

Anonymous Source Undermines Credibility: An Elaboration Likelihood Model

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This article reviews the literature on the use of anonymous sources in journalism. Three categories of the study were explored. The first category of the study was devoted to examining the use of anonymous sources by news media. Secondly, the studies which scrutinized the journalists' attitudes toward the use of anonymous sources whereas the last category of the study investigated non-journalist opinion and reaction to anonymous sources. Anonymity, as a clue to validity and reliability, might peripherally assist news readers to evaluate news credibility. It is suggested that the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) provides a relevant theoretical framework to examine the impact of anonymous sources in assessing the credibility of news presentation.

[Key Words: Anonymous source, Credibility, Journalism, Elaboration likelihood model]

Introduction

Sources are the foundation of a journalist's success, developed and nurtured and often protected for the future. (Brown, 2011:255) The professional reputations of journalists partly depend on their attempts to protect sources that provide information - particularly controversial information and those journalists who ignore or defy source confidentiality will be labeled as unethical by their peers. Media audiences not only have the right to attain detailed information reported by journalists but they also expect to have sources completely identified as a way to assess media and story credibility. If they do not know who the source is, how they can judge whether the information supplied by the media is reliable and trustworthy? Therefore, the reputations for both journalists and media can be ruined by incomplete and slovenly inaccurate source information which will generate tension between journalists and their audiences. As a result, when granting sources confidentiality, journalists put their own, even their colleagues and employers' reputation on the line and expect the audiences to accept the assertion of the source to be believable. In other words, "Trust me!"

Critics of confidential sources call them a “journalism evil” that reduces both story and media credibility. However, supporters of anonymous sources believe that the increasing competition for readers justifies anonymous source usage by journalists which also includes other questionable news-gathering techniques from hacking, eavesdropping to direct payment and even “putting words in someone’s mouth.” To lessen the detriments of anonymous source usage on news credibility, some international and local organizations have developed policies and guidelines calling on the journalist to employ anonymous sources only as the last option (Boeyink, 1990).

On the other hand, the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) Code of Ethics (2014), suggests that it is practicable for reporters to identify sources at any time. This lenient approach to employ anonymous sources leaves much room for journalists and reporters to grant sources confidentiality. In some cases, journalists have been called by the police or courts to reveal the identity of an anonymous source, but the media usually refuse to do so, citing such professional codes - even though it may put them at risk of being jailed for contempt of court. However, scholars and editors believe that it is more important that news story credibility will be jeopardized with the use of confidential sources, even while some research results showed that news readers evaluate the credibility of named and unnamed versions of a news story as being similar. To date, while the preponderance of evidence indicates that anonymous sources have helped journalists do better newsgathering and news disseminating, nevertheless it has embarrassed some journalists (Culbertson & Somerick, 1976). When the anonymous sources are used without adequate explanation and the motives of anonymous sources might be interpreted by audiences as a signal of journalistic incompetence are yet other reasons to assess a source as being incredible (Boeyink, 1990; M. M. Sternadori & Thorson, 2009). Pitts (2005) however points out that if the anonymous sources are properly employed, they may lead to interesting, efficient and accurate news reporting leaving news credibility intact.

Anonymous Source

The heart of journalism is the source which plays a major role in shaping the news (Sigal, 1973). It also has a significant impact on the course of how the information is gathered and how the news is presented as they will ultimately becoming the sources for news stories. (Gassaway, 1988:69). News sources refer to the actors whom journalists observe or interview including the interviewees who appear on the air or quoted in the magazine articles as well as the informants who supply background information or story suggestions (Gans, 1979, p. 80). According to Fedler, Bender, Davenport, and Kostyu (1997), the source can be referred to individual, document or any record that provides information. Gans (1979) identifies two types of sources: known and unknown. Knowns are individuals eminent to the audiences and reporters, and they usually are the elites group and official sources like heads of government and ministers. While the unknowns are ordinary people with lower hierarchy who become

news sources because of their association with specific news incidents such as protesters, violators of the laws, and families of victims (Gans, 1979). Much of the materials disseminated in print and broadcast media come from the known sources, which in fact majority of them are official sources. The credit to the named sources indicates that media highly value that information attributed to a known informant. News sources whether known or unknown convey valuable information to journalists. Not only sources influence the news agenda but also they influence journalistic interpretation utilized to approve information or construct a particular news event.

O'Neill and O'Connor (2008) describe sources and journalists relation as a "symbiotic relationship". Source and journalist are mutually dependent to shape the news story. Journalists are not able to do journalism effectively without dependence on their sources. They make news stories based on the materials provided by sources who obtain various kind of benefits in return. Gans' famous dance simile is a good representation of journalist and source relationship. He implies the analogy of tango which always involve two parties but in this setting, sources always taking the control. (Gans, 1979, p. 116). The way of interactions between journalists and news source differ. Selecting news source, they permit source's voice to be heard by audiences (Carlson, 2011). However, Frantz (1999) identifies three rules that journalists should consider in their relations with news source: (1) not interacting with sources; (2) ensuring transparency which allows readers to know the background and motivations of sources, and (3) not giving advice to sources. Additionally, journalists should ensure the source credibility as it provides a significant trustworthiness with the readers (Stovall, 2005, p. 201). Mollenhoff (1981) argues that "one good solid source, a direct witness with no axe to grind and with a record of high credibility, is better than two, three, or four sources who are relating second or third-hand hearsay." Journalists trust what their sources tell them but find these fears somewhat compensate through standard attribution. As direct attribution enables the readers to assess the credibility of the source, journalists are suggested to apply it as the best way of managing information. Direct attribution shows the information origin and provides journalists a strategy to present themselves as objective observers who capture the world and bring it to their audiences. Additionally, the direct attribution is considered a routine workflow in journalism practice which allows reporters to efficiently and reliably do their assignments (Carlson, 2011).

Some sources ask journalists and reporters not to refer their identification as news source within news or report. Such sources give information but without a name, with only vague identifiers like senior White House official or with a hazy description for the reason of anonymity. The absence of identification in anonymous sources reduces the transparency of the sources. What anonymous source claims imposes journalist an additional responsibility. Additionally, it makes journalists become more vulnerable to readers' criticism and makes audiences suspect that journalists negotiate and

conspire with sources. Therefore, journalists fail to keep his watchdog role by taking an active role as participants in shaping stories (Carlson, 2011).

The Use of Anonymous Source

Several content analyses have been carried out to address how and when anonymous sources have been utilized in news reporting. In general, the findings from research conducted during the past 39 years suggest that anonymity is a staple of news reporting, although the use of unnamed source increased in the 1970s and 1990s and then dropped in the 2000s. Sigal (1973), who content –analyzed about 3000 stories from the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* over 20 years, found that both news channels reported the information given by unattributed sources (p.121). Sigal (1973) wrote that “some non- routine news comes from an official who disclose a pertinent piece of information to the press on their initiative and without specific authorization to do so. Those sources justify leaking of information with the public’s right to know; others admit such conduct might be related to ego gratification. More often than ever, when leaking information, officials have their plan for tactical use of the press, for instance, as a way to influence the outcome of political conflicts and other events.” (p.112).

Many studies have verified that the use of anonymous sources is ubiquitous. Culbertson (1975) content-analyzed “*New York Times*,” “*Washington Post*,” four other Metropolitan newspapers, six smaller Ohio dailies to determine the frequency and nature of veiled attributions as they were employed. He found that 36% of all newspapers contained at least one attribution to unnamed persons. The author identified that the newspapers provided little information which might help readers assess veiled-source credibility. Culbertson (1978) pursued the 1975 study with a content analysis in 1978 regarding attribution practice of *Time* and *Newsweek* and found that sourcing patterns of newsmagazines were even more slippery: slightly less than three fourth of *Newsweek* stories and three-fourth of *Time* Stories including anonymous attributions. Culbertson did his studies during a time when news media was still highly using anonymous source due to the Watergate affair. Wulfemeyer (1985) figured out that *Times* and *Newsweek* used unnamed sources a lot and apparently the abuses of the practice by Janet Cooke and others have not prompted the reports, writers and editors at *Times* and *Newsweek* to restrict their use of anonymous attribution.

The same ubiquity of anonymous sources has been evident in broadcast news at least since the 1980s. Wulfemeyer and McFadden (1986) content analyzed network stories over a two-week period and found that more than half of the stories contained at least one anonymous quote. In an effort to increase public confidence in the news media, Wulfemeyer and McFadden (1986) state: “Network television news organizations might want to consider restricting their granting of confidentiality to sources, strictly adhering to their formal news policies regarding anonymous attribution, describing unnamed sources in

greater detail and letting viewers know more about how the information in news stories is verified.” (p. 473).

In the early 90s, another study also found that roughly 30 percent of the newspaper articles from three large papers - the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and the *Los Angeles Times* -contained anonymous sourcing such as “official said” and “source said” (Blankenburg, 1992). Blankenburg (1992) also found that the use of anonymous sources increased during the Gulf war, apparently due to a general lack of hard information, suggesting that the anonymous source should be used regarding its costs like loss of credibility and misinformation against its benefits like providing fuller coverage(Blankenburg, 1992).

After some years of Janet Cooke incident for fabrication news story, gradually the practice of anonymous source usage became more accepted until the coverage of the O.J. Simpson murder trial in 1994. After anonymous sources provided reporters incorrect information that makes journalism community feel ashamed, some would like the Simpson event to be the end of the unnamed sources usage. “My hope is that the O.J. story will be to anonymous sources what the ‘Jimmy’s World’ story [by Janet Cooke]... was to deception, fictional and composite characters,” says Tom Brislin, who teaches journalism at the University of Hawaii and administers the Carol Burnett Fund for Responsible Journalism. If Brislin has his way, in 10 years “we[journalists] will look back... on O.J.’s world and anonymous sources as those bad old days in our ethical evolution.”(Shepard, 1994, p. 20). That did not happen, of course. Other frequency of anonymous source use includes that of Denham(1997), who analyzed news coverage of wars in Bosnia and Somalia by the *Associated Press* and the *Times* to explore the anonymous attribution in stories covering military conflicts. Denham found that 15.4% of 8,780 news paragraphs about the conflicts in Bosnia and Somalia contained anonymous sources.

To identify if anonymous source use in newspaper reporting and network news stories declined after *The New York Times* reporter Jayson Blair event in 2003, Martin-Kratzer and Thorson (2007)analyzed 4376 stories from 2003 and 4508 ones from 2004and found that 21 percent of the stories had at least one anonymous source. However, analyzing the individual years, 35 percent of the 2003 stories used at least one unidentified sources compared to only 9 percent of the newspaper stories in 2004 contained an anonymous source, supporting Martin-Kratzer and Thorson’s hypothesis. The use of anonymous sources in newspaper stories dropped dramatically in 2004 in general compared to 2003, but there was no decline for network newscast and Iraq war-related coverage.

Sternadori (2007)found that about seven percent of political and government news were anonymous whereas the international news seemed to be a one of the ideal bases to employ unnamed sources,typically on the coverage of confidential information like terrorism and overseas war.Such issues are inclined to grant unnamed sources as it has to do with the great concernof not imposingaccountability directly to American. Additionally, Sheehy (2008) also

found that anonymous sources were frequently used for the foreign news reports of *The Washington Post* from 1970 to 2000.

Journalists' Reactions toward the Use of Anonymous Source

Much of the available literature on anonymous sources pays particular attention to the dynamic perspectives of the journalists. As cited by Sheppard(1994), Culbertson surveyed more than 200 editors and reached different conclusions. Most editors utilize the anonymous sources due to competition, but they were cautious in selecting them to avoid dependency. Besides, 81 percent of the editors consider anonymous sources as less credible; however, one-third of the editors were displeased about how the media treated the unnamed sources. As pointed out by the editors, more than half of the unnamed sources were successfully documented only if the journalists exerted pressure.

Dizier (1985) has attempted to draw fine distinctions on the impact of reporting anonymously between the year of 1974 and 1984. In 1974, more than half (56%) of the reporters maintained that their news-gathering would be impeded greatly if the unnamed sources were made impermissible. However, only 23 percent of the journalists drew a similar conclusion in 1984. The author justifies these results appealing were possibly attributed to two possible explanations which both are speculative. First, the Watergate issue in 1974 where confidential sources were used to inform readers about illicit activities within their government. Many of the events surrounding Watergate were uncovered by journalists using unnamed sources for much of their information which probably contributed to the importance the reporters in 1974 attached to their news sources. Secondly, the 1981 Janet Cooke incident could be at least part of the reason reports surveyed in 1984 used confidential sources less frequently than their counterparts in 1974. The incident was a highly publicized example of unlawful activity within the journalism profession.

On the other hand, Shepard (1994, p.19) holds the view that the unnamed sources are the provision of slothful reports. Power and Fico (1994) concluded that the utilization of unnamed sources significantly and negatively associated with the journalists' professional background and experience. Applying in-depth interviews with ombudsmen and mail survey, Wilson, Babcock and Pribek (1997) revealed that reporters or editors consulted only one out of the nine ombudsmen on the use of the anonymous source. On the contrary, in the mail survey, the ombudsmen believed that unnamed sources should be used as the last resort and public interest should be prioritized (Wilson et al., 1997, p. 148). The same study indicated that an anonymous source should be independently verified by a second source and granted with specific explanations on why it is used. Another study by Kimball (2011) presented that anonymous sources were unfavourable to journalists from various media, they preferred an attributable source. Similarly, Reinardy and Moore (2007) noted that journalism students who had journalism experience in press disagreed to grant sources confidentiality. This study also demonstrated

the existence of correlation between journalism experience and hostility to anonymous sources. Some of the journalists mentioned that using a confidential source is an obstacle to complete storytelling; hence, they prefer to have an attributable source (Kimball, 2011).

Non-journalists' Reaction toward the Use of Anonymous Source

As unnamed sources were observed as a widespread phenomenon in journalism practice, scholars embarked on an examination of public' attitude towards such sources and readers' responses to the news stories containing anonymous sources. Researchers were interested in finding how the readers' perception has changed in reaction to the presence of anonymous sources.

Shortly before Janet Cooke incident in 1981, The Washington Post raised major concern about the credibility of sourcing. Culbertson and Somerick (1976) highlighted that their survey respondents were suspicious of unnamed sources viewed in the abstract, but they did not view the test stories with unnamed attribution as less credible compared to the same stories using named attribution in realistic contexts. Additionally, in a Pew poll, it drew two extreme conclusions. A total of 44 percent of Americans reported that unnamed sources might contain significant stories whereas slightly more than half believed that the sources might intensify the hazard of false stories. However, Smith (2007) asserted that the use of anonymous source could be justified when attaining information is abstaining. Another research revealed that younger respondents are more opposed to the use of anonymous sources than the older ones (Smith, 2007). Similarly, 44 percent stated that anonymity makes them suspicious of what they read (Pitts, 2005).

Taking a different approach, some scholars have investigated the anonymous source and its effectiveness on credibility. Experimental research was adopted to examine if readers notice that anonymous sources were used and whether it affects their assessment of those stories. Adams (1962) identified 20 unnamed news sources in measuring its credibility. The findings suggested that the likelihood of respondents accepting or rejecting information attributed to these sources in a news story. Adapting Adams' research instruments, Riffe (1980) presented that majority of the subjects trusted anonymous sources representing government agencies were lesser in 1979 compared to 1960. Nevertheless, the study also revealed that the credibility of anonymous sources varied depending on government or non-government agency the source represented. Culbertson and Somerick (1976) also showed that named and unnamed sources did not differ significantly on perceived accuracy. Culbertson and Somerick (1976) concluded that apparently people sometimes translate the feeling that a cloaked source is "someone" behind the scene and that he or she has some reasons for remaining secretive. This occurrence, in turn, may liven up a story.

On the other hand, two studies were done, shortly after Cooke's event, who was forced to return her Pulitzer due to story fabrication. A study by Fedler and Counts (1981) used a more elaborated experimental research design. The

authors attempted to show how readers responded differently on who and what responsible for the fairness and accuracy of a story by altering the attribution of a source; one source on a controversial subject and one on a non-controversial subject. Results showed that stories without sources or with unidentified sources were rated more accurately and subjects agreed with them more than stories with a named source. Additionally, the controversial story received significantly lower ratings for fairness and accuracy than the non-controversial story. This outcome shows that story topic may be more important than the type of attribution in determining reader perceptions.

In accord with Fedler and Counts (1981), Hale (1984) conducted a similar study. He found that the factual story was perceived as significantly more believable and accurate than the opinioned story. The study also pointed out that attribution, whether or not the news story had no attribution, general attribution or specific attribution made no substantial difference in readers' perceptions. The study also states that journalists should avoid or entirely omit intermediate attribution because it enhanced no credibility or accuracy of a story yet a source that will go on record should be utilized.

Furthermore, Smith (2007) measured the credibility of two selected stories from the whistle-blowers and personal attack, the rate on the credibility of stories with named and unnamed sources was nearly the same. The result also indicated that the agreement or disagreement of the respondents on the use of anonymous sources do not seem to significantly influence their judgment toward the trustworthiness of the whistle-blower story, either named or unnamed sources. However, more than half of the respondents do not agree with the use of anonymous sources. It was also seen that there was an association between trust in unnamed sources and trust in a local media outlet. The findings of the study suggested that when readers judged the credibility of a story by taking more into account of the lack or presence of anonymous sources. It is likely that the credibility of unnamed sources was tied to the type of story.

The latest research on credibility and anonymous sources found that the use of anonymous source undermined credibility regardless of the story type. Sternadori and Thorson (2009) examined 60 undergraduate journalism students' perceived credibility and believability of anonymous and non-anonymous sources in real-world news stories. Respondents were given both award-winning and non-award winning articles. Respondents rated both types of stories included unnamed sources as less credible. They also found that the least credible of all articles were the award-winning stories. Sternadori and Thorson (2009) associate this result to "some degree of public disagreement with the presentation of antagonistic information and the industry's judgment of journalistic quality." Likewise, a cross-cultural experiment conducted in China and America to test the impact of the use of anonymous sources on perceived news story credibility. Both Americans and Chinese rated news stories with only anonymous sources as less credible than stories with identified sources (Pjesivac & Rui, 2014).

Based on the literature reviewed above, anonymous sources in the news do and do not impinge upon an assessment of news credibility. Some researchers found information and news with anonymous source were perceived as credible as an identified source (Adams, 1962; Culbertson & Somerik, 1978; Fedler & Counts, 1981; Wulfmeyer & McFadden, 1986) while some found a reverse effect of anonymity on the evaluation of news credibility (Pjesivac & Rui, 2014; M. Sternadori, 2007).

In his study regarding the impact of anonymity on perceptions of sources and information on health websites, Rains (2007) used Attribution Theory to explain why anonymous sources were perceived to be as credible and influential as sources that were identified. Attribution theory is based on the premise that people have an intrinsic need to understand relationships between cause and effect. One information processing rule respective to individuals' perceptions of anonymous sources based on attribution theory is the similarity principle which says that attributes of the cause can be assumed to be similar to attributes of the observed effect, so the effect can be used to guess the cause. In making attributions, the significance of an effect is used to infer a cause; an effect requires a cause with a similar significance. News reader might use similarity principle when making attributions about an anonymous source. As mentioned earlier, reasons to use anonymous sources by journalists are to defend liberty and protect life, job or property of a source as well as guard sources from retribution, threats, and embarrassment. In turn, the news source's panic of his or her identity known may be realized as an indication that news is important. In other words, if a news source feels he/she would be in trouble when making him or herself identified and he/she avoids retribution by taking anonymity. Therefore the news should be one that deserves to be read. As a result, news readers should find news with anonymous sources to be as credible as identified source (Rains, 2007).

Anonymous Source in Elaboration Likelihood Model

In addition to attribution theory, the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) provides a flexible framework to explain the contradictory results of the influence of anonymous source on news credibility. The model attempts to examine receivers' cognitive and attitudinal responses to the message. Two mechanisms are central in the elaboration likelihood model: central and peripheral processing. In central processing, receivers respond to the message by critically assessing message content and in the peripheral processing, recipients rely on peripheral cues. The latter type of response is widely prescribed by heuristics or simple decision rules that individuals use to evaluate and react to messages (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

Source attributes are regarded as an established class of heuristic cues including the characteristics of message senders (O'Keefe, 2002). The selection of the sort of processing- message. Those who have high motivation and ability to process and evaluate the message will choose central or peripheral- depends on message receivers' motivation and ability for processing the m central

processing while those who have low motivation and ability to process the message will select peripheral processing. Anonymity can be one of the source attributes that serves as a heuristic in any context of journalism. News content, especially in newspapers, contains only text and static images. Therefore, the information that is available from a source such as information about his or her identity may be especially significant as a basis for peripheral processing (Eastin, 2001).

To date, the effect of different source attributes has been examined by using elaboration likelihood model. For example, Eastin(2001) reviewed the effect of source expertise on the perception of message credibility and found that source expertise as a heuristic cue plays a significant role in evaluating the message credibility. In the case of Eastin's study, it can be justified that people had a low ability and motivation to process the message, and they were greatly affected by heuristic cues which were the message source expertise. In other words, the source' expertise may have a varying impact, depending upon whether the information serves as a peripheral cue or as central information (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Low level of elaborative motivation and ability are apt to result in peripheral processing of the expertise cue, when as increased amount of elaboration may, in certain circumstances, lead to central processing of the source expertise of the information. At other time, deepelaboration of message-relevant cues may eliminate the need to rely source related cues.

As noted earlier, according to O'Keefe (2002), anonymity can be regarded a source characteristic which functions as a heuristic cue and according to the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) anonymity as peripheral or heuristic cue may also influence message credibility perception. When news readers are exposed to an anonymous source in news, sometimes they evaluate news extensively; using critical thinking, and sometimes they do so in a simpler less critical manner. The probability that journalists evaluate news critically is called the Elaboration Likelihood which depends on how news reader processes the news. There are two routes for information processing- a central route and a peripheral route. Elaboration – critical thinking- occurs in the central route, while the lack of critical thinking takes place in peripheral route. When news readers process news through central route they actively think about; they consider news carefully. When they handle news and evaluate it through the peripheral route, they are much less critical; they consider source anonymity as a source characteristic. The amount of critical thinking that they apply to news depends on two factors: motivation and ability. When news readers are highly motivated to read news, they are likely to use central processing and when their motivation to read news is low, peripheral processing is more likely. Peripheral processing is mainly dictated by heuristic, which is anonymity. Therefore, studies that found news with anonymous sources is as credible and influential as news with identifiable sources. As illustrated by ELM, news reader tend to select the central route and depend on the news quality in assessing the news credibility whereas compared to identified source, those who adopt

the peripheral route assess the story with anonymous source incredible. On the other hands, in those studies which anonymity was not considered in evaluating message credibility, it is most likely that respondents have followed the central route.

Conclusion

Despite many arguments over the use of anonymous source and its detrimental influence on news credibility, such sources are still important in newsgathering. The most significant reason given to hide the source identification in news stories is the protection of individuals' privacy and safety. Such sources want to remain unidentified to the public because if they are revealed, their life will be at stake. However, media professionals tend to prohibit the use of anonymous sources as they believe these sources damage the credibility. Some research results showed that anonymous sources are evaluated as credible as identified sources while some revealed that anonymous sources are assessed incredible. These results theoretically need to be studied. Elaboration Likelihood model can provide an appropriate framework to justify news readers' reaction to anonymous sources in news stories. It is believed that news consumers actively scan and monitor source attributes when processing pieces of news, and the attributes of the source may act as a heuristic for news consumers when analyzing the credibility or veracity of a news story. It means that audiences firstly scan who is the news source and justify accordingly evaluating its credibility or incredibility. Therefore, it is concluded that the attention of news consumers and the understanding of source attribution as a heuristic can influence their perception of news credibility. The anonymity of source can act as a heuristic.

The amount of critical thinking that they apply to news depends on two factors: motivation and ability. When news readers are highly motivated to read news, they are likely to use central processing and when their motivation to read news is low, peripheral processing is more likely to take place. Peripheral processing is mainly dictated by heuristic, which is anonymity. Therefore, the studies that found news with anonymous sources are as credible and influential as news with identifiable sources. According to ELM, news readers most likely chose the central route and rely on the news quality to assess news credibility while those who follow the peripheral route evaluate the anonymous source incredible as compared to identified source. On the other hands, in those studies which anonymity was not considered in evaluating message credibility, it is most likely that respondents have followed the central route.

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