**Sources in Journalism**

News is happening all the time: People are being born or dying, banks are being robbed, roads are being planned, companies are making profits or losses, storms are destroying homes, courts are sending people to jail or freeing them, scientists are discovering new drugs. Every minute of every day something newsworthy is happening somewhere in the world.

Even if you are a journalist working in a small country, something newsworthy is probably happening in your country at this moment. But you cannot be everywhere all the time to see those events for yourself. So you need other ways of getting information on all those hundreds (maybe millions) of events you cannot witness yourself. When someone or something provides you with information, we call them a **source**.

Sources of information can be

* people,
* letters,
* books,
* files,
* films,
* tapes –
* in fact, anything which journalists use to put news stories together.

Sources are very important if you want to report on events or issues and explain the world to your audience. Journalists try to work as much as possible from their own observations, but this is often not possible. Some events or issues are finished before the journalist gets there. Others are like plants which only show their stem and leaves above the ground - the all-important roots are hidden from sight. Journalists who only report what they see can miss much of the news unless they have sources to tell them of more details or other aspects which are out of sight.

**Types of sources**

Journalists should deal in reliable facts, so it is important that the sources you use for writing stories can give you accurate information about what happened or what was said. But just as there are lots of different news events, so there are many different sources of information. Some of them will give you very accurate information and we call these sources *reliable* (because we can rely on what they say). Others are less reliable, but still useful, while some can hardly be trusted at all. The main way of judging sources of information is on their reliability.

**Reporters**

One of the most reliable sources of information (although not completely reliable) are other journalists. They may be your colleagues or reporters from a news agency which supplies your organisation. If they are well trained, experienced and objective, their reports will usually be accurate and can be trusted. However, if there are any essential facts missing from their reports, these will have to be provided. Either they will have to provide them or you will have to find the missing facts yourself. Mistakes can happen. This is why news organisations should have a system for checking facts. A reporter's story should be checked by the news editor then the sub-editor. In small newsrooms, where the reporter may also be the editor or newsreader, the reporter must be especially careful in checking facts.

There is also the danger that reporters misinterpret what they think they see and then present that as a fact. This often happens when reporting such things as the size of a crowd. Unable to count every person in it, they make an estimate, often sharing their guesses with other journalists on the scene. This is just an estimate and any report which says "there were 40,000 people present" should be treated with caution, unless the reporter knows the exact number who came through the gate.

All sources, including reporters, are said to be reliable if we think they can be believed consistently. If a source is always correct in the information they provide, we will believe them next time. If they make a mistake, we may doubt what they say. Reliability is built up over time.

Your personal reliability as a journalist is important. If you have a good record for fair and accurate reporting, you will be believed. If you get a reputation for being careless in your work or biased in your interpretation, your colleagues, readers or listeners will not be able to rely upon you. In all cases it is better only to report what you know and make it clear in your report that everything else is either an estimate, an opinion or the word of someone else, perhaps a witness. You must always try to give precise facts and attributed opinion. If you cannot do that, you can use phrases like "it is believed that ..." or "it appears that ...". It is better to do this than to leave your readers or listeners believing that what you have said is a proven fact.

**Primary sources**

Often the source is someone at the centre of the event or issue. We call such people *primary sources*. It might be a man who fell 1,000 metres from an aircraft and lived to tell the tale; or a union leader who is leading wage negotiations. They are usually the best sources of information about their part of what happened. They should be able to give you accurate details and also supply strong comments.

The fall survivor might say: "I saw the ground rushing up towards me and I kept thinking `So this is death'." The union leader might warn: "If the employers want blood on their hands, we are ready to supply it."

Of course, just because a person was present at an event does not mean that they are either accurate or fair. The fall survivor may have injured his head after landing and so be confused. The union leader will want to present his side in the best light. It is vital to double-check and cross-check facts with other sources.

**Written sources**

Not all primary sources will be spoken. Written reports can make an excellent source of information for a journalist. They are usually written after a lot of research by the authors, they have been checked for accuracy and are usually published with official approval.

However, just because information is printed, that does not mean that it is reliable. With typewriters, computers and modern technology, it is relatively easy to produce printed material. You must look at who has produced the document. Are they in a position to know enough about the topic and have access to the reliable facts? Do they have a reputation for reliability?

This is especially important with information on the Internet. Anyone can put information onto the Internet and unless you know how trustworthy they are you cannot judge the reliability of what they write.

One advantage of the Internet is that you can quickly cross-check numerous sources, but beware: a mistake on one site can easily and rapidly be repeated by people writing on other sites. Even major online references such as Wikipedia rely on volunteers writing the entries and checking their accuracy and there have been numerous cases of people using entries in Wikipedia and other online reference works to spread untruths.

**Leaked documents**

You may occasionally be given documents which have not been officially released to the press. They may be given to you by someone in a company or government department who does not want to be seen giving them to the media. We call these *leaked* documents.

Documents are often leaked by people who believe that the public should know the contents (such as an environmental report), but who are unable to reveal it in public themselves, perhaps because they do not have the authority to do so. In some cases, documents are leaked by a person to gain an advantage over someone else, perhaps someone who is criticised in the report.

Leaked documents are often excellent sources of news stories because they can contain information which someone wants to keep secret. This might be a plan to do something which the public might oppose, such as bulldozing homes to make a new road. It might be a report on corruption within an organisation which the heads of that organisation do not want to be publicly known. Just because a government, company or other group does not want information to be known, that does not mean that you should not report it. If you believe that it is important to inform your readers or listeners of certain facts, you must do that, even if the information was given to you unofficially. Of course, like any information, leaked documents must still be checked for accuracy before they can be used

There are also legal dangers to consider when using leaked documents. They might, for instance, have been stolen. It is usually an offence to receive stolen property if you think it could have been stolen, even if it is only a few sheets of paper. As we explain in the chapters on investigative reporting, photocopying the document then returning it is often a way to overcome this problem.

Leaked documents could also be covered by copyright, so you could be breaking the law by quoting directly from them. You are on safer ground in reporting the substance of what was said, in your own words

**Secondary sources**

Secondary sources are those people who do not make the news, but who pass it on. The official police report of an incident or comments by someone's press officer can be called secondary sources. Secondary sources are not usually as reliable as primary sources.

Most eyewitnesses should be treated as secondary sources for journalists because, although they are able to tell what they think they have seen, they are often not trained for such work and can be very inaccurate, without meaning to be.

You have to assess the reliability of secondary sources and if necessary tell your readers or listeners where the information came from.

**Tip-offs**

Occasionally someone will call with a story tip-off but refuse to give their name. These are said to be *anonymous* (meaning "no name"). These are the most dangerous sources of information and should only be used with extreme caution. Although anonymous tip-offs can provide good story ideas, they must never be used without a lot of checking. If they are wrong, you will be held directly responsible unless you have checked what they said with other more reliable sources.

Often people who ring up with a tip-off will tell you their name if asked, but on the promise that you do not reveal their name to anyone else. You must still cross-check what they say because, of course, you cannot quote them as your source if there is any dispute about accuracy, for example if you are taken to court for defamation.

**Attribution**

When you get information from a source, you normally need to *attribute* that information to someone. Attribution means to tell your readers or listeners the name and title of the person you interviewed or document you got the information from. You do it, for example, through the verb "to say" or a phrase like "according to ...."

There are three levels of attribution, depending on whether your source is happy about being publicly identified or whether they want to keep some secrecy about what they tell you. These three levels (which we will explain in detail) are:

**On the record**, which means you can use both their words and their name;

**Non-attributable**, which means you can use the information, but not the source's name;

**Off the record**, which means you cannot use either the information or the source's name.

All of these terms are only used to describe reporting methods. They should not appear in your finished story. Let us look at these three in detail:

**On the record**

Most information you are given will be on the record. People will tell you the details openly and allow you to quote their names and titles. The politician making a speech, the witness describing a crash, the police officer reporting an arrest, the company chairman defending an increase in prices, all are usually prepared to be quoted and to give their names. Even if they are unhappy about the story you are writing (perhaps because it makes them look bad), most people will understand your need to report fairly and accurately what they say.

It is always best to get information on the record. You can remain accurate by using the exact words people say. You can also make the story seem more human by using direct quotes (or by using their voices on radio and television). But most important, people judge what they read or hear by the person who says it. They are much more likely to take notice if the Justice Minister says he believes in capital punishment than if the man who sweeps the street says it. On the record comments have an extra level of understanding for people because they know who is speaking and exactly what was said.

**Non-attributable**

Sometimes a source will give you information on the understanding that you can use the information but not attribute it to them.

Your source may do this for one of several reasons. Perhaps they are not officially allowed to give you the information, but they think it could be made public. Perhaps they do not want to be in the public eye.

Politicians sometimes give non-attributable details of a plan so that they can find out public reaction to it without any risk. If the public likes the plan, the politician can then go on the record and claim the credit. If the public do not like the plan, the politician can abandon it without losing face because his name was never associated with it anyway. The danger for journalists is that, if the politician does decide to abandon an unpopular plan, you will be left looking like a fool for writing about a story which the politician will then deny ever having considered. Politicians occasionally leak document to the media for similar reasons - to test public opinion on an issue unofficially.

If you agree not to use your source's name, there are phrases you can use instead, such as "a spokesperson for...", "a reliable source at..." or "sources within..." These should only be used if you cannot convince the source to go on the record. They are an admission that you cannot tell the whole truth.

If your source refuses to go on the record, ask them if they mind some information being used and attributed to them, but leaving the more sensitive information not attributed specifically to them. They may allow their name to be used for certain parts but not for others.

**Off the record**

You will occasionally be given information on the understanding that it is totally off the record. Although you will have to ask your source exactly what they mean by such a phrase, it usually means that you should not even write about what they tell you. And you must certainly not use their name.

People usually give information off the record when they want you to understand the background to something which is too sensitive for them to talk publicly about. For example, you might get a tip-off of a major police operation planned for the next day against the hide-out of a criminal gang. You ask the police chief for more information, but he will obviously not want you to publish anything which might warn the gang. On the other hand, he might not want to say "no comment" because you might start asking questions somewhere else. So he might say he will tell you off the record, on condition that you do not tell anyone else.

One thing to remember about any request to treat information off the record is that it is only a request. You can agree or disagree. If a person says they will only speak to you off the record, you must decide how important their information is - and whether you can get it from somewhere else. If you cannot, perhaps you can agree to their conditions. In any case, you should bargain with them to give it on the record or at least non-attributed.

If a person gives you an interview and only tells you at the end that it was all off the record, argue that they should have said so earlier and not wasted your time. You are in a strong position because you now know what it is they want to keep a secret.

**Using assumed names**

You occasionally have to protect a source's identity by giving them an assumed name. This arises most often when you are writing about the victims of some kind of abuse, usually in feature articles or documentaries. These people may not mind you telling their story, but they do not want other people to know exactly who they are.

Children especially should be protected, although you can use assumed names for anyone with a good reason to have their identity kept secret, such as alcoholics, drug addicts or battered wives.

It is usual in such cases to give the person assumed name, for example "Tony" or "Juanita", and no surname. You must, of course, tell your readers or listeners that this is not the person's real name, but is being used to protect them. If you use a picture them, make sure they are not recognisable in it. If you use their voice, it is common practice in radio and television to electronically change it so it cannot be recognised.

You may also have to disguise other facts of the story if there is a chance that these will lead people to identify the person. This should only be done after careful consideration and with the approval of your editor