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Teaching Journalism Students About Confidential Whistleblower Sources: An Analysis Of Introductory News Writing Textbooks

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ABSTRACT

Whistleblowers are a key journalistic source for many current news stories. However, reporters pursuing these major stories must navigate the dilemma between transparent full disclosure and protecting their confidential source. Professional journalists begin their journey as students, and students begin their journey in the classroom with a teacher and a textbook. But are journalism students being trained to deal effectively, and sensitively, with a whistleblowing source who may bring complex needs and difficulties to the news gathering process? This study explores how contemporary introductory news writing textbooks tackle issues surrounding the use of unnamed whistleblower sources. Beginning with a quantitative analysis as its foundation, the study explores, qualitatively, the advice being offered to students on how to handle these sources. We suggest that there are a number of important gaps that characterize textbooks when it comes to whistleblowing and associated concepts, with scant attention being paid to, for example, differentiation among varying types of anonymous source, the contextualization of a whistleblower's unique circumstances, and the potential of positive source motivation. Suggestions are included for enhancing textbook content in this important area.

Keywords: Whistleblower; Anonymous Source; Confidential Source; Journalism; Journalist; Reporter; Shield Law; Investigative Reporting; Textbook Analysis

INTRODUCTION

Dealing with anonymous sources raises complex and ambiguous issues for journalists. In the words of Harry M. Rosenfeld, former editor of the *Times-Union* in Albany, N.Y., "Without them, much of the very best in journalism would not be possible. At the same time, nothing so much brings our blood to the boil. We decry their use and we despair of their ubiquity" (Mencher, 2011, p. 318).

The stakes are raised still higher when the source seeking anonymity is a whistleblower, whose information is often both of genuine public concern and headline-making, but whose need for the shield of anonymity is also the most pressing. In these cases, the journalist may be faced with a choice between publishing information using unnamed sources and publishing no information at all; in those times the journalists' professional ideal of full disclosure may be trumped by the need to publish a crucial story. As Boeyink observes: "Full attribution may be ideal, but if the choice is between vital information published anonymously or no information at all, the principle of truth telling can weigh in the favor of anonymous sources" (Boeyink, 1990, p. 236).

It is a dilemma that journalists face on a regular basis. News headlines this year, 2011, offered a plethora of instances of important stories sourced to whistleblowers; from the revelations offered by Wikileaks through to the exposure, by a whistleblower, of scandalous practices in the Murdoch news empire in Great Britain. Whistleblowers play an important role in journalism's function as a "watchdog" for society (Overholser & Jamieson, 2005;

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Schudson 1995), a vital counterweight against those who occupy positions of power. Frequently, information that exposes corruption and illegal activities in bureaucracies come from people in the middle ranks of public service, as "they occupy the engine room of the organization and have custody of the primary information" (Flynn, 2006, p. 263). Author and journalist, Ted Gup (2007), argues that:

At no time is the need for whistle-blowers greater than when a government is consumed by secrecy or when it views itself as a partner of business and so lets down its regulatory guard. Where secrecy is pervasive, where information control is paramount, the whistle-blower is often the only conduit by which a vulnerable public may learn of matters of grave importance to its healthy, safety, and security. (p. 252)

The art of working with a whistleblowing source should be an essential part of journalism education, especially as college courses often focus on a vision of journalism that "exists to serve the public," based upon the idea that the university should serve "as the centerpiece in the process of developing reporters, editors, and producers…who want to help ensure the freedom of the American public" (King, 2010, p. 135). But if professional journalists begin their journey as students, and students begin their journey in the classroom with a teacher and a textbook, how effective are introductory journalism textbooks in teaching students about whistleblowers?

Extensive research on teaching suggests that it is possible to teach important ideas and issues with discipline specific strategies (Henderson, Antelo, & St. Clair, 2010). This study seeks to explore whether textbooks used in introductory journalism courses are preparing students to work with unnamed whistleblowing sources in a manner that is effective for both parties, while being sensitive to the pressures that are often placed on the whistleblower. We will suggest that there are a number of important gaps that characterize these textbooks when it comes to whistleblowing and associated concepts, with scant attention being paid to, for example, differentiation between varying types of anonymous source, the contextualization of a whistleblower's unique circumstances, and the potential of positive source motivation. In our final section we offer a set of principles that might be adopted by news writing textbooks to enhance instruction in this key area.

TEXTBOOKS AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Textbooks provide a foundation to any university course. College students consider textbooks an integral part of their learning (Kern-Foxworth, 1990), with the average student reading between 25,000 and 30,000 textbook pages before graduation (Besser, Stone & Nan, 1999). In a survey, 75% of students polled considered the textbook to be the most important source of information in a course (Boyd, 2003). Textbooks are often the means by which students gain their first exposure to a given field of study (Hogben & Waterman, 1997; Stocking & Gross, 1989), and as such, they go a long way to shaping students' thoughts on a subject while providing basic cognitive orientation (Barnes, 1982). While new technology does provide instructors options beyond the textbook in many disciplines (Jackson, Gaudet, McDaniel, Wright & Watt, 2011), texts still provide structure and content for journalism courses.

At the same time, textbooks also have a powerful influence on the way academics go about their work, solidifying disciplinary knowledge and establishing commonly accepted expertise (Rabow, Hardie, Fair & McPhee, 2000) as well as transmitting cultural and professional values (Hardin & Preston, 2001). Many textbooks present material with a degree of certainty that becomes codified for the student (Matthews, 2009). They are instrumental in helping instructors to identify what is legitimate material for a course (Apple, 1986), as well as aiding in the design and structure of classes, providing uniform content, and stimulating class discussion (Besser, Stone & Nan, 1999; Starck & Wyffels, 1990). Given that they are such a potent influence in the classroom, it is unsurprising that a textbook that does an unsatisfactory job in an area of content poses severe challenges for instructors, who may find themselves in contradiction to the text (Hardin & Preston, 2001). Indeed, poor textbooks may even counteract the efforts of an instructor to cover important issues in course material (Lew, 1999).

In journalism, textbooks, together with classroom lectures and discussion and internships, are seen as the most significant influences on shaping the practices of future journalists and in disseminating new journalism practices, such as the use of convergence technology (Gilmour & Quanbeck, 2010). How well university courses—and their texts—prepare students for the profession remains open to debate, however. Journalism programs at U.S.

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colleges and universities have long been subject to criticism from professional journalists for not doing enough to ready students for the world of work in media jobs (Dickson & Brandon, 2000). The Dickson & Brandon survey of both journalism educators and professional journalists concluded that "a gap does exist between professional journalists and journalist education" (p. 65), although those surveyed did not always agree on how best to prepare aspiring journalists.

The importance of textbooks to the learning process has led to them becoming the focus for a range of content research, from studies on the way textbooks treat issues of gender (e.g. Cawyer, et al., 1994; Yanowitz and Weathers, 2004) to medical instruction (Janson, Paavola, Porter & Morello, 2010; Rabow et al., 2000) or training in Public Relations (Hoy, Raaz & Wehmeier, 2007). Journalism textbooks have also been a frequent subject for content analysis. This research has ranged widely, from the treatment of issues of disability in the news media (Hardin & Preston, 2001) to ethics (Peck, 2004) and convergence (Gilmour & Quanbeck, 2010). However while an analysis of college textbooks in 1990 showed that "specific guidelines on use of anonymous sources are rare" (Boeyink, 1990, p. 234), little if any research has focused on the way texts treat the subject of whistleblowers as sources. Indeed, as we shall see, whistleblowing itself is a subject that is largely overlooked in these texts, even though the issue is of pressing importance in modern reporting and one that comes with complex implications.

WHISTLEBLOWING

Whistleblowing is purposive dissent by which an individual has knowledge of wrongdoings being conducted and feels that he or she has no other option but to look outside the organization for alternative oversights (i.e., regulators, law enforcement, media, consumers, etc.), often after having attempted and failed to address the problem using internal channels (Jubb, 1999). It is an act of principled dissent that can influence both policy agenda and public opinion (Moore & Huxford, 2011).

It is argued that corruption in some organizational cultures is so rife and so deep-rooted that internal dissent simply no long offers a viable option for solving the problem. Ethical violations at Enron, for example, spawned a culture that regarded many unethical practices simply as a corporate strategy to increase profitability. On all levels of the organization, ethical violations were taking place (Fincher, 2009).

At times employees may observe unethical or illegal behavior and want to report it, but their fear of retaliation undermines their ability to divulge the information to the proper legal or public audiences. "Whistleblowing represents one of the most threatening forms of organizational dissent, likely to prompt considerable hostility and various forms of organizational retaliation" (Jos, Tompkins & Hays, 1989, p 552). As whistleblowers lack internal power to effect the change they seek, employing external dissent strategies to seek external influence on organization behavior is a last-resort tactic (Callahan & Dworkin, 1994). However the consequences for a whistleblower may be extreme. The majority may lose their jobs, compromise their careers, be harassed or transferred, face reductions in salary, or experience overwhelming personal and financial hardship (Jos, Tompkins & Hays,1989). Employers particularly react with retaliation when the whistleblowing information is made public through the media (Fincher, 2009). They fear that the negative publicity that ensues may impact on an organization's credit-worthiness, employee recruitment, current employee morale, sales to consumers, and credibility with investors (Callahan & Dworkin, 1994).

In spite of federal and state legislation enacted to protect whistleblowing, those who make their dissent public frequently experience retaliation at work including attempts at discrediting them, threats, isolation, humiliation, unreasonable expectations guaranteeing failure, elimination of jobs, blacklisting, poor performance reviews, and even physical assault (Devine, 1999). In the words of Gup (2007):

Whistleblowers, one of the final checks on excessive secrecy, have found themselves exposed to retribution from an increasingly politicized administration and equally unsympathetic courts. Those who have dared leak information to the press or Congress have faced bureaucratic exile, prosecution and loss of employment. (p. 19)

Informing the Media

Whistleblowers are more likely to dissent externally to media outlets when their reporting of wrongdoing is ignored internally, when top management is involved in the wrongdoing, or when they fear retaliation from top management above their own supervisors. Media whistleblowers particularly fear reprisals from senior management (Callahan & Dworkin, 1994). Whistleblowers are also more motivated to speak to the media when the observed wrongdoing threatens health or safety and when the fraud or illegal behavior involves large sums of money (Perry, 1990).

Because of the potential consequences of retaliation, a whistleblower may attempt to dissent with anonymity. When the whistleblower is anonymous internally or externally, it may lessen the credibility of the information given and undermine any impact for change. Professors Miceli and Near (1992) identify three reasons why anonymous whistleblowing lacks impact: the personal credibility of the whistleblower suffers; the perception of organizational credibility is lost; and it is impossible to get additional information in an investigation from an anonymous whistleblower. Whistleblowing to the media, however, minimizes these issues. If the whistleblower becomes an anonymous source to a reporter, the reporter knows their identity and thus can assess the whistleblower's personal credibility, professional credibility, and can follow up as needed for additional information. The media is also perceived to be able to publicize the whistleblower's complaint and to apply pressure to the organization, while protecting the whistleblower's identity (Callahan & Dworkin, 1994).

Yet the whistleblower's advantage of becoming an anonymous source to a reporter may be contrary to the best practices of journalism. Most of the time, reporters strive to go about their business with on-the-record transparency, knowing that a journalist gains credibility when clearly providing details about their source of information (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007). The issue may raise a conflict at the very heart of the journalist/whistleblower relationship: the journalist's instinct for full disclosure meeting the brick wall of the whistleblower's need for anonymity.

Whistleblower/Journalist Collaborations

Despite these difficulties, a number of major stories over the past decade have relied on information exposed through whistleblower/reporter collaborations. Here we offer three illustrations, although many others may be equally noteworthy:

In 2002, Michael Isikoff of *Newsweek* magazine in collaboration with Department of Justice whistleblower Jessalyn Radack, gave the nation a first glimpse of the circumvention of 6th Amendment due process rights in the treatment of suspected 'American Taliban' terrorist John Walker Lindh (Isikoff, 2002). Isikoff was recruited and hired by NBC News and now serves as their national investigative correspondent. Radack was fired, blacklisted, reviewed by the D.C. Bar Association, and put on the no-fly list. She no longer practices law, but is a frequent news source and blogger on national stories of whistleblowers (Huxford & Moore, 2010; Radack, 2006).

In 2005, James Risen and Eric Lichtblau, of *The New York Times,* with information clearly provided by whistleblowers; "nearly a dozen current and former officials, who were granted anonymity", exposed the previously unknown and widespread secret eavesdropping on the private telephone and email conversations of American citizens, conducted without a warrant (Risen & Lichtblau, 2005). Risen and Lichtblau won the Pulitzer Prize in 2006 for their reporting on this issue (Pulitzer Prize 2006 winners) and Risen became a bestselling author (Risen, 2006). One of Risen's suspected whistleblower sources, Jeffrey Sterling, was arrested and charged with six counts of unauthorized disclosure of national defense information, and one count each of unlawful retention of national defense information, mail fraud, unauthorized conveyance of government property and obstruction of justice (Thomas, Cloherty, Ryan, & Jones, 2011). "Sterling's relationship with Risen followed the classic reporter-source pattern. Employee leaks damaging information to reporter on promise of anonymity. Prosecutors investigate to find the leaker and the reporter refuses to testify" (Freivogel, 2011).

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In 2008, Dana Milbank of the Washington Post, assisted by whistleblower Gina Grey, revealed details of gross mismanagement of Arlington Cemetery that included discarding headstones, dumping human ashes into dirt, and mislabeling hundreds of graves (Milbank, 2008). Milbank retains his job at the Post and is a frequent guest on cable and network news and discussion programs (Milbank, 2011). Grey was fired, but her information led to widespread changes in personnel and policy at the cemetery (Benjamin, 2009; Milbank, 2010).

The whistleblower may go to the press as “the last resort of frustrated civil servants who feel they cannot correct a perceived wrong through regular government channels” (Son, 2002, p. 159). And as James Risen suggests, “ Many people have criticized the use of anonymous sources of late. Yet all reporters know that the very best stories—the most important, the most sensitive—rely on them,” (Risen, 2006, forward).

METHOD

Journalism majors usually take an introductory news writing course early in their academic program in which they are introduced to the craft and principles of news gathering and reporting (Hardin & Preston, 2001). Through a content analysis of the most popular textbooks used in these courses, this inquiry attempts to learn how the concept of using confidential whistleblower sources is taught. The content analysis was conducted to answer the following questions:

- R1: Do beginning news-writing textbooks include explicit discussion of confidential whistleblower sourcing practices, including the laws governing the reporter or the source?
- R2: Do beginning news-writing textbooks include discussion of anonymous sourcing practices, including the laws governing the reporter or the source?
- R3: Do beginning news-writing textbooks include discussion of investigative reporting?
- R4: How much space is devoted, if any, to discussion of whistleblower or confidential sources; to laws governing anonymous sources, or to investigative reporting?
- R5: How do the text authors interpret using confidential sources? What is the tone and judgment conveyed?

Textbook Selection

To assess the current textbook content on confidential whistleblower sources, two readers examined and reviewed the most recent editions available for the six best selling and most implemented textbooks used in undergraduate introductory journalism courses in the United States. The textbooks were identified through assistance from area representatives of the leading publishers of communication textbooks: McGraw Hill; Bedford, Freeman & Worth Publishing Group; Sage Publications; Pine Forge Press; Cengage Learning; Wiley; Pearson Education; Allyn & Bacon; and Oxford University Press. The publisher’s representatives were asked to review internal and competitive sales figures and indicate which beginning reporting textbooks were most used in American universities and colleges. Review copies were requested or purchased from their publishers.

Table 1
Analyzed Textbooks

Author(s)	Title	Ed#	Year
Bender et al.	Reporting for the media	9	2009
Harrower	Inside reporting: A practical guide to the craft of journalism	2	2010
Lanson & Stephens	Writing and reporting the news	3	2008
Mencher	Melvin Mencher’s news reporting and writing	12	2011
Missouri Group, The	News reporting and writing	10	2011
Rich	Writing and reporting news: A coaching method	6	2007

Review Process

Each reviewer independently conducted both a quantitative and a qualitative review of each textbook. This included a page-by-page skimming and an evaluation of the table of contents, the chapter headings, tables/figures,

the appendixes, and the index of each textbook to identify any content with a search for the key terms of: *whistleblower, anonymous sources, confidential sources, unnamed sources, not-attributable sources, off-the record, deep background, shield laws, protecting confidentiality, Deep Throat, investigative reporting, muckraker, or enterprise journalism.* These particular key terms were selected because they directly reflect or are synonyms for the content under review.

For each key word and its term equivalent found in the quantitative review, a database entry was created including page number, section length, and transcribed citation. In addition, each reviewer added an evaluative score of Level 1 for passing reference, Level 2 for moderate content, and Level 3 for extensive content. Additionally each reviewer included an evaluative comment regarding the depth and tone of the material found.

While mindful of the basic research questions, each reviewer used central inquiry questions as the foundation for the qualitative review of the texts. The questions were: Does the textbook differentiate between ordinary sources and whistleblowers? If so, in what way? Does the textbook differentiate between anonymous sources and whistleblowers? If so, in what way? Does it define "whistleblowing"? If so, how? Does it include advice on how to handle a relationship with a whistleblower? If so, what does it say? Does it discuss the potential motivations of the whistleblower? If so, what does it say? Does it discuss the extended responsibilities of the journalist when collaborating with a whistleblower? If so, what does it say? Does it reference specific laws and regulations associated with whistleblowing? If so, what are they?

Reliability

Both reviewers reviewed and rated all books. If discrepancies in scores or evaluation were present, resolution was achieved by a second review of the content in dispute by both reviewers. The total observed initial agreement was 94%, with adjudication required for only 6% of the initial scores for where there were disagreements.

Statistical Methods

All quantitative and qualitative entries were entered into a database before any data analysis occurred. The data was primarily description, so the quantitative analysis was limited to descriptive statistics: percentages and frequency distribution.

RESULTS

The reviewers examined a total of 3,336 pages from six introductory news writing textbooks for the key words and terms previously described as direct or indirect references to confidential whistleblower sources. Table 2 presents the percentage of term representation in each category, comparing total pages per text by the number of pages with any type of inclusion of the key words or equivalent terms. The topic of anonymous sources received the most attention at 2.61% and was included in every text reviewed. Specific discussion of whistleblowers as a separate and identified source type received the least attention at .54% and was not mentioned at all in one of the texts. Each text covered shield law as a topic, devoting 1.35% of total pages. Investigative reporting was also included as a topic in each textbook, represented in 1.92% of the total pages.

Table 2
Summary of confidential source representation in introductory news writing texts

Texts	Total Pages	Whistle Blower	%	Anon. Source	%	Shield Law	%	Invest. Report	%
Bender, et al	687	2	0.29%	12	1.75%	9	1.31%	2	0.29%
Harrower	341	6	1.76%	16	4.69%	9	2.64%	9	2.64%
Lanson & Stephens	550	1	0.18%	10	1.82%	5	0.91%	2	0.36%
Mencher	638	7	1.10%	18	2.82%	10	1.57%	25	3.92%
Missouri Group	574	2	0.35%	17	2.96%	10	1.74%	22	3.83%
Rich	546	0	0.00%	14	2.56%	2	0.37%	4	0.73%
Total	3336	18	0.54%	87	2.61%	45	1.35%	64	1.92%

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Next the four term categories of whistleblower, anonymous sources, shield law and investigative reporting were analyzed by the amount of inclusion in each text and is detailed in Table 3. A slight or passing reference (Level 1) was marked by number of words. A moderate (Level 2) or extensive (Level 3) section of content was marked by number of paragraphs. Each text had Levels 1, 2 and 3 content among the various term categories. Of particular interest to this study, the Harrower text included the most extensive content on whistleblowers and anonymous sources. The Lanson & Stephens text had very little content of any type for any of the key terms. The Rich text included many Level 1 references, particularly sprinkling the term anonymous source widely throughout the text, but without the level of detail afforded to Levels 2 or 3 references.

Table 3
Reference Levels 1, 2 & 3 Frequency Count

	Level 1: Slight Reference by Word Count				Level 2: Moderate Content by Paragraph Count				Level 3: Extensive Content by Paragraph Count			
Texts	**WB**	**AS**	**SL**	**IR**	**WB**	**AS**	**SL**	**IR**	**WB**	**AS**	**SL**	**IR**
Bender, et al.	20	21	0	2	1	5	3	0	0	8	9	0
Harrower	0	5	17	0	5	7	12	0	36	57	0	67
Lanson & Stephens	0	11	7	27	3	11	0	0	0	0	7	0
Mencher	2	29	0	20	12	16	3	29	0	15	14	95
Missouri Group	2	0	0	0	0	11	3	10	0	21	16	88
Rich	0	454	17	25	0	4	1	0	0	28	0	0
Total	24	520	41	74	21	54	22	39	36	129	46	250

Abbreviation Key: WB=Whistleblower, AS=Anonymous Source, SL=Shield Law, IR=Investigative Reporter

An author may signal to the reader that a particular topic is important by identifying that topic in the table of contents, using it as a chapter title or a section heading, or including it in a glossary, appendix or index. Table 4 reflects these decisions by the authors of the texts examined. All texts gave this kind of special attention to the issue of anonymous sources. Only one text identified the specific term of whistleblower through this identifying technique. The issues of shield law and investigative reporting were identified by all but one of the authors, but not as extensively as the issue of anonymous sources.

Table 4
Inclusion in Index, Glossary, Contents Table, Section Heading or Chapter Heading

Texts	WB	AS	SL	IR
Bender, Et al	0	5	2	1
Harrower	2	6	3	3
Lanson & Stephens	0	7	3	0
Mencher	0	7	4	4
Missouri Group	0	7	2	1
Rich	0	5	0	1
Total:	2	37	14	12

Abbreviation key: WB=Whistleblower; AS=Anonymous Source; SL=Shield Law; IR=Investigative Reporting

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

After deeply reviewing these six textbooks, we developed a genuine respect for each author. The texts, each in their own way, were extremely effective in explaining basic journalism strategies for an aspiring reporter. The authors covered significant and comprehensive information and did so in an approachable, easy to understand manner. Our focus, an analysis of textbook inclusion of whistleblower sourcing, is a small but important subsection of what the textbooks accomplished. And while our critical review found substantial opportunity for improvement on the inclusion of this specific topic in the textbooks, in no way do we suggest that the textbooks themselves are generally deficient.

The most obvious finding of our qualitative content analysis was the acute lack of direct discussion of whistleblowing and/or whistleblowers as a unique category of unnamed news source. Across all six textbooks, the specific term surfaced only a handful of times. The subject was only deemed important enough to be included in the index of one textbook (Harrower, 2010), which also devoted a separate section to the topic. Our content analysis also unearthed it in two further texts (Bender et al, 2009) through the phrase "blow the whistle" (p. 255); and (Mencher, 2011) where it was loosely defined in this context:

Sources do not always want to be identified for a variety of reasons. The low-level official whose demands all material from the office go out under his name requests anonymity for the information she proves. The whistle-blower does not want to endanger his job by being identified. (p. 318)

In all instances, however, the reference was fleeting and lacking in detail, painting an incomplete picture of the complex nature of whistleblowing. What was more surprising, however, was that on frequent occasions, examples and content being described in the text might easily have warranted the use of the words whistleblower or whistleblowing. Time and again, the terms appeared to have been deliberately eschewed, possibly as way of avoiding the complications that come with the concept.

On those rare occasions when the term(s) were employed, they were typically linked through a discussion of investigative reporting to the events of Watergate and the role of anonymous source, Deep Throat, in breaking that landmark story. While not without its advantages, this connection may be problematic. Arguably it fixes the use of a whistleblowing source in a particular historical and political setting—as a practice pursued by journalists in the 1970s to address high-level political scandal—rather than as an ongoing tool of reporters in the 21st century. This tendency is exacerbated by the fact that Watergate was often used in the texts as a milestone in timelines illustrating journalism's history (e.g. Harrower, 2010, p.128), further framing the successful whistleblower source as a thing of the past.

It is telling that the same textbook (Harrower) that dedicated two pages to discussing the implication of Watergate and referencing Deep Throat as a whistleblower, chose in its section on investigative journalism to offer a detailed case in which reporters did *not* have to face the problem of working with whistleblowers or other unnamed sources. Instead the story, which involved the illegal use of parking permits, was based on documentation and direct observation of the parking spots.

Anonymous & Confidential Sources

Each text provided defining detail about using information gained on background, deep background, on the record and off the record, but the focus of these definitions was on the information itself and how it could be used rather than detailed attention on defining and distinguishing among the types of human sources, and in particular, the whistleblower as source. In the absence of detailed, and explicit references to whistleblowing, our attention was turned to terms that might act as syllogisms for this, including most directly, anonymous and confidential sources. In fact, as our analysis shows, both of these were used frequently across the texts. However, just as there was little offered as a direct definition of whistleblowing on the rare occasions it arose, these terms too were left largely undefined. Moreover there was little or no distinction made between sources functioning in a manner that might warrant the term "whistleblower" (even if the word itself was eschewed) and anonymous and confidential sources, the latter terms typically being used interchangeably.

Given this lack of differentiation, it is perhaps inevitable that the valence of all the texts examined was overwhelmingly negative in tone when discussing the use of unnamed sources. While there was some concession to the fact that such sources may play a useful role, "Sources can be particularly valuable when they are willing to tell secrets," for example (Lanson & Stephens, 2008, p. 239), for the most part, the message was "Uncertainty and mistrust emerge as soon as things go off the record—which is why to avoid misunderstandings, many reporters refuse to allow it. Ever" (Harrower, 2010, p.81).

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This view—that anonymous sourcing is detrimental to journalism—was substantiated across the texts through: 1) general statements indicating that such practices inevitably lead to a loss of credibility; 2) an appeal to the working practices of those in authority in the profession; and 3) a focus on the legal problems that anonymous sources may bring. Each of these strategies warrants further discussion.

Loss of Credibility

Warnings that the use of anonymous sources threatens credibility were numerous in these texts. To take just a few examples: "Anonymous sources challenge our credibility with readers" (Rich, 2007, p. 86). "Stories without identifiable sources have less credibility with readers, with editors, even with colleagues" (Missouri Group, 2011, p. 417). "Granting anonymity to nervous sources is often the only way to get information into a story. But it can undermine your credibility too, which is why editors generally discourage it" (Harrower, 2010, p.71). "Such information (from anonymous sources) lacks credibility and makes the reporters and newspaper suspect" (Missouri Group, 2011, p.103). "Reporters have been criticized, and rightly so, for relying too heavily on (anonymous sources)" (Lanson & Stephens, 2008, p. 240). "The more you rely on unnamed sources, the less credibility your story has" (Rich, 2007, p. 90).

In fact, the issue of anonymity and its affect on communication has been a popular area for research over the past decade, with a number of critics raising concerns over both identifiability and accountability of sources (Bagdikian 2005; Carlson, 2010). In journalism, revelations about the identity of Mark Felt as Deep Throat (Rains & Scott, 2007) and a plethora of high-profile cases have placed anonymous whistleblowing in the spotlight. Yet at the same time there have been mounting concern over the ramifications of using unnamed sources (Franklin & Carlson, 2010**;** Froomkin, 1999).

The textbooks tie directly into these concerns. However, while it is widely believed—perhaps mistakenly[1]—that anonymous sources may be substantially less credible to news audience and may impact the overall credibility of journalism, no studies were referenced in our sample of textbooks to substantiate the warnings being made.

What is generally overlooked is that "losing credibility" through the use of anonymous sources can mean a range of different effects. For example, the credibility being compromised may center on the news organization or journalism as a whole in the audience's mind—a backlash against using hidden sources—or affect the reputation of the individual journalist, or center on the believability of the unnamed person providing the information, or on the accuracy of the information itself. Indeed, it may be a combination of any or all of these. As we shall see later, different strategies may be implemented to help minimize the threat to these differing elements of news credibility.

While the authors make few clear distinctions, these different perspectives do arise in the textbooks. At times it is clear that the threat is to journalism as a whole: e.g. "Many…recent attacks on the media have come because of the use of anonymous sources. In general this is a healthy challenge because the use of such sources has become far too routine and has contributed to serious mistakes" (Harrower, 2010, p. 249). On other occasions it is the accuracy of the information leaked by the anonymous source that is singled out as suspect: "Even if sources are not intentionally misleading reporters; anonymity protects them from the consequences of their mistakes. The same is not true of the news organizations that publish the information" (Bender et al, 2009, p. 256).

However some of the most negative commentary on the use of anonymous sources linked the loss of credibility more directly to either the professionalism of the individual journalist or to the unnamed source. In terms of the former, the Rich text is especially notable. Here anonymous sources were connected, repeatedly, not with addressing social wrongdoing or even the processes of investigative reporting, but with deceit and fabrication. For example, one debate on unnamed sources led directly into a discussion of infamous rogue journalists reviled for story fabrication—Janet Cooke, Jayson Blair, Stephen Glass, Patricia Smith, and Mike Barnicle (Rich, 2007, p. 92); while later, in a section on plagiarism, the theme was picked up again through the case of *USA Today* reporter Jack Kelley, who was caught fabricating articles. "Despite a *USA Today* policy prohibiting use of anonymous sources, Kelly routinely used them" (Rich, 2007, p. 309). Even veteran CBS reporter Dan Rather, we were reminded, was laid low after accepting documents from an "anonymous source" (Rich, 2007, p. 294).

Conversely, lack of credibility of the source was typically addressed in these texts through the rubric of source motivation. While there was the occasional acknowledgement that "sometimes sources want to remain anonymous for legitimate reasons" (Bender et al, 2009, p. 255); what is striking is that where the issue of the motivation of anonymous sources—and sometimes sources in general—was referenced directly, the motivations ascribed were almost uniformly negative. "Editors are wary of printing information from anonymous sources too. What if the source is lying? If you're being duped, your paper's credibility could be damaged" (Harrower, 2010, p. 81). "Many sources, named and unnamed, have their own agenda and want to manipulate reporters so the sources can promote their cause" (Rich, 2007, p. 91). "Be careful, most sources may not be what they seem" (Mencher, 2011, p. 282). "What if the source is simply using you to spread misinformation or to take revenge on a political opponent? Won't it damage your credibility if your readers think you are in cahoots with partisan gossip-mongers?" (Harrower, 2010, p. 111). "Human sources pose problems as well as solve them. To hurt an enemy or protect a friend, to make themselves look better or someone else look worse—and sometimes simply for fun—people lie to reporters" (Missouri Group, 2011, p. 416).

Similarly, the untrustworthiness of human sources is contrasted, in at least one section of the Missouri Group text, with the supposed reliability of documents. "Fortunately not all sources are human. Records and documents neither lie nor change their stories, they have no axes to grind at your expense, and they can be identified in print" (Missouri Group, 2011, p. 417).

Professional Practice

Beyond general statements of damage to credibility, an appeal to professional practice was also commonplace in the texts in justifying suspicion of anonymous sources. Certainly it is true that unease over the use of anonymous sources has led many newspapers to adopt more stringent guidelines on this practice (Bagdikian, 2005) and all the texts employed examples of this institutional concern in support of their recommendations to avoid unnamed sources. One of the most referenced newspapers in this regard is the policy of *USA Today*, which has banned such sources altogether. The *USA Today* policy was included in half of the texts (e.g. Harrower, 2010, p. 249; Mencher, 2011, p. 318; Rich, 2007, p. 309).

However the norms of professional practice on this issue were also communicated in other ways. These include bluntly tying the avoidance of anonymous sources to good professionalism: "The reporter's job is to put sources on record, by name" (Mencher, 2011, p. 38), and referencing collective beliefs: "The issue of using anonymous sources has been controversial for many years. A recent survey by the Associated Press Managing Editors' organization showed that one in four newspaper editors refuses to allow reporters to use anonymous sources" (Rich, 2007, p. 91).

What isn't addressed, however, is the somewhat recursive nature of this validation. The argument boils down to a belief that a policy is good practice because it's regarded as good practice and is a policy.

Legal Problems

In terms of the legal issues surrounding whistleblowing and anonymous sources, the narrative being told across the texts is consistent--that the weight of the law is now against the journalist who would grant source anonymity. In the words of Rich (2007):

In the past, reporters who promised their sources anonymity had a good chance of honoring their promises even if they were subpoenaed to reveal their sources. ...But in the last few years, judges in several courts penalized reporters by sentencing them to jail for refusing to reveal their sources. (p. 90)

The point was frequently underlined by examples of cases in which journalists have fallen foul of the law by refusing to reveal their source's identity, most prominently the 2005 Judith Miller case discussed by all but the Harrower text. Similarly, all the textbooks point out that, following a ruling by the Supreme Court (Cohen v. Cowles Media Co., 1991), a source whose identity is revealed after confidentiality is promised may sue the reporter and the publishing organization for damages in civil court.

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Shield Laws, "statutes that give journalists the right to protect the identity of sources when questioned during judicial proceedings" (Harrower, 2010, p. 324), are another area of legal knowledge important to the aspiring journalist. While Shield Laws are discussed across all of the textbooks, the degree of detail varies dramatically. Similarly, while all of the textbooks note that these laws are in effect in 34 states and one District, only one (Missouri Group, 2011) lists them.

Ultimately, however, the budding journalist is warned "the best way to avoid such confrontation with the courts is not to promise a source you will keep his or her name confidential. Only for the most compelling reason should you promise confidentiality" (Missouri Group, 2011, p. 459).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Our analysis has shown that tackling the issue of journalist/whistleblower collaboration head-on is rare in introductory news textbooks, and that when anonymous sourcing in general is raised, the message is, for the most part, that they are a threat not only to the reputation of the individual journalist, but to the credibility of the entire journalistic enterprise as a whole.

We would contend that this is an important area in journalism training, and while detailed instruction on how to work with a whistleblower may be held back for advanced courses—those dealing more completely with investigative reporting, for example—groundwork needs to be laid in early classes offering a foundation of training and knowledge for beginning journalists. At the very least, the aspiring journalist needs to be reassured that their job entails more than just putting sources on record, by name, in every case. Furthermore, beginning journalists may find it career motivating and professionally inspiring to learn that journalistic enterprise with whistleblowing sources may lead to profoundly important stories.

How might treatment of this issue be improved in texts intended for introductory news writing courses? While having respect for the overall depth, quality, and readability of the texts we reviewed, we draw on the data of our study—along with policy suggestions offered by a number of whistleblowing advocacy organizations (see Table 5 below) and on our own personal experience, as journalists, of working with such unnamed sources—to offer the following suggestions. While we recognize that some of the texts already take some of the steps suggested here; they do not do so consistently within a text nor inclusively across all of the sample texts.

Distinguish More Carefully Among Categories of Unnamed Sources

While it is understandable—indeed, commendable—for textbooks to warn against the frequent use of anonymous sources, the treatment might be less negative if there were more effort to distinguish among different categories of these. Some of the concerns connected with anonymous sources are unlikely to apply to whistleblowers. For example, "trial balloons" (Missouri Group, 2011, p. 103)—stories designed by an official source to test public reaction without subjecting the source to responsibility for the material—are unlikely to apply to a whistleblower seeking to expose corruption. Similarly, the "sound reasons" (Missouri Group, 2011, p. 103) that justify a promise of confidentiality are more likely to come from a whistleblower—who, by definition, is offering information of social consequence—than from a more commonplace anonymous source.

The risks of undermining the credibility of the various elements connected to a story, as discussed earlier, remain a concern. However, the student journalist can be counseled to minimize these by adopting strategies that can protect against, on the one hand, the damage to the journalists/news organization's reputation by *informing a third party* and, on the other, the credibility of the source or the accuracy of the information by *conceptualizing a range of anonymity categorization*.

Inform a Third Party

One risk to the reporters/news organizations level of credibility, as highlighted in the textbooks, implies that using an unnamed source may leave the impression that the journalist is engaging in fabrication. Like "Jimmy" in the infamous Janet Cooke fabrication case (Eason, 1986), the supposed source simply does not exist.

Research—and common sense—suggest that audiences respond better to an unnamed source if they can be reassured that while the identity of the whistleblower is being withheld from them, it *is* known by a respectable third-party involved in the case, such as an editor, lawyer or ombudsman. This strategy may not only guard against accusations of fabrication, but also ensure that the journalist does not find him or herself alone, making consequential decisions without the protection provided by inclusion of an editor, producer, legal advisor, or publisher.

Conceptualize a Range of Anonymity Categorization

"When a reporter attributes assertions to a source, the reader can assess the accuracy and truth of the information on the basis of the general reliability of the source and his or her stake in the information" (Mencher, 2011, p. 38). Anonymity, of course, robs the audience of that ability, threatening the credibility of the information and, on occasions, raising questions about the credibility of the whistleblower themselves.

However, as Rains & Scott (1977) point out, message senders do not necessarily come in discrete categories of *completely anonymous* or *fully identified*. It is entirely possible to be *partially anonymous*. There may be details that the journalist and the whistleblower can agree on being disclosed—such as the general level of management that the whistleblower occupies—that would offer cues by which the reader might judge their assertions and motives, while still protecting the source's identity.

In large part, this strategy may be conceptualized as a balancing of *Cues v. Clues*; the former being a signal to the audience that reassures in regards to a source's credibility, the latter constituting a detail that may lead to a whistleblower's identity being uncovered. Many details will fall, simultaneously, into both categories, of course. However some particles of information may be largely exclusive to one category. For example, while using pronouns that reveal the gender of a whistleblower may offer little in the way of a cue to the credibility of the source, it would constitute a substantial clue for anyone trying to unearth the source's identity, as it may narrow down the list of suspects considerably.

Consequently, while offering students suggestions for giving anonymous sources a partial identity as described above, the text should be careful to warn that striking the right balance between partial anonymity and identifiability is a delicate operation. The question that the journalist must be counseled to ask both themselves and their whistleblowing collaborator is: how may we best maximize the cues we offer to readers, while minimizing the clues that may be seized upon by an organization seeking to ferret out the source's identity?

At the same time, the texts should endeavor to suggest strategic and practical tactics for the journalist to keep legal-proof records about the whistleblower, such as avoiding e-mail records, considering cell-phone GPS location or call records, or carefully concealing a whistleblower's name in all personal notes. It would be much more difficult to keep Mark Felt's identity as Deep Throat from being discovered today with the kind of contrails that technology leaves behind.

Acknowledge the Range of the Journalist's Responsibilities

Whistleblowers—perhaps more than any other type of human source—bring complicated needs to the news process because they may have complicated motivations and face complicated consequences. Journalists are unlikely to effectively handle collaboration with these often-vulnerable individuals unless they have some notion of the types of pressure and risk that whistleblowers may face.

All the textbooks underline the journalist's responsibility to honor any promise to keep a source's identity confidential—even while, generally, warning against such promises. However, whistleblowers and those organizations that support them argue that the responsibility of journalists who work with informants who are putting their careers—and perhaps even their lives—in jeopardy should go beyond simply protecting their identity. At the very least, a reporter should be in a position to advise the whistleblower about a range of advocacy organizations for whistleblowers that might be of aid (see Table 5, below), with this information easily imparted in the textbooks.

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Table 5
Whistleblower Advocacy Organizations

Organization	Website url
Center for public integrity	http://www.iwatchnews.org
Government accountability project	http://www.whistleblower.org
National security whistleblowers coalition	http://nswbc.org
National whistleblowers center	http://www.whistleblowers.org
National whistleblowers legal defense & education fund	http://www.whistleblowersblog.org
Project on government oversight	http://www.pogo.org
Taxpayers against fraud	http://www.taf.org

Beware of Ascribing Only Negative Motivations

While it useful to counsel young reporters to be wary of the motives of sources, it is also appropriate to remind students that not all motives are either negative or tied to self-interest. Justice theories have been used to explain whistleblowing behavior, with some scholars arguing that perceptions of injustice often motivate the whistleblower to endeavor to resolve the situation. In these cases, the whistleblower perceives their act of publicized dissent to be beneficial in positive proportion to their perception of the organization's injustice or wrongdoing (Gundlach, Douglas, & Martinko, 2003). Consequently, at least some whistleblowers, far from acting from self-interest, can be said to be: "putting loyalty to the highest moral principles and to country above loyalty to persons, party, or government department" (Devine, 1999, p. 1).

Illustrate the Potential of the Whistleblower/Journalist Collaboration

Some students specifically pursue coursework in journalism because they perceive that journalists have a powerful role in democracy, holding government accountable and serving as a check to power. There are powerful, current, and astonishing cases of collaboration between journalists and whistleblowers that could be included in textbooks, including the brief case studies of the modern, non-Watergate, journalist/whistleblower collaborations we presented earlier. The achievements of Jessalyn Radack/Michael Isikoff; Gina Grey/Dana Milbank; or Jeffrey Sterling/James Risen & Eric Lichtblau—and many others—could inspire students as to the possibilities and not just the potential pitfalls of such collaboration.

That's how Pulitzers are won.

ENDNOTE

[1]There is some evidence that anonymity may not undermine the credibility of information as severely as many believe. In a recent study of health websites, for example, Rains (2007) found that there was little difference in how credible the information on these was perceived, regardless of whether it appeared to come from a named or unnamed source. And a Pew Research Center (2006) survey found that 76 percent of the American public approved of the occasional use of confidential sources. This is broadly consistent with earlier work on the level of credibility of anonymous sources in newspaper reports (See Adams, 1962; Fedler & Counts, 1981).

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