The Case

You are the publisher of a big-city newspaper. Your investigation of a major political scandal is based on the work of two young reporters. They have a source who refuses to be named. So far, all his facts check out. But now, he’s implicating the president. The stakes are high.

Can you continue to stand by an anonymous source?

A. No. An anonymous source may lie. Get your facts on the record.

B. Yes. The only way to get the truth is by protecting your source.

C. Yes, but confirm his facts with other sources before printing them.
Questions to Consider

- Why might a source not want to be named? Consider good reasons and bad.
- What are the pros and cons of using an anonymous or confidential source? Which apply in this scenario?
- If you can’t get the facts on the record or confirmed by others, are you willing to pass on a potential blockbuster story?
- Does your decision affect the credibility of the news organization? Explain why or why not.
- Would your decision be different if it involved a lower-profile person than the president?
- Do readers have a right to know where the information came from?

Owing in large part to the Post, the Watergate scandal — an illegal White House plot to spy on and sabotage President Richard Nixon’s political enemies — led the president to resign in 1974.

The two young reporters credited with this story were Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward. Woodward had a secret source in the executive branch. The source’s identity remained a secret until 2005 when former FBI deputy director W. Mark Felt came forward to say he was the source, and the newspaper confirmed it.

During the Watergate scandal, Woodward promised never to reveal the source’s name and never to quote him, even as an anonymous source. The source guided the reporters by confirming some facts and revealing others. In journalism jargon, using such a source means that discussions are on “deep background.” Thus, the nickname for Woodward’s famous Watergate source: “Deep Throat.”

The use of anonymous sources is hotly debated. Those who use them say people will never tell the whole truth unless they are protected from retaliation. Those who don’t use them say unnamed sources can misuse their shield of anonymity. Although codes of ethics say keeping secrets is often a necessary part of a reporter’s job, the codes also advise journalists to question sources’ motives before promising anonymity. Once granted anonymity, sources might manipulate reporters for their own ends. Some news organizations have policies requiring reporters to identify sources.

In the case of Watergate, *The Washington Post* had a rule: All leads had to be confirmed by two sources.

Executive Editor Ben Bradlee later recalled that many people wondered “how the Post dared ride over the constant denials of the president of the United States and the attorney general” as well as top presidential aides. Bradlee replied that the Post knew its information was correct. Leads from Deep Throat as well as other well-protected sources consistently checked out. Tapes of Nixon’s conversations show that *The Washington Post* was right.
For Further Discussion

- Do you think The Washington Post’s two-source rule still holds true today for most news organizations? Explain your answer.

- There is no federal law to protect a journalist from revealing an anonymous source’s identity if so ordered by a court. Journalists have gone to jail on contempt of court charges rather than reveal a source. Do you think journalists should be allowed to keep their sources a secret? Why or why not?

- How might knowing that he or she could be jailed affect a journalist’s decision to grant anonymity to a source?

- News consumers often say the use of anonymous sources is their biggest complaint — even more than factual errors or bias. Do you agree or disagree? Explain.

Activity

The Associated Press has set guidelines for using anonymous sources:

- The material provided by the source is NOT opinion and is VITAL.
- The material is not available ANY other way.
- The source is RELIABLE and in a position to know.

Select a story in a newspaper, magazine or on a news website that cites one or more unnamed sources. Evaluate whether the information meets the AP’s guidelines.