

Anonymous Sources Harm Credibility of All Stories

by Miglena Mantcheva Sternadori and Esther Thorson

Findings confirm the use of anonymous sources has a negative effect on readers' perceptions of story credibility. Stories of presumably higher quality elicited more believability toward sources who disagree with the main findings of the story.

Although the Internet is changing news delivery, newsgathering routines have shown little change. Anonymous sources remain one of the staples of 21st century journalism despite concerns that the practice opens the doors to manipulation by “spin doctors” and “leakers.”¹ Journalistic debacles, such as Janet Cooke’s invented child addict story² and the Jayson Blair and Jack Kelley fabrications,³ have discouraged news organizations from much use of anonymous sources. But breaking stories in which information is limited, such as the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal⁴ and the Gulf War of 1991,⁵ routinely bring back scores of anonymous sources.

This experimental study tests how the use of anonymous sources in print investigative stories affects readers’ perceptions of credibility. It tests this hypothesis in both prize-winning stories (and hence the assumption that they are of very high quality) and those that were submitted for prizes, but failed to win (presumably of somewhat lower quality).

Value of Anonymous Sources

The first study on anonymous sources, which was conducted by Sigal⁶ in the 1970s, found background briefings accounted for 8 percent and leaks for 2

Sternadori is an assistant professor in the Department of Contemporary Media and Journalism at the University of South Dakota. Thorson is a professor and acting dean of the School of Journalism at the University of Missouri. They thank Dan Sullivan of the University of Minnesota for his thoughtful feedback and suggestions.

percent of news channels used by *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*. Since then, many more studies have confirmed that anonymous sourcing is ubiquitous. Culbertson⁷ analyzed 12 newspapers and found anonymous attributions in one-third of the stories, with highest frequency in *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*. The frequency was higher in newsmagazines. About 70 percent of *Newsweek* stories and about 75 percent of *Time* stories contained anonymous attributions.⁸ Blankenburg observed that between 23 and 30 percent of national and international stories in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *The Los Angeles Times* contained anonymous sources. Similar ubiquity has been documented in broadcast news, as Wulfemeyer and McFadden⁹ found anonymous attributions in more than half of network stories.

What makes the use of anonymous sources so popular? It is not taught to journalism students, and most educational texts caution against the practice. One textbook¹⁰ warns that the use of unnamed sources makes the reporter and the newspaper suspect, opens the door to sources lying or attempting a maneuver and puts reporters at risk of lawsuits if they break anonymity promises. *The Reporter's Handbook*¹¹ advises journalists to find sources willing to identify themselves or convince the reticent to go on the record. If that fails, they should explain fully why a source requested and was granted anonymity. Claiming the initiative came from the source may also be inaccurate. Gassaway's interviews¹² with 15 confidential sources suggest most did not ask for anonymity but provided information anonymously at a reporter's request. Most also said they were concerned with the public's right to know.

If anonymous sourcing is not always consciously pursued but happens regularly, perhaps it is because it serves a purpose. Blankenburg observed that the use of anonymous sources is "not just functional to newsgathering but of social value" because it sheds light on controversial topics.¹³ Recent concerns about news credibility were significant enough to bring back an idea about completely forgoing anonymous sources,¹⁴ but that quickly proved too utopian for deadline newsroom operations. A *Washington Post* policy banning the use of anonymous sources in the 1970s lasted only two days and was quickly forgotten after the newspaper ended up scooped on major stories. According to Blankenburg, "prohibitions fail because anonymity works" and because it allows for antagonistic information to be reported.¹⁵

Another perspective on anonymous sources is that it is a way for the powerful (e.g., political officials and business executives) to promote the status quo. Brown and colleagues, who observed that conflict stories use no more anonymous sources than ordinary stories, suggest the practice "in all but a few cases perpetuates the invisibility of the truly powerful."¹⁶ Gassaway¹⁷ found that the same anonymous sources tend to leak information to many reporters over many years, which limits a publication's diversity of viewpoints over time.

If using anonymous sources is inevitable, perhaps journalists need to be more aware of the price they are paying, beyond the occasional embarrassment from publishing something wrong. The following sections explore how

the literature on news credibility and source credibility relates to the use of anonymous sources.

Defining Credibility

Credibility research has its roots in persuasion research. In the 1950s, Hovland and Weiss¹⁸ were the first to explore the concept of source credibility, where “source” is viewed as either an individual or an organization sending out a persuasive message. Within that line of research, credibility has been defined as “attitude toward a source of communication,”¹⁹ “global evaluation of the believability of the message source,”²⁰ or a combination of trustworthiness, expertise and goodwill.²¹ Sources who have a vested interest in what they are trying to promote are viewed as less credible than are sources judged to be independent observers,²² and sources judged to have low expertise on a topic are also judged as less credible than are sources with high expertise.²³

Journalism research suggests credibility and hard-nosed reporting do not go hand in hand. Meyer²⁴ viewed newspaper credibility as a combination of believability and community affiliation. Investigations running “counter to the perceived economic or social interests of the community”²⁵ can erode a newspaper’s credibility despite their journalistic quality. According to Meyer,²⁶ some dimensions of credibility are unstable, and subtleties involved in measuring credibility may lead to inconsistent results. Gaziano and McGrath²⁷ used a 12-item index to measure credibility with both believability and “likeability” items on a semantic differential scale. Kiouisis²⁸ viewed credibility as the combined public perceptions of media’s approach to “quality, profit making, privacy, community well-being and trustworthiness.” Ultimately, the devil is in the perception. Sparrow observes that media are trying to “remain credible or at least credibly credible.”²⁹

Based on this literature, news credibility here refers to the public perception of news quality, which may or may not match journalistic perceptions of news quality. This definition views credibility as similar to Meyer’s “likeability”³⁰ and implies that so-called “legitimate”³¹ news created by following news routines may sometimes fall short of satisfying readers’ needs and wants.

Perceptions of Anonymous Sources

Surveys conducted between the 1960s and the 1980s have produced ambivalent results about readers’ perceptions of anonymous sources. Adams³² found there were five types of anonymous sources readers perceived as most credible—people affiliated with the U.S. government, the government in general, official reports, official sources and government spokespeople. Wording also affected credibility. Readers scored “authoritative quarters” higher than

“well-informed quarters,” and “trustworthy indications” did better than just “indications.”³³

In the wake of Watergate, readers appeared positive about anonymous sources. Some viewed anonymous sources as more knowledgeable and credible, and unnamed attribution seemed to make a story more interesting³⁴ or even more accurate.³⁵ Prior knowledge or opinions about a topic often played a much more significant role in influencing readers’ perceptions. Hale³⁶ found readers perceived stories with anonymous sources to be just as believable as stories with named sources.

Studies about what percentage of readers like or dislike about anonymous sources are ambivalent. In a 1980 survey by the *Chicago Sun-Times*, 55 percent of the readers approved of anonymous sources.³⁷ Fielder and Weaver³⁸ found 40 percent of readers disapproved of unnamed attribution even in investigative stories. A Gallup poll from the early 1980s found 53 percent of Americans disapprove of anonymous sources. A 1979 study by the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) found 81 percent of readers see anonymous sources as less believable but 87 percent see the use of anonymous sources as good journalistic practice. Twenty years later, an ASNE focus-group study³⁹ found 73 percent of the public had become more skeptical about news accuracy.

Hypotheses

Based on the literature from the last 25 years, the following hypothesis about the relationship between credibility and anonymous sources is proposed:

H1:

Stories with no anonymous sources will be perceived as more credible than stories with a high number of anonymous sources.

The stimuli in this experimental study are abridged versions of stories from the annual contest of Investigative Reporters and Editors (IRE), an association of journalists who view media’s role as watchdogs. In enterprise content, journalists tend to report on controversial topics and have more freedom to choose their sources,⁴⁰ which makes anonymous sources relatively common.⁴¹ Analyzing content from contests is important because such competitions subtly promote guidelines by pointing to examples of quality work. Hansen,⁴² for instance, has observed prize-winning as an industry reward measure. Based on the presumption that contests are standard-setters and that journalistic quality translates into credibility, the following is proposed:

H2:

Winning investigative stories will be perceived as more credible than non-winning stories.

The rationale here is that the quality of winning stories should fill in for the negative impact of a high number of anonymous sources. As Blankenburg and

others have suggested, a good story sometimes needs anonymous sources, “integral to newsgathering in a variety of settings and vital in some circumstances.”⁴³ In that sense, winning stories should have done a better job of creating what Ryfe calls “legitimacy,”⁴⁴ recognition of appropriate use of journalistic rules by both journalists and public.

H3:

There will be an interaction between the use of anonymous sources and contest outcome, such that winning stories with no anonymous sources will be perceived as the most credible.

The rationale behind the third hypothesis is that a high-quality story is one that abides by high journalistic standards. This should make it more “legitimate” and less damaged by the use of anonymous sources than would some more ordinary story.

Method

The experiment used a 2 (story quality) x 2 (anonymous sources) between-subject design. The two levels of story quality were winners and non-winners. The two levels of anonymous sources were high and zero, stories with and without anonymous sources. The two dependent variables were perceived credibility and subject believability, measured by 31 questions targeting various aspects of news credibility.

Participants

The participants were 60 undergraduate journalism students enrolled in a beginning newswriting class, who received extra credit for taking part in the experiment. All comparisons in the following data analyses were between subjects.

Stimuli

The stimuli consisted of 12 investigative stories selected from a pool of newspaper entries in the annual Investigative Reporters and Editors (IRE) contest from 1995 to 2002. Each participant read four stories, one in each of the following categories:

- Winner status, contains anonymous sources
- Winner status, contains no anonymous sources
- Non-winner, contains anonymous sources
- Non-winner, contains no anonymous sources.

The participants were not aware if, when and where the stories they read had been published. To avoid fatiguing participants, some of the shorter contest entries were selected, and each was reduced from its original size to about 1,000 words. Half of the stories were contest winners. The rest were entries that neither won nor were nominated as finalists. This was done to ensure stimuli

were significantly different in quality. Stories selected as finalists were assumed to have been close in quality to the winners. Half of the stories contained quotations from 10 to 12 anonymous sources; the others contained none. To increase the contrast between stimuli with low and high numbers of anonymous sources, slight textual changes were made to some of the original stories by adding a few extra anonymous sources.

The 12 stories comprised:

- Three winners with anonymous sources: about street gangs (*Chicago Sun Times*), about campaign finance (*The Los Angeles Times*) and about mortgage fraud (*Pocono* [Stroudsburg, Pa.] *Record*)

- Three winners without anonymous sources: about forced sterilization in developing countries (*Wall Street Journal*), about absentee judges (*Baton Rouge Advocate*) and about money laundering (*Bergen* [North New Jersey] *Record*)

Three non-winning, non-nominated stories with anonymous sources: about air travel security (*USA Today*), about abortion medical malpractice (*Arizona Republic*) and about underage dancers and corrupt cops (*Minneapolis Star-Tribune*)

- Three non-winning/non-nominated stories without anonymous sources: about eco-terrorism (*Portland Oregonian*), about vacant buildings and squatters (*Detroit News*), and about al-Qaeda's training process (*The New York Times*)

Procedure

Each participant was asked to read four investigative stories, each of which were selected randomly from each of the four categories, and answer a 31-item questionnaire after each reading. The 31 questions, aimed at measuring aspects of perceived credibility, were developed by Kratzer and Thorson.⁴⁵ They loaded on six dimensions, discussed in the data reduction section below. The stories and the questionnaires were available online at surveyartisan.com. The data were automatically recorded in a spreadsheet. The study took each

Story quality by anonymous sources interaction was significant. Winning stories with a high number of anonymous sources scored as the least credible. Winning stories with no anonymous sources scored as the most credible.

participant between 45 and 65 minutes. A random and unique set of stories was constructed for each participant by drawing numbers from randomizer.org. A 1-to 7 scale—"not at all" to "very much"—was used for the answers to the 31 questions after each assigned story. Participants completed a final questionnaire assessing their media use and perceptions of controversy.

Data Reduction

A factor analysis—missing values replaced with means, correlation matrix, varimax rotation—showed the 31 items loaded on six factors with eigenvalues higher than one. Indices were constructed based on the first two factors, which cumulatively explained nearly 46 percent of the variance. Factor 1, initial eigenvalue = 10.25, explained 33.1 percent of the variance. Factor 2, eigenvalue = 3.98, explained 12.8 percent of the variance. The two indices included variables with individual values higher than 0.6 in the component matrix.

Missing values in the dataset were replaced with mean scores. The first index, perceived credibility (Cronbach's $\alpha = .92$), was computed as the mean of the participants' answers to the following 13 questions/statements:

- The story was fair.
- The story was complete.
- The story was accurate.
- I trust the information in this story.
- I trust the sources quoted in this story.
- The story was believable.
- The story was credible.
- The story was informative.
- The story explored the issue in depth.
- The story was interesting.
- I liked this story.
- The story was well written.
- The story was important.

This 13-item index is consistent with the literature on credibility measurement reviewed earlier.

In further exploration of the data, a second index, called source believability index, was constructed (Cronbach's $\alpha = .86$). The index was computed as the mean of the five items. It should be noted here that this index is not an indicator of the believability of all sources used. Rather, it is an indicator of believability of sources who disagree with a story's main findings. For instance, in an article that uncovered medical malpractice, four of the variables were the answers to the following questions/statements on a scale of 1 to 7:

- How much do you believe the sources in the story who said it was NOT the doctor's and the clinic's fault that the patient died?
 - How much do you trust the sources in the story who said it WAS NOT the doctor's and the clinic's fault that the patient died?
 - The sources in the story who said that it WAS NOT the doctor's and the
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Table 1
Mean Scores and Standard Deviations for Credibility and Resistance Indices

<i>Story</i>	<i>Perceived Credibility</i>	<i>Standard Believability</i>	<i>Source Deviation</i>	<i>Standard Deviation</i>
Assaults on Flights (anonymous/non-winning)	5.53	.87	2.95	1.07
Medical Malpractice (anonymous/non-winning)	4.70	1.03	2.59	.84
Underage Dancers (anonymous/non-winning)	4.90	1.21	2.82	.91
Campaign Contributions (anonymous/winning)	4.15	1.02	3.67	.80
Inflated Appraisals (anonymous/winning)	4.48	1.13	3.06	.95
Street Gangs (anonymous/winning)	4.61	.65	2.84	.91
Al-Qaeda Training (no anonymous/non-winning)	5.28	.97	3.30	1.03
Eco-terrorism (no anonymous/non-winning)	5.24	1.00	3.15	1.23
Vacant Buildings (no anonymous/non-winning)	4.64	.81	3.15	1.21
Absentee Judges (no anonymous/winning)	4.93	.81	3.00	1.06
Chemical Sterilization (no anonymous/winning)	5.55	.88	5.01	1.09
Money Laundering (no anonymous/winning)	5.15	.72	2.83	.90

clinic’s fault that the patient died knew what they were talking about.

- The sources in the story who said it WAS NOT the doctor’s and the clinic’s fault that the patient died made strong arguments.

The fifth variable in the source believability index was the reversed value of the answer to the question, “How much do you believe the sources in the story who said it was the doctor’s and the clinic’s fault that the patient died?” See Table 1 for mean scores and standard deviations for the indices.

Results

The hypotheses were tested by submitting the data to a 2 (anonymous sources) x 2 (story quality) ANOVA.

Hypotheses 1 stated that stories containing anonymous sources will be perceived as less credible

Table 2
Estimated Marginal Means for Effect of Anonymous Sources on Perceived Credibility

<i>Anonymous Sources</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Error</i>
Low	5.135	.008
High	4.702	.008

than stories without anonymous sources.

There was a main effect for anonymous sources ($F = 12.13$, $p < .01$, partial eta squared = .05), such that stories with no anonymous sources scored as more credible than stories with anonymous sources. [See Table 2] H1 was supported.

There was also a main effect of anonymous sources for the second dependent variable ($F = 9.53$, $p < .01$, partial eta squared = .04), such that source believability was higher for stories with no anonymous sources. [See Table 3]

Table 3
Estimated Marginal Means for Effect of Anonymous Sources on Source Believability

Anonymous Sources	Mean	Std. Error
None	3.030	.102
High	2.585	.102

Hypothesis 2 stated that winning stories will be perceived as more credible than non-winning stories.

The main effect for story quality ($F = 3.46$, $p < .06$, partial eta squared = .02) was only marginally significant and in the direction opposite to the one hypothesized ($M = 5.04$, $SD = 1.02$ for non-winning stories; $M = 4.8$, $SD = 1.01$ for winning stories). H2 was not supported. There was a main effect for story quality ($F = 8.85$, $p < .01$, partial eta squared = .04) for the second dependent variable such that source believability was higher for winning stories than for non-winning stories. [See Table 4]

Table 4
Estimated Marginal Means for Source Believability Based on Story Quality

Story Quality	Mean	Std. Error
Non-winning	2.593	.102
Winning	3.022	.102

Hypothesis 3 stated there will be an interaction between anonymous sources and story quality.

The story quality x anonymous sources interaction was significant ($F = 9.75$, $p < .01$, partial eta squared = .04). Winning stories with a high number of anonymous sources scored as the least credible. Winning stories with

Table 5
Estimated Marginal Means for Story Quality*
Anonymous Sources Interaction

Contest Outcome	Anonymous sources	Mean	Std. Error
Non-winning	No anon. sources	5.061	.125
	High anon. sources	5.016	.124
Winning	No anon. sources	5.210	.124
	High anon. sources	4.388*	.125

*Significantly different from other means at $p < .05$.

no anonymous sources scored as the most credible, but post-hoc tests showed that was not significantly different from the scores in the two remaining conditions. [See

Figure 1
Story Quality by Anonymous Sources Interaction

	High anon.	No anon.
Nonwin	5.016	5.061
Win	4.388	5.21

Figure 1 and Table 5] H3 was partially supported. There was no significant interaction for source believability.

Discussion

This study explored how the use of anonymous sources and journalistic quality affect perceptions of credibility. The findings confirm that the use of anonymous sources has a negative effect on readers' perceptions of credibility. It is possible that anonymity elicits a reasonable assumption that the source has a vested interest, which is typically associated with low credibility, at least in persuasion research. It is also possible that the use of anonymous sources without sufficient explanation is interpreted by readers as a sign of journalistic incompetence, which in source credibility theory is another reason to assign lower credibility to a source.

Stories of presumably higher quality—contest winners—elicited more source believability toward sources who disagree with the main findings. This may suggest some degree of public disagreement with presentation of antagonistic information and the industry's judgment of journalistic quality. This is not surprising in light of the findings of a 1998 ASNE credibility study, which found that many readers perceive media as out of touch with prevailing societal values. As Haiman⁴⁶ points out, "We in the journalism business do seem to give ourselves a lot of prizes." It is also possible that stories that elicited more source believability were on topics personally relevant to many participants. Chanowitz and Langner⁴⁷ suggest people are more likely to make a "premature cognitive commitment" for what appears to be personally irrelevant information but resist information on personally relevant topics.

The experimental method, although not perfect, allowed establishing causality rather than a correlation between the use of anonymous sources and credibility. But the findings must be tempered by some limitations. Post-hoc tests showed significant differences among some indices' scores for specific stories. Differences in topics within and across message categories, along with

information attributed to specific sources, named or anonymous, may have affected participants' evaluations. It should be noted, however, that it is common for experimental stimuli to differ, especially when they are real-world messages. Using several messages per category—three, in the case of this study—was intended to allow some of these differences to cancel out, permitting a “separation of categorical features and idiosyncratic features of individual cases.”⁴⁸

Statistically speaking, results from experiments are not meant to be generalized to any population but to relationships between variables. Nevertheless, testing middle-aged and older adults would be an important next step. Furthermore, participants in this study read the stories on a computer screen in a university lab, which is certainly different from reading the newspaper in one's home. However, at least one meta-analysis has offered strong support for the external validity of so-called “trivial laboratory studies.”⁴⁹ Because the participants were enrolled in their first newswriting class, it is reasonable to believe that their opinions of anonymous sources are comparable to those of other young adults without much journalism knowledge. The abridgement of the original stories is another limitation, because eliminating some context may have affected the quality of the content.

In conclusion, this study expanded on previous findings that use of anonymous sources has an adverse effect on credibility. Directions for future research include exploring if and how different types of anonymous sources—for instance, official versus non-government—affect perceived credibility. If the study is replicated, pre-testing participants about their views on anonymous sources could be used to eliminate the effect of pre-existing attitudes through an analysis of covariance.

Future studies could test adults of various types and expand the pool of stimuli to include non-investigative stories. Although random assignment statistically eliminates individual differences, there may be generational differences in the relation between anonymity and credibility perceptions. Participants older than college students may confirm the findings of the early credibility studies, when anonymous sources were perceived as more knowledgeable. Or, as the 1998 ASNE study found, older readers may be exactly the group that harbors the deepest suspicions of anonymous sources. It is also important to consider new studies on how journalists view the use of anonymous sources. Reporters in the 1970s attached great value to anonymous sources, but in 1984, less than a quarter of journalists said their work could be “seriously hampered” if they were not allowed to use anonymous sources.⁵⁰ Asking that question more regularly could provide better understanding of the news industry's inner workings over time.

Notes

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