REASONS FOR CHANGES IN POLICY OR PRACTICE ON THE USE OF CONFIDENTIAL SOURCES

A sampling of respondents’ comments when asked to describe the factors that led to a change in the policy on the use of confidential sources:

- “We use fewer anonymous sources because such reporting undermines the newspaper’s credibility”
- “Viewers are skeptical of confidential sources, so we shy away from them”
- “It was decided that the use of confidential sources was being abused, and in many cases, the information presented could be acquired from other sources”
- “A company-wide tightening of rules to protect our credibility, in the face of reporter fabrication of stories at many (other) newspapers. Also, it is always a reporter’s obligation to be skillful enough to ultimately get information on the record”
- “An effort to enhance the credibility of our reporting”
- “It is just good journalism”
- “Confidential-source reporting tends to be viewed as ‘suspect’ these days by readers”
- “Media scandals involving unnamed sources allowed us to re-evaluate our policy”
- “High profile national cases in which reporters made up sources and greater awareness of the credibility issues that are sometimes raised by using confidential sources”
- “Desire for more accountability, credibility”; “Ethical considerations”; “Reader distrust of information provided by an unidentified source, because of high-profile cases with coverage”
- “The media’s need for more transparency, and the scandal caused by our shortcomings”
- “The sensitivity of readers, who don’t like it because they cannot judge if the information is true”
- “We generally do not like anonymous sources. We believe they tend to decrease credibility and increase lazy reporting. If we use them—and it is rare—the top editors must know who the source is, and more than one editor has to agree anonymity is warranted”
- “We generally do not use them, not so much because of the threat of subpoena but because we aren’t satisfied with confidential sources in providing quality reporting to readers”
- “While the fear of subpoenas plays into it, it is as much as anything a newsroom decision, with concerns about credibility with readers mattering a lot”
- “Our policy on confidential sources got a close look after some of the big cases of made-up sources, and there was a big spurt of activity right after those cases, with everybody clamping down on things”
- “Stations are using fewer confidential sources but not because of any legal reasons; they see that it is the hallmark of lazy journalism, and the industry has gotten away from it because we’ve come to realize that it represents a lack of discipline to let reporters constantly be taking things ‘off the record’”
- “We now require a triangulation of sources confirming the confidential material, and the reporter must reveal the source to [the editor]. But none of this came about because we were worried about subpoenas. It is because we are worried about made-up sources, and saw people either losing their Pulitzers because they fabricated sources or finding themselves in trouble because they cited anonymous sources who really had an ax to grind.”
- “Readers’ obvious growing belief that ‘unnamed sources’ may be fictitious. The highly publicized dishonesty of other reporters led to this”
- “Awareness that readers often discount information from confidential sources”
- “Skepticism by our readers of the accuracy and/or motives of anonymous sources”
- “It appears there are more people wanting to be sources that are less trustworthy and more risky to deal with.”
- “It is a journalistic reason, not a legal one”
- “It has much more to do with trust of the media and its sources.”
- “Using these sources puts us in a precarious position, because readers cannot judge for themselves if our story is true. We now use them only if we have no other choice.”
- “The readers simply will not tolerate it anymore”
- “These decisions are driven by journalistic fairness. We are no longer willing to give people the chance to take shots at each other anonymously, so we use confidential sources only when truly necessary.”