

## **‘Insiders Say’: The Use of Unnamed Sources in the Globe and Mail**

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### **Abstract**

There is a close interaction between political sources and media professionals. Journalists need politicians as generators of news stories and as sources. Politicians need journalists to make themselves and their policies more widely known. This paper will provide a framework to inform an understanding of this changing relationship, and argue that the new strains may be seen most vividly in the use of official but unnamed political sources.

### **Text**

The relationship between journalists and politicians in democracies has been well-studied, although it's recognized that this relationship is exceptionally difficult to analyze (Blumler and Gurevitch 26). Yet the reporter-politician dynamic is worthy of on-going study because it is at the heart of political communication. There is a close interaction between political sources and media professionals. Journalists need politicians as generators of news stories and as sources. Politicians need journalists to make themselves and their policies more widely known. This paper will provide a framework to inform an understanding of this changing relationship, and argue that the new strains may be seen most vividly in the use of official but unnamed political sources.

My interest in this study was sparked by a commentary in the *Globe and Mail* on January 17, 2006 criticizing the newspaper's use of anonymous sources (Waddell A6). The article referred to a front-page story that ran on January 10, 2006, under the headline "Liberals quietly considering the possibility of defeat." The story was written by Jane Taber, the paper's senior political writer, and Bill Curry, a reporter with the paper's

parliamentary bureau. It included direct and indirect quotes on the state of the election campaign attributed variously to an unnamed candidate, second and third unnamed candidates, a veteran Liberal, one strategist, a Martinite, some Liberal staffers, other Liberal staff, some Ontario candidates and a senior Liberal Heritage Minister, Liza Frulla was eventually quoted but not until paragraph 20. Questions immediately came to mind. Why are two political journalists basing an entire report on unnamed sources? How can media justify granting anonymity to candidates running for election? How do readers know these people even exist? What is this doing to public discussion of the election campaign?

To understand how reporters use sources, it is important to have an understanding of the relationship between politicians and journalists. However, the predominant paradigms of the media-politics power relationship do not adequately lay the groundwork for an examination of the use of sources.

### **Adversaries or collaborators?**

The adversary model rests on the assumption that there should be a conflict of interest between journalists and politicians (Blumler and Gurevitch, 27). In this paradigm, journalists are watchdogs to power, reporting the news as they see fit, and autonomously setting the news agenda. They protect the public from abuses of power, act as checks on those that would exceed their mandates and provide the 'audience' with truthful information that allows citizens to fully participate in a healthy democracy.

In this model, journalists assume that politicians have no legitimate access to media, that they use media for spurious purposes, meaning to spin, to chase votes, to

manipulate outcomes, and ultimately to get and keep power. The motives of politicians are suspect, and the job of journalists is to expose their wrongdoings, publicize their mistakes and challenge their authority.

Journalists as adversaries to power is a popularly held view, certainly among many of those in the media (Lloyd). Hand in hand with that view goes a deep suspicion of politicians and their spokespeople as truthful sources. In an opinion piece in the *Globe and Mail* in December 2004, Peter Debarats, the former dean of the School of Journalism at the University of Western Ontario and a past holder of the Chair of Communications Ethics at Ryerson University, made this provocative statement about political sources: “When it comes to political information, almost all is biased or incomplete” (A25).

For their part, politicians regularly accuse journalists of negativity and a fixation on drama, personalities and trivia. Political leaders complain that they endure “the malice of an incorrigibly hostile media” and blame journalists for subverting responsible public policy initiatives with “mountains of trivia and drivel and trash” (Mulrone 108). Conflict is a regular and recurring feature of the relationship, and often turns the arena of political coverage into a battlefield. On one side are the politicians, who see journalists as obstacles in their attempts to reach and persuade the public. On the other are the journalists, who see politicians as manipulators of the truth. The relationship becomes one in which “journalists [seek] out the sharpest conflicts, the most sensational charges and the most outrageous gaffes and politicians [are] more than able to supply these in quantity” (Taras 3).

The flaw in the adversary model is that it does not allow for what can be argued is a joint creation of political news, an often collaborative enterprise which hinges on the

idea that “reporters and officials have reason and resources to trade with each other” (Blumler and Gurevitch 29). In the exchange model, the interactions between journalists and politicians are seen to serve each side’s interests. Journalists need access to politicians for information, news, action and reaction. Politicians need journalists to convey their messages to the public and to build support for policies and initiatives.

In this model, journalists and politicians reach mutually agreeable arrangements with each other and obey a set of unwritten rules governing access, sources, and resources. Politicians provide handouts, news releases, advance copies of speeches and statements. They organize news conferences, scrums, photo ops, and staged events. They favour certain reporters with leaks and trial balloons, and they control access for interviews and background briefings (Gaber, Gandy, Lloyd). Journalists, under strain of deadline or inadequate reporting resources or simply because this process journalism serves the needs of their beat assignments, often accept this narrow offering of political ‘news’ (Gans).

In the exchange model, journalists and politicians are mutually dependent while at the same time pursuing what are often different although overlapping aims. This model, while less appealing to the journalistic imagination, more accurately describes the true nature of the practical relationship between journalists and politicians. However, it does not allow for the significant tensions that exist between them, as vividly captured by the adversary model in which politics and journalism take place in constant conflict, hostility and mutual mistrust.

If neither the adversary nor the exchange model is truly adequate for a study of how journalists and politicians treat the official, unnamed source, then a blending of the

two might be. In this model, the media-politics relationship is not a dance and not a war but a little of both. Journalists and politicians may indeed need to collaborate to make the news but they are locked in a ceaseless battle for control of the news agenda (Wolfsfeld).

This relationship has been blamed for the creation of pack-journalism or groupthink or 'herd-like' tendencies among political journalists, a phenomenon that has been the subject of both academic interest and journalistic self-examination (Taras, Fenton, Bain). Politicians and political reporters belong to a small club. They see one another every day; they eat together, socialize, trade information and gossip, and feed off one another's status, real or perceived. Most political journalists personally like many of the politicians they cover despite the cynical tone of their reporting, its increasingly negative coverage of politics, and the trend toward interpretive reporting of news events (Swanson 23). This somewhat cozy aspect of the journalist-politician relationship, and its impact on the use of official sources, would be worthy of new study.

Additionally, it is important to have at least a modicum of understanding of some of the newer, external pressures on both sides that have not only increased their interdependency but also heightened the tensions between them. Cuts to newsroom budgets and staff, and the 24-hour news cycle and its needs, mean that fewer reporters are doing more with less. The changing media environment has decreased reporters' ability to seek out anything but the quickly available, official source. The reliance on politicians as sources for the very news they have generated means that political journalism 'has often degenerated to simply reporting what someone in one party says, and then getting a reply from someone on the other side of the aisle' (McChesney 303).

Politicians face some of the same pressures. The 24-hour news cycle and the proliferation of media outlets mean politicians are often forced to deliver instant policy solutions, without time to consider how an off-the-cuff remark could jeopardize a policy initiative (Blumler and Kavanagh. Roberts). This has put enormous pressure on politicians to maintain message discipline, which has affected how official sources manage their own relationships with media. This is a theme I will return to later.

To understand how both media and politicians use official, unnamed sources, one needs some understanding of the relationship between them. Academic study and two decades as a member of the Parliamentary Press Gallery lead me to conclude that neither an adversary nor an exchange model sufficiently describes this relationship. I favour a model that blends the two. In this model, reporters and politicians are forced by their interests to dance together but with elbows up and eyes wide open.

### **Official sources and political journalists**

Journalists see politicians as inherently newsworthy and rely on them as major sources of news and information, action and reaction. Indeed, it has been argued that it is difficult to imagine any reputable or mainstream media outlet that did not give prominent place to quotes from the Prime Minister or a cabinet minister on every important issue of public policy (Ericson, Baranek, and Chan). These after all, are the people 'in the know'. Moreover, they have a responsibility to be accessible to the media and account to the citizenry for their decisions and actions.

However, not all politicians are accorded equal status in the media. Journalists view every utterance of the Prime Minister as newsworthy but have a sort of sliding scale

of news/source value which they apply to other political actors, meaning cabinet ministers, members of the shadow cabinet, spokespeople, parliamentary secretaries, backbenchers and so on. The further removed a political figure is from the centre of power – meaning the Prime Minister – the less value he or she has to the media. It is proximity to the secrets of power that has the most potency for journalists. Those lower on the scale, or on the fringes of power, have to work harder to gain publicity or even to get the ear of a journalist (Wolfsfeld). In this model journalists are referees in a contest in which various antagonists compete for access to the media (Davis 669-90).

Others argue that the media themselves are elite, and that media structures, formed largely by the imperatives of ownership and the profit motive, mean that journalists are propagandists, defending the political agendas of the dominant power-holders (Herman and Chomsky). In this model, media's reliance on official sources is simply a part of their central function, which is to prop up the institutional structures of society. Journalists are not referees, but doormen, tasked with allowing access only to those deemed worthy by the owning class.

Still others argue that it is the rise of professional journalism with its emphasis on objectivity that has resulted in a reliance on official sources (McChesney). The argument is that journalism has attempted to neutralize the controversy connected with how stories are selected by increasingly reporting on 'legitimate' news, meaning news from official sources, most notably elected officials. In this way, reporters can protect themselves from charges of bias by saying they don't make the news, they just report what the democratically elected politician said. This is the view of journalists as note-takers or stenographers to power.

Needless to say, none of these views offers much appeal to the journalistic imagination, which prefers the image of journalists as a motley crew of boat-rockers, barging through the corridors of power, demanding accountability on behalf of the hapless citizen. For their part, journalists argue there are internal and external pressures that make official sources irresistibly attractive. First, of course, is their availability. Journalists assigned to the federal parliament or provincial legislatures, the White House, Whitehall or any press gallery in any democracy, enjoy relatively easy access to politicians and government officials. As noted earlier, the politicians themselves, who routinely deliver official, reportable materials and choreographed events such as news releases, news conferences and interviews, control much of this access. Secondly, a reliance on official sources makes covering political news easy and fairly cheap, with the exception of costly election campaigns. Thirdly, media practices lend themselves to favouring official sources. The need to meet tight deadlines, to serve more than one media outlet in any given work day, to churn out news in the 'sausage factory' of modern newsrooms, often means taking the route of least resistance and relying on familiar, accessible, official sources (Manning).

The bottom line is that despite an enormous array of available sources, journalists tend to limit themselves to official sources, and this is nowhere more evident than in political journalism (Franklin). Still, anecdotal accounts from journalists reveal an uncomfortable acknowledgement that the news is too often the product of official sources, and for many journalists that raises the ever-present bugaboo of political spin, media manipulation and accusations that modern journalism is failing to meet its democratic responsibility (Downie and Kaiser).

Whether you view journalists as referees or doormen, stenographers or watchdogs, and even though the participants in the political sphere may have unequal access to the media, they all share an important, equalizing quality. They are all members of a fairly small political elite. This has led to what Michael Schudson has called the ‘fourth tendency of news’: “It is official, dependent on legitimate public sources, usually highly placed government officials and a relatively small number of reliable experts” (11). Academics have concluded that journalists’ reliance on official sources gives politicians the upper hand (Wolfsfeld). Their power brings status, and the resources to set the news agenda and frame issues in ways that create a favorable public opinion environment for their policies and initiatives, and they do this with the certain knowledge that the media need them more than they need the media. Indeed, there is a prevailing view among politicians that an ideal world would be one in which they had unmediated access to the public (Dornan 179-90). New technologies allow for some unmediated access, notably pod-casting. I argue however, that because access is for the most part mediated, politicians have developed ways to dominate the news agenda, and one way they have successfully done this is by creating a dependency relationship with media on official sources (Miller 385-406).

### **Official sources’ use of front and back disclosure**

Having established that politicians and journalists have an interdependent yet hostile relationship, with media relying more on politicians than the reverse, and accepting academic analysis which shows that media rely heavily on official sources, I will move now to briefly look at the two arenas within which these official sources

operate, what has been called front and back region disclosure, or above the line and below the line activities (Ericson, Baranek, and Chan, Gaber ). While understanding that withholding information can have as much if not at times more appeal to politicians than disclosing information, that practice is not the focus of this paper.

Governments go to great lengths to garner media attention for their initiatives, and democratic governments have an obligation to communicate the details of their policies, programs, practices and plans to citizens, with media as the necessary vehicle for displaying public accountability. Front-region disclosure encompasses all the news and information that governments want to publicize.

Governments have become increasingly sophisticated at maximizing their front-region disclosure by working behind the scenes to make certain their political interests are positively represented in the news while their opponents' media exposure is minimized (Davis 19-41). They hire public relations professionals who understand the dynamics of agenda-setting, the importance of framing, and journalists' source strategies. They also hire former journalists as communications advisors, capitalizing on their knowledge of media practices. Modern governments have a highly developed understanding of the need for message discipline. Media relations and strategic communications enter policy-making at the earliest possible stage, and great effort goes into developing media lines and communications strategies and products for ministers and members of parliament so that all possible media sources are 'singing from the same song sheet.' While many journalists are largely unaware of the extent of the government's public relations machinery, they intuitively resent the tendency of their

sources to parrot the official government line. Journalists are sensitive to being ‘spun’ by their sources, meaning the politicians themselves or their spokespeople (Swanson).

The overlapping interests of journalists and politicians have created what has been called back-region disclosure. This refers to the arena the two sides have created for the selective disclosure of information, through what has been called “an elaborate and delicate web of relations” (Ericson, Baranek, and Chan 221). Interestingly, despite journalists’ professed distaste for political spin, back-region disclosure is where spin thrives. Through selective leaks, private conversations between sources and journalists, a well-placed piece of gossip, rumour or innuendo, sources attempt to influence journalists’ coverage and undermine their political opponents. Some study has been done of how sources approach journalists behind the scenes, and how journalists will afford these sources confidentiality in exchange for what is being offered as ‘secret’ information (Schudson ). These conversations are off the record, meaning they cannot be reported. Journalists agree to protect the confidentiality of a source, and withhold the information from the public, often in the interests of protecting a long-term relationship with that source. In return, sources enjoy non-threatening access to journalists who give them the opportunity to reveal potentially damaging information without fear of being cited (Ericson, Baranek and Chan). Even these sources however, are still official, meaning they are politicians, bureaucrats, and spokespeople who make deals with journalists to reveal information without fear of exposure.

The third type of information comes from the unnamed or unattributed source, and also operates in the back-region. However, this does not in any significant way expand the access of alternative sources to the media. These sources are the same people

with the same combination of attributes that make them valuable to journalists, notably power, information and proximity.

### **Sources and journalistic codes of conduct**

Most reputable newsrooms have codes of conduct or style guides that define the generally accepted journalistic definitions of each type of information. They are,

1. Off the record: The information may not be reported. It is solely to help the reporter's understanding or perspective of the subject.
2. On background: The thrust of the statements may be used and the source generally described, but with no direct quotes.
3. Not for attribution: The statements may be quoted directly but the source may not be named (Toronto 7).

It's important to understand that all three categories of information, while offering different types of information in different regions of disclosure, all still come from official sources who operate within the interdependent yet conflict-ridden relationship that exists between politicians and journalists. Journalists acknowledge that the use of these sources requires some controls, and most codes of ethics speak to the issue, with particular attention given to the use of the unnamed source. The *Globe and Mail's* Style Guide says:

*“When sources are unnamed, they must be characterized as clearly and accurately as possible without actually identifying them, so as to give the reader an idea of their motivations for speaking. Reasons must be given why they cannot be named. Care must be taken to distinguish them from nearby named sources so as not to cast unfair suspicion on the latter.*

*Official spokesmen are rarely, if ever, entitled to anonymity, and it is better to specify their titles or job functions than to call them spokesmen.*

*Information should almost never be attributed merely to 'sources' or 'reliable sources' and rarely hung on the quaint construction 'The Globe and Mail has learned'” (McFarlane and Clements 470).*

The intent of the policy is clear. Information obtained through unnamed sources must be vital to the story and of significant public interest. Journalists generally understand this to mean that the information is vital to certain categories of stories, including national defense, investigative articles and classic whistle-blower projects (Calame 12). Indeed, information provided by unnamed sources has been integral to good journalism, notably Watergate in the U.S., and the revelations around the sponsorship scandal in Canada.

### **The study**

An analysis was made of the use of unnamed sources in articles in the *Globe and Mail* for the six month period between August 6, 2005 and March 6, 2006. The *Globe and Mail* was chosen largely because of its reputation as a newspaper of record. It is widely regarded among the political elite as the leading newspaper in Canada, and is seen to set the news agenda for other media (Taras). The newspaper was also selected because it has an articulated policy regarding the use of unattributed sources. The time period was selected because it covers a variety of newsworthy events on the federal political scene, notably a pre-election period of legislative activity, an election campaign and a transition of power.

A central difficulty of this study was designing a search that would capture a majority of the political stories in which unnamed sources were cited. Journalists use a

wide variety of descriptives to indicate that a source is unnamed. In fact, 37 different descriptives were identified in the examined articles (Appendix A). The challenge was to keep the search wide enough to capture as many stories as possible without diluting the search entirely. These keywords were finally settled upon: (anonymous source\* or unnamed source\* or “source\* close to” or anonymity or “not to be named” or “liberal source\*” or “conservative source\*” or “official source\*” or “source\* said” or “not to be identified”) and (parliament or hill or liberal or conservative or martin or harper or federal). A search in Factiva yielded 182 articles for the time period identified. A thorough reading narrowed the study to 118 articles that spoke directly to the field of federal political activity including policy-making. It must be noted that some relevant articles were not captured by this search. All news articles and columns, and *Report on Business* articles that were captured by the search and covered a federal policy initiative were included. In the interests of managing the number of articles, only those that reported on the activities of the governing party and the official opposition were included. Of the articles included in the study, only 17 were clearly identified as either a column or analysis.

The 118 articles and columns were analyzed against the *Globe and Mail*'s policy, which was divided into the following elements:

**1. Sources must be identified clearly and accurately so as to give the reader an idea of their motivations for speaking**

The motivations of anonymous sources are varied. Michael McCurry, press secretary for U.S. President Bill Clinton, has given a number of reasons why sources in

Washington will seek out anonymous access to journalists, four of which have particular relevance to the Canadian scene (4-9).

- Sources will provide information anonymously to provide context, to illuminate the major story of the day and fill in blanks that an official announcement or speech could not completely address.
- Sources will provide information anonymously to preview the next day's story, setting up a major announcement with the intention of prolonging the shelf life of the story on news agendas.
- Sources will use anonymously delivered information as a way of testing a possible announcement in the media without a future commitment to it.
- Sources will use anonymity to advance a cause or grievance, and to score political points.

It's been observed that the biggest abuser of anonymous sources is the government itself (Hoyt 2). It follows that understanding a source's motives, whether they are to broaden context or advance a grievance, is important information. The *New York Times* announced a revamped policy for the use of anonymous sources in February 2004 and further refined it in June 2005 (Calame 12). Before an unnamed source makes its way into that newspaper, at least one senior editor must be told the source's name, readers are to be told why a source is entitled to anonymity, and the use of anonymous sources is to be the exception rather than the routine. Other news organizations, including *Knight-Ridder's* Washington Bureau, are following suit and writing restrictive new policies to describe unnamed sources and their motives as fully as possible.

A careful reading of the *Globe and Mail* articles showed that motives for speaking anonymously were not explained. Journalists relied on the reader's ability to infer motive through the way a source was described. For example, in a story on Stephen Harper's election readiness, "one Conservative Party official in Toronto" told the paper that Mr. Harper is "is done, it's over and we all know it" (Galloway A7). The Conservatives were being shut out of Toronto, and so it is significant information that the official was from Toronto, and readers may understand that the criticism of Harper carries a different meaning than if it came from a Liberal Party official.

In a story on a proposal to buy new Air Force transports, "a Defence Department official familiar with the situation" provides details of the proposed purchase, which will include "15 fixed-wing search-and-rescue aircraft and four northern utility planes" (Den Tandt A1). This kind of detailed information about a policy initiative from inside the Department of Defence could have some veracity, and the motive could be to provide the public some hard information on a secret proposal that suits the department's long-term interests.

In a report on efforts by Imperial Oil for federal financial assistance, "a senior pipeline industry executive" is quoted as saying federal officials were shocked at the demands and "cannot believe the balls on Exxon" (Ebner B3). This quote takes on an admiring tone coming as it does from an industry executive, and might mean something else if it came from a government negotiator. It is unclear what the motive is for this source's wish to remain anonymous except that he or she is able to cast Imperial as a 'ballsy' negotiator in the media.

Sources were most likely to be identified in ways that indicated their political affiliations. Journalists' familiarity with partisanship influences their writing. They believe that if sources are identified as partisan then their motives for speaking anonymously will be self-evident. So that when "a Liberal source" is quoted in an article that reports the Liberal government will announce a ban on handguns, readers can understand that the Liberals have leaked the news themselves and derive motive from that (Taber and Moore A1). Or when "a senior Liberal source" says in a story on the Liberal leadership race that Allan Rock is "yesterday's man" we can understand that the source wants us to know Mr. Rock's lack of popularity in his own party likely informed his decision not to run (McCarthy and Laghi A1). Or when unnamed Conservative sources say Ralph Klein's wife will be "just another Indian" after he leaves politics we can assume disgruntled party members want to take a cheap shot at the leader (Klein's wife A11).

## **2. Reasons must be given why the source cannot be named**

Journalists know that there can be good reasons for granting anonymity to sources. Sources may legitimately fear reprisals from their bosses or even legal action if they reveal confidential information. Providing reasons for protecting a source's anonymity gives insight into the news operation's standards and ethics. For example, in a July 27, 2005 story about the relocation of 50,000 U.S. soldiers, the *New York Times* said, "The relocation, to be completed by 2008, was described by two Pentagon officials who have worked on the project and were granted anonymity so they would describe the changes before an official announcement expected later this week" (Calame 12). The newspaper's decision for granting anonymity is clear.

Of the 118 articles examined in the *Globe and Mail*, 19 included a reference to the source's request for anonymity. Five references to requests for anonymity were given: the source was "speaking on condition of anonymity", "the source asked not to be named" or "not to be identified", the source "agreed to speak only on background", or the source spoke "on the condition they not be identified." No reasons were given in any article for why the sources were granted anonymity. Indeed, there was no indication that the journalists might have been able to refuse to grant anonymity, or that an attempt had been made to get the information on the record.

### **3. Official spokesmen are rarely, if ever, entitled to anonymity and it is better to specify their titles or job functions than call them spokesmen**

In a report on the front page of the *Globe and Mail* on February 10, 2006, on the controversy surrounding David Emerson's decision to leave the Liberals for a Conservative cabinet seat, journalist Bill Curry quoted "a spokeswoman for Mr. Emerson" saying, "He has no plans to resign" and "speaking on condition of anonymity" (Curry A1). This is notable for several reasons. First, it clearly breaks the newspaper's rules about quoting spokespeople. Second, it fails to ensure anonymity because of the limited number of people who could be a spokesperson for the minister. And third, the quote offered is so benign that it begs questions about why the source would demand anonymity and why the reporter would grant it. Did this spokeswoman imagine that the wrath of her political masters would come down on her for simply repeating what the expressed party line was on Mr. Emerson's appointment?

This may be an example of the apparent readiness with which journalists agree to grant anonymity. Nothing seems to get the journalistic pulse going quite like behind-the-

scenes information from an inside source. There are sources, and journalists as well, who believe they will be taken more seriously if anonymity is part of the package. As journalist Robert Fulford has noted, “A fact is just a fact, but a fact delivered by a nameless “official” smells of intrigue” (A21). It’s reasonable to assume from an examination of the articles that *Globe and Mail* journalists rarely say no to a source’s request for anonymity and that they may even too quickly offer it up in exchange for information, no matter how bland.

#### **4. Information should almost never be attributed merely to ‘sources’ or ‘reliable sources’ and rarely hung on the quaint construction ‘The Globe and Mail has learned’**

In the examined articles, the construction “the Globe and Mail has learned” was used twice. “Sources tell the Globe and Mail” appeared three times. And “officials have told the Globe and Mail” was used once. A number of articles made reference to the newspaper having first reported a story but a news organization has bragging rights when it breaks a story and no ethical questions are raised when it reminds its readers that it ‘owns’ a particular news story. However, the other six references are clear violations of the newspaper’s own style guide. The use of what the guide calls a “quaint construction” calls into question why a journalist would feel free to use it and why this wouldn’t be caught by a senior editor.

Information was regularly attributed to “sources” and while the term “reliable sources” was not found, variations of it were. “A senior source”, “an official source”, “an insider”, “a well-placed source”, “a government source”, “federal sources” ... information was attributed to many variations of “source.” It is difficult to see the

difference between the appellation of source and “someone who was there” or “a colleague of” or “a long time supporter” or “an individual” – all expressions that appeared regularly in the examined articles.

These are all just variations on “sources” and “reliable sources” and likely come from a journalist’s need to find new ways to say the same thing. For example, in one front page *Globe and Mail* story on the election campaign, the newspaper attributed information and quotes variously to some Liberal insiders, a veteran insider, a long-time Cauchon supporter, a Liberal source, one senior Liberal organizer, a spokesperson for Brian Tobin, and one long-time Liberal (Taber A1).

This raises another issue about the use of unnamed sources. Many of the stories may or may not have been single-sourced. The journalist often didn’t make it clear if he or she had spoken to one source or several. For example, in one article on federal aid in Third World countries, the journalist attributes information and direct quotes to sources, a source, the source and an official (Laghi A4). It is impossible to tell if the information came from more than one source or if the reporter was merely using different ways to introduce his single source.

Reporters go to some lengths to indicate that the anonymous sources they have spoken to are close to power, understanding that it is their proximity to power that increases their value. These value descriptions suggest that these are the people we should expect would know what they are talking about because they have elite access to secret information. They take a variety of forms, from the garden-variety senior source, inside source, and well-placed source to the mother of all sources, the source close to the Prime Minister. Only four articles referred to a source close to the Prime Minister or an

official with the Prime Minister's Office. It is not clear why so few articles quoted this type of source when this is the most valuable source of all. It's unlikely that the journalists in the *Globe and Mail's* parliamentary bureau do not have good sources in the PMO. The likelier explanation is that they and their PMO sources agreed not to focus attention on the fact that people in the Paul Martin PMO were talking to reporters. We have seen how dependent reporters are on their sources, we know that reporters protect these relationships, and we understand that these relationships are often friendships. We know too that reporters can find themselves on the end of an angry phone call from the PMO and that this can lead to a career-threatening freeze. It may be that PMO sources are more commonly referred to as insiders, and senior sources.

Evidence presented by an examination of the articles shows that the *Globe and Mail's* guidelines for the use of anonymous sources are regularly ignored, showing as Robert Fulford put it that "newspapers seem now to operate on the firm principle that they don't use anonymous sources except when they do" (A21).

### **How anonymous sources are used**

The study of the *Globe and Mail* revealed five ways in which anonymous sources were used. (See Table 1).

**News-making:** In 19 stories (16.1%), anonymous sources were used to provide information that broke news. The information these sources provided was vital to the news reports and contained what the reader would presume to be factually specific details. While none of the news stories could qualify as the journalistic equivalent of a smoking gun, all could be said to be a legitimate use of the unnamed source.

- Six of these stories appeared on the front page. One appeared on the front page of the *Report on Business* section.

**Reporting on caucus:** Caucus is secret and meetings are not open to the media, and so anonymous sources are regularly used to report on what happened at the meetings. This is a legitimate use of anonymous sources in journalistic circles, especially if news is at stake. However, in the 8 relevant articles (6.8%), these sources provided no news. They were used instead to describe the mood in the room. Unnamed sources gave information about the Prime Minister being cheered by caucus and tensions among caucus members. It is noteworthy that there were so few reports on caucus but the House was not sitting for most of the time period of the study.

- One of these stories appeared on the front page.

**Policy-making:** Anonymous sources provided information on policy options in 11 articles (9.3%). The difference between this category and the news-making category is that their information did not create news but rather, provided background and some further detail. For example, some details of a government proposal to combat rising fuel costs were revealed by government sources, and senior government officials gave background on proposed changes to income trusts. This is valuable information that could contribute to discussion of public policy issues.

- Three of these stories appeared on the front page. One appeared on the front page of the *Report on Business* section.

**Mischief-making:** Despite the newspaper's style guide which cautions against allowing sources to use anonymity to take pot shots, sources were given this opportunity in 9 stories (7.6%). Liberal-on-Liberal, and Conservative-on-Conservative drive-by smears

were most common, particularly during the election campaign. They ranged from unnamed sources calling their campaign manager shallow and deceptive, to anonymous Liberal complaints about a lack of campaign policy.

- Five of these stories appeared on the front page.

**Colour:** This was by far the greatest use of the information provided by anonymous sources. Unnamed sources were used in 71 articles (60.2%) to provide colour and comment in news stories and interpretive analyses of the news. The sources did not provide hard facts, but were used to give insight into the motives and strategies behind the scenes. Two of these reports are worth examining in some detail as they speak to the pressures on journalists to quickly offer more than ‘just the facts’ as they increasingly venture into analytical reporting.

On September 26, 2005, the *Globe and Mail* reported that former Liberal cabinet minister David Dingwall had failed to register as a lobbyist for a Toronto pharmaceutical company (Sallot and Tuck A4). This story broke as a result of information provided to the newspaper by unnamed government sources. This meant that the *Globe* ‘owned’ this story and competitive interests mean that a newspaper will do its best to keep an original story alive, which it did by following up with an analysis on September 29, 2005. This article analysed Mr. Dingwall’s political acumen. It quoted a senior Liberal, a former Chretienite, a senior Chretien Liberal and an assistant on just how unpopular he was in official Ottawa and how difficult he was to work with (Taber A5). The analysis provided considerable gossip about his character but nothing more.

The second example was a story on February 7, 2006, the day after the Prime Minister announced the formation of his new cabinet. The senior political writer for the

*Globe and Mail* had an in-depth, behind the scenes analysis of “the secret meeting” the new PM had held with those of his caucus who were not named to cabinet (Taber A4). This included information from unnamed MPs about how the PM was businesslike and complimentary with the members, how shocked some “political observers” were that certain individuals did not make it into cabinet, and colour commentary on the PM feeling so relaxed afterwards that he went to his son’s hockey practice and had pizza.

There had been considerable media speculation about the formation of the new cabinet, live TV and radio coverage, and a great deal of commentary following the announcement. The dilemma for the *Globe and Mail* was how to keep this story fresh for the next day. This is an example of how this sort of colour reporting is filling the media’s need to ‘advance the story.’

- Fifteen of these stories appeared on the page. One appeared on the front page of the *Report on Business* section.

<b>Story Type</b>	<b>Percentage of total stories (n=118) using unnamed sources</b>
News –making	16.1%
Report on caucus	6.8%
Policy-making	9.3%
Mischief-making	7.6%
Colour and comment	60.2%

Table 1: Use of unnamed sources in the *Globe and Mail*, August 6/05-March 6/06.

## Conclusions

This study shows that the *Globe and Mail's* political journalists are using unnamed sources largely to provide background colour on the game and strategy of politics. There are reasons for this. As noted, journalists are resorting more and more to interpretive reporting and analysis. I believe this is a reaction to efforts by politicians to set the news agenda by delivering ready-made 'news' to journalists in the form of news releases, speeches and statements, news conferences, and so on. Hand in hand with the centralized media relations activities of government, goes centralized message control. It has been noted that "the more journalists are challenged for control of news, the more they will resist by developing types of information to substitute for what politicians provide them" (Swanson 22). I argue that the use of unnamed sources is an attempt by journalists to establish independence from political manipulation. Reporters are frustrated that all their official, on-the-record sources have "talking points that they e-mail to friends and everyone says exactly the same thing" (Milbank 53). Unnamed, anonymous sources may allow journalists to believe they are busting free of the media lines and key messages of the political publicity machine. However, I have also argued that these unnamed sources are still official and that journalists in fact are not establishing independence by allowing them access to the media.

Journalists can and do develop proactive strategies with their political sources, and they are "neither the powerless victims of the professionalisation of politics, nor passive cogs in a communications machine" (Neveu and Kuhn 2). Indeed, academics have argued that a new breed of political journalist has been spawned, one which is keenly aware of political communicators' attempts to manipulate the news and who fight

that challenge for control by producing news that is more negative toward politics and politicians (Swanson 11-31).

The creation of political news is still often a clash of wills and motives, one in which “public officials become more manipulative and cunning to try to get their message past a hostile press – and the press becomes even more determined to point out how insincere the politicians are” (Lloyd 99). Journalists may be using unnamed sources in their frustrated attempts to set their own news agendas, while at the same time politicians may be pushing unnamed sources onto journalists in their equally frustrated attempts to control the same agenda. In the end little is added to public discourse by quotes from anonymous sources. The *Globe and Mail’s* use of unnamed sources to provide colour and gossip allows politicians, bureaucrats and other officials to smuggle information of questionable value into the media. Additionally, the newspaper undermines meaningful public discourse by inviting readers to judge how well the game of politics is played, and not the merits of public policy.

## **APPENDIX A**

### **Identifiers of unnamed sources in *Globe and Mail* articles – August 6, 2005 to March 6, 2006**

“Sources” or “source”

“Government sources”

“Senior source”

“Senior government source(s)”

“Well-placed source”

“Well-connected source”

“Federal source(s)”  
“Source close to the negotiations”  
“Source(s) close to the Prime Minister”  
“Source(s) close to the story”  
“Source familiar with the situation”  
“Source familiar to the strategy”  
“Source with first-hand knowledge of the secret talks”  
“Official(s)”  
    “Conservative official(s)”  
    “Liberal official(s)”  
“Party official(s)”  
“Another (or several) liberal MP(s)” (and variations i.e. conservative)  
“Some MPs”  
“Senior liberal(s)”  
“Senior conservative(s)”  
“Insider(s)”  
“Senior insider(s)”  
“Party insider(s)”  
“Spokeswoman” and “spokesman”  
“Veteran insider”  
“Strategist”  
“War-room strategist”  
“Supporter”  
“Long-time supporter”  
“Senior organizer”  
“A colleague”  
“Yet another colleague”  
“Someone who was there”  
“Individual familiar with the campaign”  
“Close friend”  
“People close to” (him)

## **APPENDIX B**

### **Post mortem**

To further illustrate how unnamed sources are used in the *Globe and Mail*, a thorough ‘dissection’ was done on one article (Appendix C). This article was chosen at random. “Clear the Air on GG” ran on the front page on August 17, 2005 and was written by Jane Taber and Bill Curry. The story was written in the heat of the controversy about allegations that the newly named governor-general and her husband had separatist sympathies. The lead read: “The Prime Minister must try harder to reassure Canadians that the incoming governor-general and her husband are committed federalists in light of new allegations about the couple’s loyalty to Canada, Conservative Stephen Harper says.”

Sources appeared in the following order:

1. Mr. Harper. A direct quote from a television interview from the day before, in which Harper said that the PM had telephoned him personally to reassure him the allegations were not true. Mr. Harper also quoted the PM, presumably from the phone call. The PM’s quote appeared like this: “she is, and has always been, a strong federalist.”
2. “A conservative official.” No direct quote. Confirming the PM did call Mr. Harper.
3. Liberal MP Alan Tonks: A direct quote suggesting the GG should issue a statement.
4. “Another Liberal Ontario MP.” A direct quote. “Politics is raw sometimes. This is kind of raw. She has to put the people at ease.”

5. “A senior source.” No direct quote. Suggesting the new GG did not want to issue a statement.
6. The PM’s communications director, Scott Reid. A direct quote. “... not a separatist, never has been a participant or a militant in the sovereigntist movement.”
7. “Several Liberal MPs and senior Liberals.” A direct quote. There was a “lack of due diligence” in the PMO.
8. “Another Liberal MP.” A direct quote. “They’re like the gang that can’t shoot straight.”

Several observations are worth making. The article uses a quote from the PM provided by Mr. Harper. Outside journalism, this is called hearsay.

If the article had only used named sources, Mr. Harper, Mr. Tonks and Mr. Reid would have appeared. The story then would have been that the PM called Mr. Harper a week earlier to reassure him the new GG and her husband were not separatists, one Liberal MP thinks she should issue a statement, and the PMO is certain they are not separatists.

The addition of unnamed sources adds a patina of intrigue to the story. The GG may be in over her head, in a ‘raw’ and rough and tumble world she knows little about. Not only that, the PM and his office are verging on incompetence.

It is unclear how many unnamed sources are being cited but there are a minimum of seven, three times as many as named sources.

The story as told by named sources is in fact, not news. Mr. Harper’s first quote points out that he told media a week earlier that the PM called him.

The way unnamed sources are used and identified breaks the Globe and Mail's style guide by not clearly characterizing them in ways to suggest motive, other than by identifying their partisanship. It does not indicate why anonymity was granted. And it breaks the guide's rule that information not be attributed merely to 'sources.'

### APPENDIX C

National News

Clear the air on G-G, Harper tells PM

JANE TABER AND BILL CURRY

807 words

17 August 2005

The Globe and Mail

A1

English

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OTTAWA -- The Prime Minister must try harder to reassure Canadians that the incoming governor-general and her husband are committed federalists in light of new allegations about the couple's loyalty to Canada, Conservative Leader Stephen Harper says.

"I told the media last week that the Prime Minister did call me personally to assure me that these rumours were not true, that the governor-general [-designate Michaëlle Jean] and [Jean-Daniel] Lafond have always been federalists . . . and I expect that to be true. . . . I am waiting to hear somebody in the Prime Minister's Office put out information that is contrary to what we are reading in the papers now," he said yesterday in an interview with Ottawa radio station CFRA.

The Opposition Leader said Paul Martin explicitly told him that he appointed Ms. Jean to the post of governor-general because "she is, and always has been, a strong federalist."

Mr. Martin also assured Mr. Harper that her filmmaker husband, Mr. Lafond, had never been a separatist.

A Conservative official said Mr. Harper, during the telephone call, asked Mr. Martin to repeat these assurances about the couple. The Prime Minister did so.

Mr. Harper said he wants to believe the Prime Minister, but if the latest allegations about the couple are false, "it is up to the Prime Minister and his office to clarify why it isn't true."

Mr. Harper's decision to enter the debate yesterday only increases the growing pressure on the PMO to issue a statement confirming that Ms. Jean and her husband are committed Canadians.

Several protesters were at the gates of Parliament Hill yesterday questioning the appointment. The Monarchist League of Canada says Ms. Jean should issue a statement clearing the air. Some Liberal MPs and other senior Liberals agree.

“I think the [Liberal] caucus and the Canadian people would be very satisfied [with] just a very circumspect statement from the G-G based on how she feels today about her role as G-G and her vision of a federal nation,” Toronto Liberal MP Alan Tonks said. “I think that would put the whole thing to rest.”

Another Liberal Ontario MP said, “Politics is raw sometimes. This is kind of raw. She has to put people at ease. I think people generally want to like her but this is causing some people, not everyone, to have unease. Put that unease to rest.”

However, earlier this week Ms. Jean, according to a senior source, felt that appearing on television or issuing a public statement was “not astute.” She decided that she had too much work ahead in preparing for the position and would not speak before her installation on Sept. 27.

The source said there has been no pressure from the PMO for her to come forward publicly.

For nearly a week now Ms. Jean and her husband have been under fire over claims from hard-line separatists that they are sympathetic to their cause. The controversy began with an article in *Le Québécois*, the voice of the province's sovereignty watchdogs, that said Ms. Jean had been “soaking for ages in the sovereigntist atmosphere that characterizes her intellectual circle.”

The magazine then unearthed quotations by Ms. Jean and Mr. Lafond from a book he wrote in 1993. In it he says “I applaud with both hands” Quebec independence and promises to be at “all St. Jean [Baptiste] parades.”

Ms. Jean's comments are more ambiguous.

The quotations were taken from Mr. Lafond's book, *La manière nègre*. It is a companion piece to his 1991 documentary of the same name, which examines independence struggles in Quebec and various Caribbean nations such as Martinique and Haiti.

In the movie, Ms. Jean is featured at a Montreal bar with key hard-line separatists.

Again yesterday, PMO communications director Scott Reid said that Mr. Lafond “is not a separatist, nor has ever been a participant or a militant in the sovereigntist movement.”

He did not address the issue of Ms. Jean, nor did he explicitly say that Mr. Lafond had never sympathized or identified with the sovereigntist cause.

Several Liberal MPs and senior Liberals questioned the handling of the appointment by the Prime Minister and the PMO, saying there was a “lack of due diligence” in checking the couple's background.

Mr. Reid has repeatedly said that the Privy Council Office, RCMP and CSIS subjected the couple to “rigorous” checks.

“They are like the gang that can't shoot straight,” said another Liberal MP about the way in which the appointment was handled. “How many calls do you have to make in Quebec City to figure these guys out? I really think she represents the new Canada. . . . I hope for her sake it works out.”

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