

By Tom Engelhardt

"A. Senior Official, who insisted on anonymity, said Mr. Scowcroft's discussions with the president had helped set the guidelines for what the administration was willing to tolerate in the Gulf...."

That phrase—"who insisted on anonymity"—buried in an October 1 *New York Times* article may signal the first significant change in journalistic standards in the post-Cold War era. In particular, anonymity in news sourcing, a fixture of the modern media, could soon become obsolete. Already the hint of change at the *Times* has been hailed by some as a "new sourcing openness" and decried by others as a shocking breach in media manners.

Only two facts are incontestable. First, for a newspaper not to grant a source like Mr. Official his wished-for anonymity is unheard of. (That he was identified as not wanting to be identified only emphasizes the point.) Second, a media marketing survey, released September 25 by the polling firm of Marshack & Grant, shocked the news industry by revealing an inexplicable preference among 18-to-25 year olds—an audience segment beloved by advertisers—for knowing where the news was actually coming from.

Press insiders stress that, in an industry losing younger readers and ad lineage, the *Times* piece and the survey are linked events. "I'd bet my bolos on it," comments A. Highly Placed Insider at *Newsweek*. "The survey goosed the *Times* into sending a coded message to advertisers. If you look at that piece, you have two fully ID'd sources—Another Official and An Official—and an array of typically absurd pseudonyms—Scowcroft, Cheney, Bush—for sources who demanded anonymity. So, at the very least," Mr. Insider continued, "somebody meant the protesting Mr. Senior Official to stand out like a sore thumb."

Wonder who's Kissinger now: For a media outsider to appreciate what's at stake, a few historical basics are in order. In the post-World War II era, a reporter who wanted to gain access to Washington's vast government bureaucracy had to be willing to offer sources near-blanket anonymity. This involved an almost automatic process of assigning them "names" whose absurdity was meant to signal their pseudonymous nature. For example, the ubiquitous "Henry Kissinger" is believed to have been not one but numerous foreign-policy officials in several different Cold War administrations, bound together only by their distinctly Germanic accents.

There were, however, always a few critics who argued that such business-as-usual anonymity made the daily newspaper all but meaningless for the normal reader. In recent years, there has been a growing insistence, initially among younger reporters and editors, that anonymity has no place in a free press. "No more Nixons, Brzezinskis or Sununus," demands Another Media Consultant. "From now on, we want nitty-gritty IDs and nothing else."

A 1990 study of the "credibility crisis of the American news media" by A. Credible Media Expert from the University of Hawaii confirms this countertrend. In at least 50 percent of all sentences involving attribution in 1,130 "inside the Beltway" articles, sources

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According to our usual unreliable sources, they have been the source of our unreliability.

were correctly identified as A. Middle-Level Official, A. Press Aide, A. Congressional Defense Expert and the like—a 14.67 percent decrease in less than a decade.

To confirm that this countertrend predated the recent flap at the *Times*, this reporter fed Thomas Friedman and Maureen Dowd's May 1990 portrait of the pseudonymous "Jim Baker, secretary of state" in the *New York Times Magazine* into Sourcerer, a software program developed by the Institute of Sourcing Analysis in Cambridge, Mass. Sourcerer's "new sourcing profile" was unmistakable. While the piece still had its pseudonymous "Fitzwaters" and

"Bushes," statistically it nearly hit the 60 percent mark when it came to the crucial political names like A. Longtime Associate, Some Friends and the brothers A. Senior Administration Official and A. White House Official.

Source spot: The subject of the present controversy, Mr. Senior Official, who is to appear on the Phil Donahue show later this week ("The sources of pain, the pain of sources"), has refused all comment. However, an interview with his father, Mr. Official Sr., offered some insight into the controversy.

Seated at a corner table in the No-Name Bar & Grill in a nondescript Washington neighborhood, Mr. Official Sr. was sipping a glass of American beer. "Of course, you must use my name," he said in a firm but hushed tone. "Remember, though, it's two 'f's. You know, if there was one thing we tried to drum into our son's head, it was a certain pride in himself. If Mrs. Official Sr.

and I hadn't had faith in his abilities from the beginning, we would have named him An or Another or, at best, Middle-Level, but not Senior. Still, these events have been confusing for us. Ever since the Truman administration, three generations of Officials have stood proudly behind our name. So to have your own son quoted from one coast to the other opting for pseudonymity hasn't exactly been a pleasure. On the other hand, whatever my son's reasons may be," he said, grimacing, "to request anonymity and to be publicly rebuked in this fashion is, to our minds, unconscionable!"

"They can complain all they want," replies a Highly Placed Editor ("Call me H.P.!") at the *Times*, "but they can't erase the handwriting on the wall. Look at our coverage of the Iraqi crisis. Why, there's practically nothing but Officials and Experts and Senior Aides quoted. When it comes to open sourcing, you can't turn back the clock in media reporting."

Tom Engelhardt is a pseudonym for A. Satirist, who lives in New York.

