A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF THE USE OF CONFIDENTIAL SOURCES
IN 2006 BY TIME AND NEWSWEEK

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CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES.................................................. iv

Chapter

1. INTRODUCTION........................................... 1

2. LITERATURE REVIEW................................. 4

Reader Response ........................... 5

Editorial Policy .......................... 8

Quantitative Studies of Journalistic Use of Anonymous Sources ...................... 13

Who is Acting as Anonymous Sources...... 13

What Type of Story Requires the Use of Anonymous Sources?.................. 15

Anonymous Sources in the News........... 20

Research Questions ......................... 27

3. METHODOLOGY........................................ 30

4. FINDINGS.......................................... 32

Where are Quotations?................... 32

How are Quotations Written?.............. 35

Who is Being Quoted?.................... 37

5. DISCUSSION...................................... 43

Further Research ............................ 46

Appendix

1. CODING INSTRUCTIONS............................... 49

2. CODING SHEET.................................. 52
TABLES

Table | Page
--- | ---
1. Number of Stories Containing an Anonymous Source in 12 Issues for the Year 2006, by Magazine | 33
2. Number of Stories Containing an Anonymous Source in *Time*, by Month | 34
3. Number of Stories Containing an Anonymous Source in *Newsweek*, by Month | 35
5. Total Anonymous Quotations, by Magazine, by Month | 37
6. Total Anonymous Direct Quotes and Anonymous Indirect Quotes, by Magazine | 38
7. Status of Anonymous Sources, by Magazine | 38
8. Type of Anonymous Sources, by Magazine | 39
9. Stated Job Role of an Anonymous Source, by Magazine | 40
10. Job Organization of Source Stated, by Magazine | 40
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In recent years the controversy surrounding journalistic use of anonymous sources has risen. Journalist’s have found themselves in courtrooms, have lost their credibility and have misled their editors by using anonymous sources. Many of the prominent stories about the media have focused on journalistic willingness or unwillingness to break the confidentiality promised to their source.

Time has been a figure in different cases involving the use of a confidential source by a journalist, and had a journalist involved in the 2003 Valerie Plame case in which an undercover CIA agent’s identity was revealed by several major media organizations. Special prosecutor Patrick Miller subpoenaed Times reporter Matthew Cooper, as well as reporters from The Washington Post and NBC, to testify on whom had revealed Plame’s identity to them. The New York Times reporter Judith Miller spent 85 days in jail for
being in contempt of the court before being released after revealing her source. Ms. Miller only revealed the name of her source after the source granted her permission.

Much of the research conducted on the use of anonymous sources focuses on editorial policy. Individual policies are compared to find similarities in how anonymous sources are to be handled in different media organizations. The number of formal and informal policies held by media organizations is also a frequent research topic after an incident occurs in which a journalist and their confidential source become a news item. Compared to the research on media organizational policy, few studies have been conducted on the quantitative amount of anonymous sources in individual stories. Quantitative research that has been done recently has centered on broadcast journalism.

In 1978, Hugh M. Culbertson conducted a content analysis of *Time* and *Newsweek*’s use of confidential sources for the year 1974. Culbertson termed the use of a confidential source by a journalist as “veiled attribution”. Culbertson found *Time* used “veiled attribution” in 75 percent of its stories and *Newsweek* used it in 70 percent of its stories (1978). Culbertson found a
source’s status was the most common way for a source to be identified when the source’s name was not directly given.

In 1985, Tim K. Wulfemeyer reanalyzed *Time* and *Newsweek*’s use of confidential sources. Using one issue of each magazine from each month in 1982, Wulfemeyer found *Newsweek* quoted anonymous sources in 85 percent of the magazine’s stories and *Time* quoted anonymous sources in 77 percent of its total stories (1985). Wulfemeyer also found quotes were more likely to appear in international stories than national stories, and a term implying the information was coming from an “official” was the most common attribution for a source.

Confidential sources are a key element for a journalist to have for many reasons. Anderson found 85 percent of daily newspapers publish staff-written articles based on unnamed sources (1982, 364). By not revealing the identity of a source, a journalist can receive more information, both in amount and sensitivity, from the source. Also, injustices can be revealed by sources without the fear of repercussions. In this study it will be found if this valuable tool in journalism has decreased in use.
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The use of anonymous sources encompasses many different areas of research. As anonymous sources became a common occurrence in fact-based stories, researchers began examining how reader’s responded to these stories. Researchers wanted to see how the attitudes of readers changed in response to the presence of anonymous sources. Researchers began asking if the level of trust a reader had in a stories information changed based on the presence of an anonymous source? Did reader’s confidence in the stories they were reading increase or decrease based on the presence of anonymous sources? Are readers even noticing when an anonymous source is being used? These are all questions that have been answered.

Another area of research centered on anonymous source use is the change in editorial policy addressing the use of confidential sources. In the wake of the Janet Cooke and Cohen v. Cowles cases, researchers wanted to find if
editorial policies on the use of confidential sources was changing to protect media outlets from similar incidences. Are reporters being required to identify confidential sources to their editors in exchange for using the information they provide? Are written policies on how to deal with a confidential source or leak becoming standard?

Finally, what are the numbers telling us? How are quantitative studies on anonymous sources from the 1970s and 1980s comparing to today? With the prominence of broadcast journalism bringing viewer’s information in real-time, are confidential sources a reliable means of getting information? Who is giving journalists information without willing to be identified, and how are journalists letting their readers know whom these sources are to keep their credibility? Research in all of these areas has been examined to form the base of knowledge to conduct the current study.

Reader Response

Culbertson and Somerick (1977) conducted interviews of 125 residents in three Ohio communities on their understanding of attribution. Independent variables such as education level, political stance and political interest
were rated, and then attentiveness to and understanding of attribution by the readers was measured. Culbertson and Somerick found that the best predictor of how attentive a reader was to veiled sources was their knowledge of public affairs (1977). Political interest also proved to be a strong predictor of attentiveness. Culbertson and Somerick stated, “The impact of knowledge level, then, does not appear to stem from its relationship with political interest or education level.” (1977, 67).

Fedler and Counts (1981) wanted to show by altering the attribution of a source in a story, reader’s would respond differently to the information in the story. Fedler and Counts said, “Used more effectively, attribution might help readers understand that newspapers are publishing accurate summaries of their sources’ remarks, and that the sources share some responsibility of the remarks’ publication.” (1981, 25).

Two stories were generated, one on a controversial subject and one on a non-controversial subject, with different amounts and types of attributed sources. Subjects then rated the stories, using a five-point scale, on fairness, accuracy, significance and controversiality.
Fedler and Counts found readers ranked stories with more attribution as more accurate.

Significance and agreement were highest on the controversial story when it contained no attribution (1981). Readers also expressed when only one source is quoted the story becomes less accurate to a reader because it is considered one-sided. Fedler and Counts also stated they felt the use of anonymous sources in controversial stories can be detrimental.

Hale (1984) researched whether or not readers noticed the presence of attribution, the types of attribution, and how attribution affected the reader’s evaluation of the story? Hale used 500 subjects and two different news stories, each with three versions. Each version had a different type and amount of attribution.

Hale found the type of attribution made no difference in believability in both factual and opinionated stories, and concluded attribution did not make a substantial difference in reader perceptions (1984). Hale also stated that journalists should avoid intermediate attribution, terms such as county sheriff or mayor’s assistant, or omit them entirely, because it does not enhance the perception of accuracy by a reader.
Editorial Policy

Culbertson (1980) mailed questionnaires to 292 ASNE editors to survey their attitudes about, and their newspaper’s readerships feeling on, leaks expecting to be used as anonymous sources. Culbertson found large circulation newspaper editors think newspapers use anonymous sources too often and that the larger the newspaper the more likely reporters are willing to grant anonymity. Culbertson also found editors thought about 56 percent of unnamed sources would agree to be quoted if reporters insisted (1980).

When asked about their own thoughts, Culbertson received responses that the greater an editor’s belief in investigative reporting and that the press should be an independent watchdog of the government, the greater their likelihood to believe in the need for anonymous sources (1980). Culbertson stated, “Overall approval of leaks depended more on beliefs about whether they are needed and are handled well than on general philosophical opinions related to news.” (1980, 408).

Anderson (1982) conducted a survey of 150 managing editors in 1982 after Janet Cooke fabricated the story of
Jimmy, an eight-year-old heroin addict, she wrote about in the *Washington Post*. Of 107 respondents to the survey, 73 percent of the editors agreed a story based on fabrication could make its way into print in their newspapers and 75 percent said anonymous sources were overused in the press (1982, 364). However, 16 percent of the editors did agree they would publish stories based on anonymous sources without knowing the identity of the source if they thought the reporters life was in danger (1982), as Janet Cooke claimed to her editors.

Davis, Rose and Gates (1996) conducted a survey of 106 large daily newspaper editors on their newspapers confidential source policies before and after the Cohen v. Cowles case. Ninety two percent of the 64 respondents said their newspapers use confidential sources in reporting and have a written or non-written policy on this usage. In these policies, 98.5 percent allow their reporters to use confidential sources only as a last resort (1996, 93).

Davis, Rose and Gates also found 90 percent of the newspapers do not require editors to meet or speak with confidential sources, however, 77 percent require that editors do know the name of confidential sources (1996,
The policies themselves typically deal with who has the authority to make a promise of confidentiality.

Boeyink (1990) also studied several newspaper policies, textbooks and editor statements on anonymous sources, and expressed the importance of attribution so the reader can understand the meaning and significance of what the source has to say. After reviewing these different statements and documents, Boeyink proposed seven guidelines for using anonymous sources: promises of anonymity must be authorized by the editor; anonymous sources should be used only for a just cause; anonymous sources should be used only as a last resort; sources should be as fully identified as possible with reasons for anonymity explained in the story; editors should balance the potential harms and benefits in any use of anonymous sources; anonymous sources can only be used with just intentions by the reporter, the media, and the source; and use of anonymous sources requires independent verification by a second source.

Son (2002) researched codes of ethics, and of particular interest, how codes of ethics address the handling of leaks when anonymous sources are involved. Son found 25 of the 47 codes analyzed discouraged the use of
confidential sources but stressed the importance of keeping the source confidential once a promise was made.

Wulfemeyer (1983) set out to find what the effect the Janet Cooke incident had on the use of anonymous sources through a survey of 200 newspaper and television stations, and editor-in-chiefs of 100 newspapers and television stations. He specifically looked at policies and procedures. The survey contained 35 questions, both open- and close-ended. Forty-three percent of the surveys were returned, 65 from newspapers and 64 from television stations.

Twenty four percent of those surveyed had formal, written policies on the use of anonymous sources and 71 percent had unwritten policies. Sixty seven percent of the media organizations said their editors must know the identity of any anonymous sources, this included 86 percent of the newspapers. But, only 21 percent of the media organizations say their journalists must describe their sources to the fullest in their reports (1983, 46).

St. Dizier (1985) studied usage by, and attitudes of, reporters concerning confidential sources. St. Dizier sent out 100 surveys to reporters in Florida, once in 1974 and again in 1984, to see what these attitudes would be and if
these attitudes would change over time. Forty-eight percent of the reporters contacted in 1974 responded and 67 percent in 1984.

One hundred percent of the reporters responding in 1974 said they had used confidential sources at least once, and one-third used them at least once a week (1985). In 1984, 97 percent of respondents had used a confidential source, but only 12 percent said they used them once a week. The frequency in use of confidential sources had lowered (1985, 46).

A surprising find was that 56 percent of the reporters said their newsgathering ability would be hampered if they were not allowed to use confidential sources; only 23 percent in 1984 had the same response. There was also more freedom in using confidential sources in 1974. Fifty-one percent said they usually consulted with an editor before using an unnamed source, but in 1984 that amount had raised to 73 percent (1985, 47).

Wilson (1997) expanded the research of editorial policy and thinking on anonymous sources to include newspaper ombudsmen by conducting in-depth interviews and mailing out questionnaires. Wilson wanted to answer the questions how aware were the ombudsmen of their respective
newspapers policies concerning anonymous sources, how did newspaper ombudsmen perceive the public concern with anonymous sources, and what policy do ombudsmen prefer when it comes to anonymous sources?

Wilson first conducted nine in-depth interviews to develop a mail survey sent to 37 ombudsmen. Twenty three surveys were returned. Eighty three percent of the newspapers the ombudsmen worked for relied on anonymous sources and of this group, 13 percent said their newspapers used them too much (1997).

Some of the instances when the ombudsmen said an anonymous source should be used were in a major business story when no public records or sources were available, investigations where the source’s safety or job is in jeopardy, if lives or health is in danger, or if corruption in government is involved (1997). But many agreed using anonymous sources is a last resort.

Quantitative Studies of Journalistic Use of Anonymous Sources

Who is Acting as Anonymous Sources?

Gassaway (1988) interviewed 15 people who were likely candidates to be news sources and who confirmed they had in fact been confidential sources in the past. Seven of the 15
said they had been an anonymous news source for a period of 10 to 20 years, eight had been a source more than 25 times and two-thirds had been a source within the last year. Eight of the respondents said they had traded information with a journalist, giving confidential information for non-published information (1988).

Gassaway concluded, "... once a person begins to function as a confidential source, he or she will continue to do so as journalists keep returning to the source for more information over time." (1988, 75).

Hallin, Manoff and Weddle (1993) studied sourcing by 23 defense and national security reporters from seven major newspapers. Story citations were coded into one of six categories by affiliation and then coded into subunits of specific attribution. Of 7,956 citations, 13.3 percent of these citations were from an anonymous source within the executive branch of the government (1993, 756).

When concluding why the executive branch had so many anonymous sources in stories about national security and defense, Hallin, Manoff and Weddle stated:

"Looking at the use of anonymous sources in terms of the position of the source rather than the practice of the journalist, the fact that government officials are so often cited anonymously reflects both their power - they are in a better position to insist on anonymity and
still get covered – and the constraints under which they operate – they are less free than many other actors to say what they think publicly.” (1993, 760).

What Type of Story Requires the Use of Anonymous Sources?

Blankenburg (1992) showed anonymous source use increased during a war period by examining stories written during the Gulf War in 1991. Blankenburg searched for stories with the terms “official said” and “source said”, from January to March in 1991, the length of the Gulf War. Thirty seven and a half percent of the stories war-related contained an anonymous source, compared to only 24.6 percent of stories unrelated to war in 1991 (1992, 14). Blankenburg found an increase of anonymous sources from 1990, by more than 10 percent, compared to stories written between January and March in which only 26.9 percent of stories contained anonymous sources.

Blankenburg also studied sports stories of 500 words or more written in 1990 in three newspapers. Blankenburg determined using the terms drug, arrest and investigation with “source said” would show how anonymous sources were used in sports stories on crime and vice. He did the same for stories on athletic pay searching the terms salary or salaries with “source said”.
Blankenburg found the words “source said” in 10 percent of stories on crime and vice and 8 percent of stories on salaries (1992, 15). In the three newspapers, only 2.2 percent of the sports stories written on other topics, contained anonymous sources.

Ryan (1979) performed a content analysis of eight major daily newspapers. He counted the number of attributed and unattributed stories in issue-oriented and event-oriented stories in six different issues of each paper. Sentences were first coded for issue or event orientation, then as to which social issue they were most concerned with. Ryan then counted the number of attributed and unattributed sentences. Four thousand seven hundred and sixty one sentences were coded.

Ryan found 73.7 percent of the sentences were reports, or facts, however only 19.7 percent of these were attributed (1979, 500). Combined, Ryan found only 42.7 percent of sentences in issue-oriented stories were attributed and 29.8 percent of sentences in event-oriented stories were attributed (1979, 501). Overall, only 61.3 percent of the sentences Ryan analyzed were not attributed.

Shoemaker (1983) wanted to test the relationship between the attitudes of the reporters and editors covering
political groups, and how the group was portrayed in their respective newspapers. Journalists were also surveyed on their perception of the group as being different from mainstream U.S. political thought. Shoemaker found the more deviant the group was perceived the less viable the reporter portrayed it (1983).

Shoemaker states “… biased evaluation information was more likely to be unattributed than attributed, and biased information about the groups’ legality and viability was equally likely to be attributed or unattributed.” (1983, 27). Therefore attributed information tends to be neutral while unattributed information portrays groups in a negative way.

Esposito (1999) studied the use of anonymous sources in television news coverage of the President Clinton and Monica Lewinsky scandal by conducting a content analysis of 150 random news stories from ABC, CBS, NBC and CNN during the time period of January 21, 1998 to September 9, 1998. Esposito found 792 of the 1,107 stories coded, or 72 percent, contained at least one anonymous source (1999, 7). Of the individual networks, NBC ranked the highest in use of anonymous sources with 80 percent of its stories containing at least one anonymous source (1999, 7).
A total of 4,833 sources were used in the 1,107 stories examined by Esposito. Almost one-half, 2,179 or 45.1 percent asked to remain anonymous in the broadcasts (1999, 7). Thirty six percent of these sources were considered neutral to the investigation, or the network gave no explanation as to where the information came from (1999, 9). Twenty seven percent of the sources were subordinate figures, including an aide to Kenneth Starr or a staff member of the Clinton administration (1999, 9).

Esposito did state two points worth noting in his discussion. First, “... the Clinton-Lewinsky story originated from Washington D.C. ... where few sources appear to say anything of substance on record and where background and deep background are a way of life.” (1999, 15). Second, Esposito wrote, “... what really matters is not whether a source is named or unnamed, but whether the information gathered is factual.” (1999, 16).

Reynolds and Barnett (2003) conducted a study based on the broadcast of the first five hours of news coverage of the September 11 attacks. Reynolds and Barnett found anonymous sources were stated as a source by the four major news organizations, ABC, CBS, CNN and NBC, 55 times in the first five hours of coverage. NBC used the most, 34 of 833
statements made by sources were unattributed, with CNN having the least, no unattributed statements of the 510 statements reported (2003, 696).

Carpenter, Lacy and Fico (2006) examined the use of anonymous sources by network news when covering four high-profile crimes. They stated, “Because reporters are central in deciding how stories are covered and who is allowed to comment on the stories, much of the analysis in this research concentrates on the role of the reporter and the use of the sources.” (2006, 904). Carpenter, Lacy and Fico coded stories based on the use of anonymous sources, the transparency of sources cited and if multiple viewpoints were used.

Twenty eight dates were randomly selected from January 13 to September 22 in 2004, and the morning and evening news broadcasts on ABC, NBC, CBS and the PBS NewsHour were coded to create the sample. Carpenter, Lacy and Fico compared high-profile crime stories to other significant stories and found 71 percent of high-profile crime stories contained anonymous sources, 55.8 percent of other significant stories contained an anonymous source (2006, 909). This led to the conclusion high-profile crime stories were more likely to use an anonymous source because sources
involved in trials needed to maintain secrecy about their cases (2006, 910).

Anonymous Sources in the News


Blankenburg only considered stories that were 250 words or more. Blankenburg found The New York Times and the Los Angeles Times preferred to use “official said” where The Washington Post used a mix of official and source (1992). An average of 28.83 percent of the stories in the three newspapers for both years contained a mix of both “official said” and “source said” (1992, 12).

Denham (1997) studied the use of anonymous attribution in stories covering military conflicts. Using a stratified random sample, Denham downloaded stories from the Los Angeles Times, The Washington Post and the Associated Press during the Bosnia and Somalia conflicts. Denham then coded each paragraph of the stories containing a veiled news source for political administration, conflict, dateline, level of attribution, newspaper and source type.
Denham found 8,780 paragraphs containing anonymous sources (1997, 567). Denham did not state how many total stories these paragraphs comprised. Of these paragraphs 15.4 percent, or 5,660, contained an anonymous source. When comparing the military conflict being written about, Denham wrote “... nearly identical percentages of anonymous attribution across both conflicts when all sources of information were included.” (1997, 568).

Denham also extracted and analyzed stories with American sources and datelines. When specifically looking at American sources, 36.3 percent in the coverage of Bosnia and 29.1 percent in the coverage of Somalia were anonymous (1997, 568), and 52.4 percent of stories with American datelines contained no source at all.

When Denham looked at attribution by newspaper he found the The Washington Post contained the most anonymous attribution with 21.4 percent of paragraphs (1997, 570). Sixteen point four percent of paragraphs in the Los Angeles Times and 10.1 percent of the Associated Press paragraphs contained anonymous attribution (1997, 570). Denham also found there was no evidence to support his theory that Republican administrations provide more information to the
media anonymously than Democratic administrations (1997, 575).

Lasorsa and Reese (1990) studied coverage of the stock market crash in 1987 by CBS Evening News, Newsweek, The New York Times and the Wall Street Journal. One hundred and sixty seven stories were coded for type of sources quoted. Of the 1,022 sources quoted by the four media outlets, 17 percent of the sources, or 174, were unspecified (1990, 68). CBS Evening News used the most anonymous sources with 39.6 percent, or 44 of the 111, sources being unspecified (1990, 68). The Wall Street Journal had the least anonymous sources, 7 of 257 or 2.7 percent (1990, 68).

Wulfemeyer and McFadden (1986) conducted a survey of network news and its use of anonymous attribution in broadcast media. Wulfemeyer and McFadden coded 27 newscasts over a period of two weeks on story subject, direct or indirect quotation, and presentation style. Fifty five percent of the coded stories contained an anonymous quote and 71 percent of these stories were reporter driven packages (1986, 471).

Martin-Kratzer and Thorson (2007) conducted a content analysis to determine if anonymous source use in newspaper reporting and network newstories declined from 2003 to
2004. They hypothesized editorial policy regarding anonymous sources would change at newspapers nationwide because of the scandal involving The New York Times reporter Jayson Blair in 2003. Martin-Kratzer and Thorson assumed this would result in a decrease in use of anonymous sources.

Sixteen newspapers were chosen based on four categories of circulation size and geographic location. Twenty eight dates were chosen from January 1 to October 7 in 2003, and January 1 to October 13 in 2004, with four editions from each day of the week. Stories contained on the front page, or the front page of the local/metro section, were coded. The morning and evening news broadcasts on the network news stations for the same dates were also coded. Martin-Kratzer and Thorson coded each story on six variables: anonymous sourcing, transparent sourcing, high profile stories, story topics, placement and story origination (2007).

Eight thousand eight hundred and eighty four total newspaper stories were analyzed, 4,376 from 2003 and 4,508 from 2004. Twenty one percent, or 1,865 stories, contained at least one anonymous source (2007, 63). However, analyzing the individual years, 35 percent of the stories
containing an anonymous source were written in 2003 and only 9 percent of the newspaper stories in 2004 contained an anonymous source (2007, 63), supporting Martin-Kratzer and Thorson’s hypothesis.

When looking at story topics, a drastic decrease in the number of anonymous sources used was seen across all topics. In 2003, Martin-Kratzer and Thorson found 91 percent of stories about accidents and disasters contained an anonymous source as opposed to only 9 percent in 2004 (2007, 64). Also, 87 percent of stories on domestic affairs in 2003 contained an anonymous source, but only 13 percent of domestic affairs stories did in 2004 (2007, 64).

Another finding of Martin-Kratzer and Thorson was who was writing stories containing anonymous sources. Staff members of newspapers with circulation of more than 75,000, or large newspapers, contributed 99 percent of the stories containing an anonymous source. Less than 1 percent of the stories with an anonymous source came from a wire service (2007, 64).

Martin-Kratzer and Thorson found the reverse situation of newspaper stories for network news broadcasts. Forty one percent of the total 3,688 network news stories from 2003 and 2004 contained an anonymous source. This
translated into 32 percent of 2003 stories and 51 percent of 2004 stories (2007, 64).

The current research is based on and being compared to Culbertson’s “Veiled Attribution—An Element of Style?” (1978). Culbertson hypothesized newsmagazines would use uninformative nouns like source and observer less than newspapers; newsmagazines would use critic and supporter as descriptive terms for anonymous sources more often than newspapers; newsmagazines would name sources as experts more; and newsmagazines would directly quote and use persons rather than organizations more than newspapers. When specifically referring to the newsmagazines, Time would use nouns implying importance over expertise, and a specific stance, more than Newsweek.

Culbertson analyzed one issue per month for the year of 1974. Findings showed 70 percent of Newsweek stories and 75 percent of Time stories included anonymous sources (1978, 460). Culbertson showed of the 943 phrases noted in Time and 1,087 phrases noted in Newsweek, only 11 percent in Time and 9 percent in Newsweek were “bland” word phrases like source and observer (1978, 460). The words most commonly used to describe a source offered an inference of high status, 31 percent in Time and 30 percent in Newsweek,
or subordinate status, 20 percent in *Time* and 25 percent in *Newsweek* (1978, 460).

Culbertson also compared his results to a 1974 study he had conducted on the use of anonymous sources by 12 daily newspapers. Culbertson hypothesized that the newsmagazines would use words describing a source as an expert more than the newspaper. This hypothesis was supported. Only 4 percent of the words describing a source in the newspapers had an expert connotation, where 13 percent of the descriptors in *Time* and 26 percent of the descriptors in *Newsweek* inferred an expert as a source (1978, 462).

Wulfemeyer also used Culbertson’s 1978 study as a base for his 1985 article “How and Why Anonymous Attribution Is Used by *Time* and *Newsweek.*” Wulfemeyer analyzed one issue from each month of 1982 for both magazines. Anonymous sources were quoted in 81 percent of the 388 total stories (1985, 83). More international than national stories contained anonymous sources, and *Newsweek* used sources more often than *Time*. Wulfemeyer found the most frequently quoted anonymous source was a type of official, followed by an aide.
Wulfemeyer did state that an over use of anonymity did occur. “There are some examples of overkill. Four stories included 15 anonymous quotes, three stories had 17, one story had 20 and one had 42 anonymous quotes in about four full pages.” (1985, 126). Wulfemeyer added, “… if journalists do work hard to get information “on-the-record” and reduce their reliance on unnamed sources, give as much source identification as possible and confirm the accuracy of “confidential” information, the use of anonymous attribution can continue to be an accepted journalistic practice.” (1985, 126).

Research Questions

Given the amount of media coverage to cases involving confidential sources in the last 20 years, a reexamination of Culbertson’s study needs to be conducted, updating the quantitative information involving the use of anonymous sources by newsmagazines, as well as comparing the results to Wulfemeyer’s 1985 study. Have journalist’s cut the number of confidential sources used in their reporting? Is this cut a drastic amount or a small decrease? Has a difference in the use of identification of sources
occurred? Do international stories still lead national stories in the use of confidential sources?

A content analysis of one issue of *Time* and one issue of *Newsweek* for each month in 2006 can answer these questions. A drastic decrease in the amount of anonymous sources used in 2006 should be seen from Culbertson’s 1978 and Wulfemeyer’s 1985 studies. The coding Culbertson used for categorizing stories and sources will be used for consistency purposes. Coding will also include a distinction between national and international stories to compare to Wulfemeyer’s 1985 study.

Also, for the purposes of this study, when describing a source the descriptors “anonymous”, “unattributed”, “confidential”, “leak”, “unnamed” and “veiled” shall be assumed to mean the same thing in that the source has asked not to be named directly by the journalist. The terms “named” and “attributed” describing a source have the same connotation meaning the source has given permission to the journalist to use their name in quoting information.

Five research questions will be addressed with the results of this study:

RQ1: Has the combined use of anonymous sources by *Time* and *Newsweek* increased or decreased?
RQ2: Has the use of anonymous sources by *Time* increased or decreased?

RQ3: Has the use of anonymous sources by *Newsweek* increased or decreased?

RQ4: What was the most common anonymous source descriptor in 2006?

RQ5: In 2006 did journalists use anonymous sources more in international or national stories?
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

To replicate Culbertson’s 1978 study, a content analysis using the random selection with replacement method was conducted on one issue of *Time* and one issue of *Newsweek* for each month of the year 2006. Both *Time* and *Newsweek* are released on Mondays, ensuring similar story topics. Issues to be coded were selected at random. The 12 issues for each magazine were January 16, February 13, March 27, April 3, May 1, June 12, July 24, August 14, September 18, October 23, November 6 and December 18.

All stories in each magazine were coded except for art, movie and book reviews, editorial columns, and any stories written by a non-journalist. While reading, coders noted each instance of an anonymous source by providing the title of the story, the page number the information appeared on, if the story was a national story or an international story, and all words used to describe the source. The anonymous source was then analyzed for type,
status, if the information provided was a direct quote from the source or paraphrased, and if a source’s occupation and organization were stated.

Two coders received written instructions on how to code the magazines and a coding sheet for each month of each magazine (see Appendix). Coder reliability was calculated using the first three months of coding for *Time* magazine to compare 2006 to 1974 and 1982, and to answer the proposed research questions.
CHAPTER IV
FINDINGS

The quantitative results of coding provide three sets of information on the use of anonymous sources in 2006 by Time and Newsweek: the types and amount of stories containing anonymous quotes, information about the quote itself and information on who is being used as an anonymous source.

Where Are Quotations?

In the 12 issues of Time coded for 2006, a total of 190 stories were examined. These 190 stories excluded editorial columns, reviews, or stories written by a non-journalist. Of these 190 stories, 54 of the stories, 28.4 percent, contained information provided by an anonymous source, either directly or indirectly. In the 12 issues from 2006 of Newsweek coded, 197 stories met the criteria to be examined. Anonymous sources were used for information in 65 of these stories, or 33.0 percent. Combined, 119 (30.7 percent) of the 387 total eligible stories in the 24
total issues of *Time* and *Newsweek* contained an anonymous source (Table 1).

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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>197</td>
<td>387</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Considering there were 54 stories containing an anonymous source in the 12 issues of *Time* examined, an average of 4.5 stories containing an anonymous source, per issue, can be assumed. This, however, was not the case. In both January and March eight stories were written quoting an anonymous source. The lowest amount written in an issue was two, found in September (Table 2).

For *Newsweek*, 65 stories contained an anonymous source in the 12 issues examined, resulting in an average of 5.4 stories per issue. Again, the average per issue was not the case. January contained the most stories quoting an anonymous source with nine, and February and March both
Table 2. Number of Stories Containing an Anonymous Sources in *Time*, by Month

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Stories Containing an Anonymous Source</th>
<th>Stories Not Containing an Anonymous Source</th>
<th>Total Stories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

contained eight. The lowest amount of stories written in an issue was three, occurring in both August and November (Table 3).

Culbertson and Wulfemeyer studied if anonymous sources were being quoted more often in stories written on domestic issues, or if anonymous sources were contained more frequently in international stories. In the 12 issues of *Time* examined, of the 54 stories containing an anonymous
Table 3. Number of Stories Containing an Anonymous Source in *Newsweek*, by Month

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Stories Containing an Anonymous Source</th>
<th>Stories Not Containing an Anonymous Source</th>
<th>Total Stories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

source, 36 were national stories and 18 were international stories. Of the 65 total stories in *Newsweek* containing an anonymous source, 45 were national stories and 20 were international stories (Table 4).

*How Are Quotations Written?*

In the 12 issues examined of *Time*, a total of 206 anonymous statements were recorded in the 54 stories containing at least one direct or indirect anonymous quote prompting
Table 4. Number of National and International Stories Containing an Anonymous Source in 12 Issues for the Year 2006, by Magazine

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Newsweek</th>
<th>Combined</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National Stories</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Containing an Anonymous Source</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Stories</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Containing an Anonymous Source</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

coding. The January 16th issue held the most, 44 quotes, and the September 18th issue the least with only four total quotes. Newsweek contained a total of 250 anonymous statements in the 65 stories warranting coding. The May 1st issue contained 33 total anonymous quotes, the most in one issue, for Newsweek. The least amount for Newsweek appeared in the November 6th issue, only seven total anonymous quotes (Table 5).

Both magazines used indirect anonymous quotes more often than direct anonymous quotes in 2006, meaning authors paraphrased the information they received rather than directly quoting an anonymous source. Of the 206 anonymous
Table 5. Total Anonymous Quotations, by Magazine, by Month

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Newsweek</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>206</strong></td>
<td><strong>250</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

statements appearing in the 54 stories containing an anonymous quote coded for *Time*, the authors wrote 89 of these statements as direct quotations and 117 as paraphrased indirect quotations. *Newsweek* authors wrote 94 direct anonymous statements and 156 indirect anonymous statements in the 65 stories containing at least one anonymous quote coded, totaling 250 anonymous statements (Table 6).
Table 6. Total Anonymous Direct Quotes and Indirect Anonymous Quotes, by Magazine

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Newsweek</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Direct</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>206</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Who is Being Quoted?**

Four categories were coded to find how the sources behind the anonymous information were being described to readers. First, the status of the anonymous source was coded. Both magazines quoted high status sources, or sources with inside information or perceived knowledge about the topic of the article, more than any other source (Table 7). Of *Time*’s 206 anonymous statements, 109 or 52.9 percent of these were considered to come from a source of high status. *Newsweek* contained 115 statements made by high status anonymous sources in the 12 issues coded. This was 46.0 percent of *Newsweek*’s 250 anonymous sources.

The second descriptive category coded for was the type of source providing information anonymously. Single and plural persons contributed substantially more information anonymously to the magazines than organizations, other media outlets or countries. Single persons were attributed
Table 7. Status of Anonymous Sources, by Magazine

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Newsweek</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Associate</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Status</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subordinate</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pro/Con</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expertise</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Information</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>206</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

for 105 of the 206 anonymous quotations in the 12 issues of *Time*, and 121 of the 250 anonymous quotations coded in *Newsweek* (Table 8).

Table 8. Type of Anonymous Sources, by Magazine

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Newsweek</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Named Organization</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unnamed Organization</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single Person</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plural Person</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>206</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If the job role of an anonymous source was stated to describe the source, this was coded and was the third descriptor recorded. The majority of the anonymous
quotations contained in both *Time* and *Newsweek* did not have a job role associated with the source. *Time* only stated a job role for an anonymous source in 36 of the 206 quotations coded, and *Newsweek* only noted a job role for an anonymous source in 71 of the 250 quotations (Table 9).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Newsweek</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Job Role</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Job Role</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>206</strong></td>
<td><strong>250</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The final descriptor of an anonymous source coded was the job organization of the source was noted. Again, the majority of anonymous quotations in both magazines did not contain a descriptor allowing the reader to know where the anonymous source worked. No job organization was stated as a descriptor for the anonymous source providing 141 of the 206 anonymous quotations in *Time* and 166 of the 250 anonymous quotations in *Newsweek* (Table 10).

Culbertson and Wulfemeyer also tracked the words being used as the primary descriptors for sources providing anonymous quotations. The most common word used to describe
| Table 10. Job Organization of Source Stated, by Magazine |
|----------------|-----------|-----------|
|                | Time      | Newsweek  |
| Organization   | 65        | 84        |
| No Organization| 141       | 166       |
| Total          | 206       | 250       |

an anonymous source providing a statement was the term “official”. *Newsweek* used someone it termed an “official” as an anonymous source for 70 of the 250 anonymous statements in the 12 issues coded. *Time* used “official” as a descriptor for an anonymous source for 75 of the 206 anonymous statements.

Both newsmagazines used the term with and without other adjectives to give the reader more information about who this “official” may be. Common descriptors used with “official” to give the reader more information were “intelligence”, “administration”, “knowledgeable” and “government”. “Aides” were often noted as being associated with the “White House” or “Bush”.

The next common provider of information was either an “aide” or someone just attributed as a “source”. *Newsweek* attributed information to either an “aide” or a general “source” almost equally. Twenty four anonymous statements were attributed to an “aide” and 29 anonymous statements...
were contributed to a “source” in the 12 issues of Newsweek. *Time* was similar attributing 12 anonymous quotations to an “aide”, and 15 anonymous statements to a “source”. Authors also noted if sources were “former” members of an organization or administration, allowing readers to infer a bias slant may be present.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION

Assessing Time and Newsweek’s use of anonymous sources in 2006, it can be seen journalists are still granting confidentiality to persons supplying them with information. In the 24 issues of Time and Newsweek analyzed, 456 quotations were provided by sources wishing to remain anonymous. Newsweek also quoted anonymous sources more often than Time in 2006.

Culbertson found Time and Newsweek quoted an anonymous source in 72.5 percent of the stories printed in 1974. Wulfemeyer found the magazines quoted an anonymous source in 81 percent of the stories printed in 1982. In 2006, Time and Newsweek quoted an anonymous source in 119 of 387 stories, only 30.7 percent. This shows a decrease in the overall use of confidential sources answering research question one.

In 1974 Time quoted an anonymous source in 75 percent of its stories and 77 percent of stories in 1982. For 2006,
54 of 190 stories, or 28.4 percent of stories in *Time* contained an anonymous source. Therefore a decrease in the use of anonymous sources by *Time*, by almost 50 percent, is shown and answers research question number two.

*Newsweek* contained an anonymous source in 33.0 percent of its stories in 2006, 65 of 197 stories. Culbertson coded 70 percent of *Newsweek*'s stories in 1974 with anonymous sources, and Wulfemeyer found 85 percent of *Newsweek*'s stories in 1982 contained an anonymous source. Again, a decrease in the amount of stories containing an anonymous source, answering research question three comparing *Newsweek*.

The substantial decrease in the use of anonymous sources by the magazines raises many questions that could warrant further research. Culbertson coded 197 stories in *Time* and 191 stories in *Newsweek*, 388 stories total. In 2006, 387 stories were coded, almost an identical number, yet the amount which contained a confidential source lowered by 37 percent.

Editorial policy could play a large factor in the reasoning for this decrease. With the amount of responsibility editors now carry in being certain all stories are reported factually, and not fabricated,
reporters often cannot grant confidentiality unless absolutely necessary.

Both magazines now contain a large number of “mini” stories, stories not more than ten paragraphs long, in their first few pages. With the infusion of these shorter stories, fewer stories of substantial length are printed. The longer, more in depth stories, commonly requiring sources providing privileged information, is less.

The term “official”, often used with descriptors, was the most common source quoted anonymously in 2006, to answer research question four. This was also the most used descriptor in both 1974 and 1982, showing whom reporters are getting sensitive information from is not changing. Government officials are still acting as informants for journalists, but asking for confidentiality.

One story of note was contained in Time’s 2006 November issue. The story, entitled “The Disappeared” written by Bobby Ghosh, was about the rise of kidnappings in Iraq of Iraqi citizens. The seven anonymous quotations in the story all were noted as having come from an “official”, “officials” or a “U.S. official”. The Iraqi citizens who provided the author with information and personal stories were all willing to be identified, but the
American government officials who were providing statistics and other research were not.

American government officials not wanting to be identified also contributed to national stories containing more anonymous sources than international stories in 2006, answering research question five. *Newsweek* quoted an anonymous source 143 times in national stories compared to 107 times in international stories. *Time* was similar with 127 of the total quotations noted contained in a national story, only having 79 quotations in international stories.

A basic explanation for this can be drawn based on the topics of the stories written. The Jack Abramhoff scandal, immigration reform, the effect of the war in Iraq at home and corporate corruption all dominated the headlines in 2006, allowing for more domestic centered stories. *Time* also carried cover stories on technology, global warming and election coverage. Ten of the twelve covers of *Time* were based on domestic stories. *Newsweek* split its coverage with seven national stories and five international stories.

**Further Research**

Current quantitative analysis of the use of anonymous sources by journalists shows confidentiality is still being
granted and sources are still willing to give information if their identity is not revealed. However the substantial decrease in the use of quotations from these sources is of definite interest. Why the decrease? Has editorial policy changed to limit the use of these sources since 1982? Is the change in the type of story included in magazines, shorter formats making for quicker reads, a contributing factor? Or has the basic format of the magazines changed, less pages allowing for less stories?

Are journalists not seeking out information as hard as they were in the past, leaving less information to report, regardless of attribution? Also, with the amount of “officials” being quoted, a study should be conducted on who exactly is being considered an “official”. Do certain titles warrant this distinction or is anyone working in a government agency deemed an “official”? 

Magazine journalists are continuing to use anonymous sources in their reporting, but the amount in which they are quoting these sources is declining. Time and Newsweek both had a substantial decrease in the amount of information attributed to an anonymous source in 2006 from 1974 and 1982. Journalists use the anonymous source as a tool to assist in their reporting of sensitive subjects,
but as other cases similar to Janet Cooke and Valerie Plame occur, this important tool for journalists may become extinct.
Instructions to Coders

You have been asked to read articles in *Time* and *Newsweek* and note the presence of anonymous sources. Anonymous sources are interviewees who have asked to not be named in a reporter’s story. You will read twelve issues, one from each month, of both magazines from the year 2006. Each issue has been randomly selected.

The coding sheets provided are arranged to evaluate each instance an anonymous source is used by a reporter. At the top of each sheet is a place to note the issue being coded. In each issue, movie, art and book reviews should be excluded in coding. Any signed articles of opinion or articles written by a non-journalist should also be excluded.

When an instance of an anonymous source occurs in a story, the following procedure should be followed:

1. First write the title of the story in the column headed STORY.

2. The actual word used to note an anonymous source should be written in the second column titled WORD/WORDS.

3. Many stories will be contained on multiple pages, so please note the page number the word is on in the third column.

4. Next, please note whether the story is written about a national or international topic.
5. The next four sets of columns ask you to describe the attributes noted by the word describing the source and the context in which it is included. Please use your own judgment in making decisions. The descriptions below explain each set of descriptions. Choose one for each set of descriptors.

Mode (Choose one)
Is the source being quoted directly, with quotation marks, or has the reporter paraphrased the information.

Status (Choose one)
Associate: The source is associated with a person, cause, organization, institution or society in which they would have access to key information. Words suggesting this would be member, participant, people (as in Bush people), men (as in Bush men), intimate, associate, friend, colleague and confidante.

High Status: These words describe a person of power or prestige. Words indicating this would be official, leader, authority, strategist and strategic-planner.

Subordinate: These are lower level workers in an organization or institution. Words such as aide, worker or staffer are examples.

Pro/Con: Sources who have a pro or con position with respect to the person or policy. Words suggesting this would be critic or supporter.

Expertise: Sources who are described with a high level of knowledge on the subject being discussed. Expert, intellectual, or analyst would fall in this category.

No information: If no information as to who the source may be is given, such as the words source or observer, mark this column.

Type (Choose one)
Named Organization: A named organization, such as the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, or a company fits in this column.
Unnamed Organization: An organization not identified with a specific name, such as the police department is described here.

Single Person: Words indicating the source is a single person, including spokesmen.

Plural Persons: If the reporter indicates the information comes from multiple persons the column should be marked.

Media: If a media institution is responsible for the information, such as the Associated Press.

Nation: A specified nation has provided the information.

Occupation

Job role (choose one): The source is noted by his job role, such as lawyer or party chairman.

Organization (choose one): If a firm, university or some organization has supplied the information and is noted.

Thank you. Your time is appreciated. Please ask if you have any questions.
WORKS CITED


