

OP-ED

The many excuses for anonymity

Michael Kinsley

IN 1989, NEW YORKER writer Janet Malcolm published her famous essay, "The Journalist and the Murderer," with its notoriously overheated opening sentence: "Every journalist who is not too stupid or too full of himself to notice what is going on knows that what he does is morally indefensible."

This was back in the era when the New Yorker specialized in overheated and overhyped essays, including "The Fate of the Earth" by Jonathan Schell, which argued that all normal life must cease until we eliminate nuclear weapons. Malcolm had a more modest target: journalists who get their information by misleading their sources. But from her rage, you would think it was nuclear war.

I always thought Malcolm's complaint was ludicrous. An arrangement between a journalist and a source is a business deal like any other, I reasoned: mutually exploitative. Both parties must believe they are better off, or they wouldn't make a deal. There is no reason to suppose that deals between journalists and sources are uniquely exploitative or inherently one-sided. A source usually has his or her own agenda. Journalists don't have subpoena power. People talk because they want to.

I still feel that way, pretty much. But I've been taken aback by a little study I've conducted over the last few weeks.

It involves the use of anonymous sources. In the Age of Transparency, when government officials and business executives are supposed to fill out a form and put it on the Internet every time they scratch their behinds, why should journalists expect to be able to say simply, "Trust us," when they report controversial information?

Acknowledging that this is a legitimate question, the higher-toned media have attempted to establish rules about when it is permissible to use an anonymous source, to hold these occasions to a minimum and to require the reporter to explain why a source was permitted to remain anonymous.

These explanations can be hilarious. But they also tend to prove Malcolm right. Journalism is about betrayal — betrayal of sources by reporters, and also betrayal of friends, colleagues, family members by sources.

I did a database search of two newspapers — the Washington Post and the New York Times — for the phrases "requested anonymity" and "asked not to be identified because" for just a few weeks each, and I got a flood of examples.

People talked to reporters but requested and received a promise of anonymity:

- "because they feared being ostracized";
- "for fear of retribution" or "repercussions" or "reprisals";
- "to discuss private matters";
- "because the Colts had not yet announced the move";
- "to speak frankly" or "candidly";
- "to discuss sensitive issues";
- "because the decision has not been made public";
- "because the issue is politically sensitive";
- "because they were not authorized to speak on the record";
- "to speak more freely";
- "because the investigation is ongoing";
- "to give a candid assessment";
- "because the team was not commenting publicly";
- "to protect her relationship with the company";
- "because he and Mr. Smith are friendly";
- "because he did not want to alienate the administration";
- "because he was departing from the official line that all is well in Mogadishu";
- "because of his diplomatic position" or "in keeping with protocol";
- "because they were not allowed to talk about the information";
- "because the talks are confidential" or "because the information was private";
- "because of the delicacy of the situation";
- "because he feared Mr. Khan might take revenge."

And so on. These all seem like excellent reasons not to talk to a journalist. But they all amount to the same reason: because I'm not supposed to. And yet all these people did in fact talk, along with dozens more every day. They did so risking Mr. Khan's revenge and their friendship with Mr. Smith, violating their own promises of privacy or confidentiality, ignoring the delicacy of the situation or their lack of authorization.

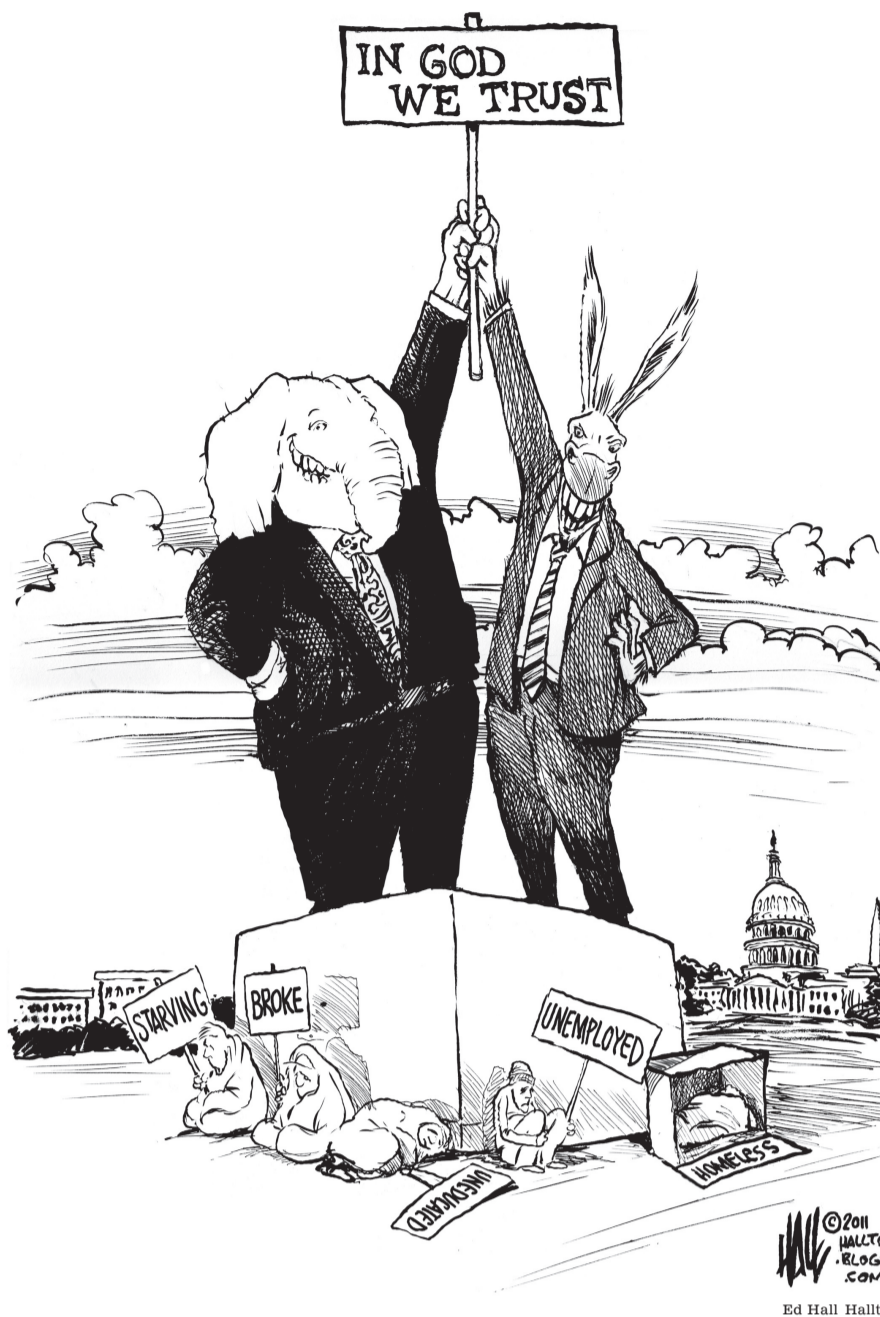
Why do people answer questions they shouldn't? Sometimes it really is in their organization's or their own self-interest, whatever the official policy may be. Sometimes it's a craven hope of currying favor with the reporter for the next time. Sometimes it's because they're flattered to be asked or simply because they were asked, flatteringly or not.

It's amazing how many people don't realize, or forget, that they can tell a reporter to just go away.

And why do reporters rely so heavily on unnamed sources? Sometimes that's the only way to get important information. But sometimes it's a bluff on the part of the reporter: An anonymous source inside the administration sounds more impressive than Joe Blow, assistant secretary of Transportation.

Anyway, I've had to conclude that the real world is much closer to the one Malcolm described 22 years ago — a film-noir nightmare of betrayals and broken promises — than the sunny landscape of mutually beneficial transactions that I had previously imagined.

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What's God got to do with it?

Michael Shermer

THE HOUSE voted 396-9 this week to reaffirm as the national motto the phrase "In God We Trust" and encouraged its pronouncement on public buildings and continued printing on the coin of the realm. The motto was made official in 1956 during the height of Cold War hysteria over godless communism and — in the words of Brig. Gen. Jack D. Ripper in "Dr. Strangelove" — "Communist infiltration, Communist indoctrination, Communist subversion and the international Communist conspiracy to sap and impurify all of our precious bodily fluids."

As risible a reason as this was for knocking out a few bricks in the wall separating state and church, it was at least understandable in the context of the times. But today, what is the point of having this motto? There are no communist threats, and belief in God or a universal spirit among Americans is still holding strong at about 90%, according to a 2011 Gallup Poll. The answer is in the wording of the resolution voted on: "Whereas if religion and morality are taken out of the marketplace of ideas, the very freedom on which the United States was founded cannot be secured."

What is troubling — and should trouble any enlightened citizen of a modern nation such as ours — is the implication that in this age of science and technology, computers and cyberspace, and liberal democracies securing rights and freedoms for oppressed peoples all over the globe, that anyone could still hold the belief that religion has a monopoly on morality and that the foundation of trust is based on engraving four words on brick and paper.

If you think that God is watching over the U.S., please ask yourself why he glanced away during 9/11 or why he chose to abandon the good folks of New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina, and why he continues to allow earthquakes and cancers to strike down even blameless children. The problem of evil — why bad things happen to good people if an all-powerful and all-good God is in control of things — has haunted the faithful since it was first articulated millenniums ago, with nigh a solution on the horizon.

It's time to drop the God talk and face reality with a steely-eyed visage of the modern understanding of the origin of freedom on which the United States was founded and continues to be se-

cured. God has nothing to do with it. If you want freedom and security, you need the following:

The rule of law; property rights; a secure and trustworthy banking and monetary system; economic stability; a reliable infrastructure and the freedom to move about the country; freedom of the press; freedom of association; education for the masses; protection of civil liberties; a clean and safe environment; a robust military for protection of our liberties from attacks by other states; a potent police force for protection of our freedoms from attacks by people within the state; a viable legislative system for establishing fair and just laws; and an effective judicial system for the equitable enforcement of those fair and just laws.

With these in place the citizens of a nation feel free and secure. Why? The answer is in the final word of the motto: Trust. Claremont Graduate University economist Paul Zak has studied trust

among nations and found that the more of these components that are in place, the more citizens trust one another. Zak even computed the differences in living standards that trust can affect, demonstrating that a 15% increase in the proportion of people in a country who think others are trustworthy raises income per person by 1% per year for every year thereafter. For example, increasing levels of trust in the U.S. from its current 36% to 51% would raise the average income for every man, woman and child in the country by \$400 per year. Trust pays.

Trust has fiscal benefits that are derived through specific political and economic policies that have nothing whatsoever to do with religion or belief in God. Despite a strong faith in God, the percentage of Americans who believe that "religion can answer all or most of today's problems" has plummeted from 82% to 58%, while those who believe that "religion is old-fashioned and out of date" leaped from 7% to 28%, according to a 2010 Gallup Poll. Thus it would seem that Americans are more aware today than half a century ago that it's up to us to secure our freedom through enlightened secular policies with practical social applications rather than faith-based hope in empty mottoes reflecting an era gone by.

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Obama hones a populist edge

Ronald Brownstein

ALL THE TURMOIL in the Republican presidential race has President Obama's campaign brain trust focusing on fundamentals.

Regardless of the Republican nominee, those on the Obama team recognize that their biggest obstacle is voter disappointment with his performance, particularly on the economy. They believe one of their biggest opportunities is that voters generally prefer the president's ideas for dealing with jobs and the deficit over Republican alternatives. They understand that their biggest challenge is to improve the retrospective judgment about his performance while simultaneously encouraging voters to focus more on the prospective comparison with the GOP.

In most national surveys, Obama's approval rating is running around 45%. Even more ominous, more than two-thirds of Americans surveyed routinely say the country is on the wrong track, the highest level in decades. Those numbers more resemble the profile of presidential losers than of winners.

Most political strategists agree that given today's cynicism about politicians, incumbents can now win reelection with an approval rating of less than 50%, the historic danger line. The question is how much less. Inside Obama's camp, some talk optimistically about winning states with ratings scarcely above 40% — so long as voters dislike the GOP candidate even more.

Things always change in politics, but that would defy history. And even senior Obama strategists acknowledge that they feel more confident about states where his approval rating reaches 47% or above. That's the same number transfixing many Republicans. "It's very difficult for a president to get reelected if their job approval is less than 47% in a two-way race," GOP pollster Whit Ayres said this week.

Obama could hit that mark (some polls already put him there). But he's not guaranteed to get (or stay) there. The glum conclusion inside the White House is that the economy isn't likely to provide him much of a tail wind. The smaller-scale initiatives he's now consistently announcing may help only at the margin.

Obama's team is most optimistic about improving his ratings through the comparison with the eventual GOP nominee. That debate, they hope, will remind people of first-term accomplishments like the auto industry rescue and shift attention toward ideas such as reducing the deficit through a mix of spending cuts and upper-income tax increases, which consistently outpolls the GOP's cuts-only approach.

Put another way, they hope that clarifying the choice will help them win the referendum. Of course, Republicans will use that same debate to remind voters about the aspects of Obama's term they like least, such as his stimulus failing to prevent high unemployment.

Unless Obama can rebuild his approval rating above 50%, which seems unlikely without faster economic growth, he'll win reelection only by convincing several million voters currently disappointed in him that they would like the GOP alternative even less. That points toward a bruising year.

Obama strategists say that no matter whom the GOP nominates, the president will deliver the same core message: A Republican president would rubber-stamp the agenda of the GOP Congress and return to policies that caused the crash, favor the wealthy and squeeze the middle class. Against any Republican, Obama appears determined to stress the populist notes he's amplified lately about economic inequality.

But the GOP alternatives will provide very different contexts for those arguments. Obama's team hasn't thought much about a matchup against Herman Cain, which appears even less necessary now as he flounders in a sexual harassment controversy. Texas Gov. Rick Perry, they believe, might be a stronger competitor than Mitt Romney for blue-collar whites and Latinos, but he would ease Obama's recovery with economically discontented white-collar whites who generally prefer that their president believe in evolution. The former Massachusetts governor offers the inverse equation: Although his boardroom background may play well in white-collar suburbs, it could alienate blue-collar whites if Obama can portray him as embodying cutthroat corporate greed.

The late Edward Kennedy sold a similar argument when beating Romney in a Massachusetts Senate race in 1994. But it would be an enormous gamble for Obama to count on more support from blue-collar whites, who have steadfastly resisted backing him since 2008. Not only Obama but each Democratic presidential nominee since 2000 has run better among whites with college degrees than those without. A class-warrior message against Romney would further unnerve Democratic centrists who worry that Obama's amped-up populism won't attract more blue-collar whites but will estrange the white-collar whites otherwise open to him. By making higher taxes on the wealthy "such a big part of his solution, he is in fact just splitting his coalition," says Mark Penn, Hillary Rodham Clinton's chief strategist in 2008.

So far, the president's team says that his calling for the wealthy to pay more isn't antagonizing the upper-middle class. Penn, though, worries that ultimately "the people who vote on taxes are the people who pay them." Obama's sharpening populism reaches back to his party's traditions. Whether it can galvanize his party's modern electoral coalition remains to be proven.

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