

NOW MORE THAN EVER IT'S CRUCIAL TO FOLLOW JOURNALISM 101

By Ron Sirak • @ronsirak
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Never has it been more important for journalism to get it right. With all the cries of “fake news” this is not time to make mistakes. And yet the two biggest screw-ups of reporting on the Russia probe investigation – one by CNN and one by ABC – have involved the distribution of single-source stories – a no-no taught in Journalism 101.

The work by The Washington Post, The New York Times, CNN, NBC and a few others has been incredibly diligent and superbly accurate, as recent guilty pleas have indicated. But it only takes one mistake to give those who see the media as the enemy of the people a platform from which to shout their misguided message.

In June, CNN had to retract a story that reported Congress was investigating a "Russian investment fund with ties to Trump officials." And in early December, ABC issued a correction saying it was as “president-elect, not as a candidate, that Trump asked [Gen.] Flynn to contact the Russians.” Both stories hinged on a single source. CNN

fired several people for violating its sourcing policy. And Brian Ross of ABC was suspended four weeks without pay.

Here is the rule I learned: Unless the source is the direct subject of the story, speaking on the condition of anonymity, at least one other corroborating source needs to be found. I'll give you a real example from when I was Assistant Sports Editor at The Associated Press.

Early on the morning of Nov. 7, 1991, an AP sportswriter in Los Angeles found from a source within the Lakers who was in a position to know that Magic Johnson was going to announce later that day he is HIV-positive. Now, if Magic had told the writer himself and said that his name cannot be used as the source the AP could have gone with it.

But that wasn't the case and we needed a corroborating source. Every AP reporter with any NBA connections began working their contacts. Finally, we got a second source from within the players union to confirm the story and we were able to get to the wire with the scoop before Magic's news conference.

The bottom line is that The AP was willing to pass on a scoop in favor of following the rules. Now, because of the

Internet and social media, it's very difficult to have a scoop for more than a few minutes and there is a rush to be first. But that competitive pressure cannot be used as an excuse to make mistakes.

In some ways, the competitive pressure was greater in the pre-Internet world. If you trailed on a story then it was a full day until you could get back into the papers again. But when I was at The AP, its president, Louis D. Boccardi, always said: "I'd like to be first, but I'd rather be right." That has always guided me.

I'll give you other examples. In 2013, I did two stories for Golf Digest a couple of months apart, one on how Fox Sports, which had never televised pro golf, got the U.S. Open TV contract away from NBC and ESPN – "The Fox and the Peacock" (<http://bit.ly/2ACdNqW>) – and the other on a proposed shake-up of USGA leadership – "The Failed Coup at the USGA" (<http://bit.ly/2BDI2LI>).

Both stories relied heavily on anonymous sources. And because of the sensitive subject matter – the USGA, NBC, ESPN and Fox are powerful forces in the world in which I work – I was super-cautious in my sourcing. For the most part, anything I used anonymously I tripled sourced.

If I was going to be wrong, I wanted it to be by leaving something out rather than publish something not accurate. In fact, there were a couple of things I was virtually certain were true – and in fact ended up being true – but I didn't feel I had strong enough sourcing and left it out.

Fortunately, both of the details would have been icing on a cake I was already satisfied with. They weren't make-or-break items. But in both cases a source came up to me later and asked why I didn't use the info they provided and I simply said I didn't feel I had it nailed down.

The point is this: Journalism has rules. And the issue is this: Journalism is facing its greatest challenge since the First Amendment was penned as the veracity of a free and independent press is under fire. Now is not the time to get it wrong. Error on the under; be a day late rather than a dollar short. There is too much great work being done to have it undone by a couple of mistakes.