

**Real World Graduation: Question 30**

Edward D. Duvall  
12 May 2018

Question 30

Why do journalists publish articles using information from "anonymous sources"?

- a) To protect the identity of people who secretly provided vital information to the public, although it may not have been legal or ethical to do so
- b) To protect the First Amendment rights of people who may be afraid of publishing or speaking out on their own.
- c) Because the media serves as the watchdog of a free society, and the people have a right to know about all the available information
- d) Information from anonymous sources is generally more accurate than from open sources.
- e) Primarily due to a combination of a), c), and d), although situations like b) do occur occasionally.

### Answer to Question 30

This is a trick question. All of the answers are wrong.

Answers a) and b) are wrong because they pertain to "confidential" sources whose identities are known to the journalist; in that sense, they are not anonymous.

Answer c) is wrong because if the media were truly performing a watchdog function, they would publish only information that was corroborated by at least one or two reliable sources known to them. In other words, a respectable journalist would use the information provided "anonymously" only if it were verified by credible sources. In that case, the article is actually based on the credible sources, not the anonymous one.

Answer d) is wrong because there is no way to know if any information provided anonymously is correct or not until events demonstrate it one way or the other, or it is verified by credible sources known to the journalist. It cannot be assumed that information is more reliable simply because the person or organization that provided it does not want their name to be made public.

But truly "anonymous" information is frequently used by journalists because it has many benefits to the journalist. First, it gives rumor and innuendo a veneer of legitimacy; for example, a journalist may write, "anonymous sources have informed us that Famous Person X is under investigation, although we have been unable to verify it". The reader gets the message that Candidate X is to be suspected because they are being investigated. The reader is not likely to remember that the source is unknown, or that the journalist admitted that he has not confirmed it. But the reader has heard something negative about Famous Person X, which was the goal of the "anonymous source".

Second, it allows the journalist to fill up a large amount of space by presenting claims, counter-claims, and denials without having to do the serious work of figuring out how much of it is true or relevant. In other words, the journalist fills the pages and airwaves with background noise that may contain very little that is factual or newsworthy.

Third, it provides the journalist with a means to interject his biases into his articles by mentioning information from anonymous sources that serve to advance the journalists preferred view of how things are or ought to be. The advantage is that he cannot be accused of editorializing, since he actually is reporting on information that came to him.

Fourth, it provides journalists and editors with a veneer of legitimacy when publishing the most sensational and controversial information; controversy generates interest; interest sells newspapers and airtime; and both advertising revenue and the journalist's fame increases.