



GREG SCHNEIDERS

Reporters should reveal real reasons for unnamed sources

Bob Dylan once sang, “But I can’t think for you, you’ll have to decide whether Judas Iscariot had God on his side.”

Turns out, he did. At least that’s the way he tells it in the *Gospel of Judas*, a 1,700-year-old codex the National Geographic Society just released. According to that manuscript, Jesus asked Judas to leak his whereabouts to the Romans in order that his “Passion” and the world’s redemption might proceed as planned.

Also last week, we learned that former Cheney aide Scooter Libby explains that his illegal leaking was done at the behest of his leader, President Bush. All this rationalization of leaks revives some interesting questions about how communications professionals should be dealing with unauthorized disclosures.

Here in Washington, we understand that this city could not function without leaks – we’d rather give up indoor plumbing. But lately, the national news media have been agonizing over how to deal with leaks. The consensus, so far, is that when an anonymous quote appears in a story, the reader deserves an explanation. Understanding a leaker’s motivation can help a reader evaluate the credibility of the leak. Is it public-spirited or merely self-serving? Does the leaker have an incentive to “spin” the leak one way or another? Is the leaker likely to profit financially, politically, or otherwise from the leak?

Reporters’ rationales for quoting anonymous sources range from the banal to the bizarre. We are told that some leakers wish to remain anonymous out of “fear of reprisal” or “due to the sensitivity of the issue” or “because the information has not yet been made pub-

lic.” Well, duh.

Why not tell us the real reason a leaker wants to remain anonymous. These would sound more like “because she would be fired” or “because this is an act of extreme disloyalty” or “because the source is really not in a position to know much about this issue.” But obviously, such candor would create other problems for reporters.

In fact, the anonymous leak serves everyone’s interest (except the target). The public gets information that it would otherwise be denied – like the existence of an elaborate domestic spying program. The reporter gets a story – often an exclusive – that could never be had “on the record.” And the source, well, here’s where those rationales come in again... the source also gets something of value. It may be as innocent as seeming in-the-know to a big-time reporter. It may be settling an old score or killing a program the source doesn’t like. Or, it may be darker than that – like ending the career of a political opponent.

Whatever the reason for the leak, however, it is unlikely to be as boring and innocent-sounding as the ones being offered up these days in our daily press. In the interest of honest journalism and, frankly, in the interest of spicy storytelling, let’s start demanding that reporters tell us the real inside story about why their sources are so shy. ■

Greg Schneiders is a founding partner of Prime Group, a consultancy that specializes in helping clients understand, plan, and execute change. Greg@primegrouppllc.com.