20 PRINCIPLES OF SOURCING

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TWENTY PRINCIPLES OF SOURCING

With the amount of disinformation and rumours circulating online and on social networks, AFP's role of providing accurate and verified news via identified and trustworthy sources has never been more important. The following document explains the fundamentals of the Agency's rules on sourcing and how we should manage relationships with sources. These guidelines should be respected and should be applied using professional judgement, experience and common sense. The chief editor's department is available 24 hours a day for advice or for a final decision. If you have any questions about these rules, feel there are omissions or come across any situations that raise new questions, please contact the chief editor's department.

SUMMARY

1) THE SOURCE IN THE LEAD

The source should be given immediately in flashes, alerts, urgents and leads so clients and readers can see where AFP obtained the information. Exceptions are made for events that are clearly in the public domain (a presidential speech, a royal wedding). The source can be dropped from the intros of the main leads and wraps when the facts have been established beyond doubt, or you can use formulations such as "France announced Thursday…".

The source should usually be placed at the close of the sentence (a European Commission spokesperson said) unless opening with the source gives the story more weight (President X announced…) or the information can be contested (The army said that it had captured the town of …).

Social networks are an integral part of news gathering, and verified accounts are an accepted source: Sports results, market reports and certain economic indicators should not be sourced. Headlines should be concisely sourced, unless the event is in the public domain and the facts are not open to dispute.

2) IDENTIFYING THE SOURCE

Sources should be clearly identified by name, age if relevant, title, occupation and any other factors that strengthen the credibility of the story.

A source should be identified in the same way throughout the story and should not be presented in different ways. For example, we should not identify a source by name and then quote them anonymously, which would mislead readers into thinking that the reporter had spoken to two different people.

Do not overstate a source's importance or turn a single source into multiple sources -- "officials said", "official media reported" -- where only one official or one media outlet is quoted.

An AFP text, photo or video journalist who witnessed an event is a recognized firsthand source and adds credibility to the story: an AFP reporter/photographer/video journalist at the scene said/witnessed/reported.

3) ANONYMOUS SOURCES

The use of anonymous sources enables us to publish information that we would otherwise be unable to report. This is particularly the case when sources are bound to secrecy (such as for police or judicial matters) and when publishing sensitive information in all areas of coverage including the economy, diplomacy, politics and sport.

AFP is committed to protecting its sources and will grant anonymity if being identified could pose a risk to them.

However, we must also assure our clients of the transparency and reliability of our information, and bear in mind that AFP is staking its reputation on the veracity of its information when it quotes anonymous sources.

The use of anonymous sources should be the exception, not the rule, and we must explain in as much detail as possible why we cannot identify the source. We should describe the source as precisely as possible, writing for example, “an aid worker in Kabul who cannot be identified for security reasons”; “a negotiator who is not authorised to disclose details of the discussions”, or “a trade union official who may risk reprisals for speaking to the media”.

Reporters must press sources at every opportunity to go on the record and must not slip into the trap of routinely granting anonymity. Public figures, including government officials, and those around them regularly hide behind anonymity when they brief the media in order to promote their agendas. We should not allow ourselves to be manipulated like this.

Sources who hide behind anonymity are unaccountable if they give us inaccurate or false information. We must ask ourselves what the possible motivation behind an insistence on anonymity could be. We must work to change the culture of habitual anonymity that exists in certain areas of our reporting and we must explain to our sources that identifying them is a key factor in establishing the credibility of our coverage.

It is essential that we know if the source has direct access to the information or if it was obtained from a third party.

It is always preferable to seek at least two sources, particularly if they are anonymous. Using a single anonymous source may be the only way to report important information. This is acceptable if the source has direct access to the information and we are confident that the information is true and that the source is reliable

In this case, the reporter must disclose the identity of the source to their service head or the editor-in-chief under a strict guarantee of confidentiality. Reporters must understand that sources are talking to AFP, and that there is not a private or personal relationship between the source and the journalist.

We do not use formulations such as “reliable sources” or “informed sources”. Instead, we strive to give as clear an indication as possible of why a particular source's information is trustworthy. We should try to give an indication of their function, whom they represent, and the reasons why they cannot be identified by name (a highly placed foreign ministry official who is not authorised to talk to the media, a local militia commander who requested anonymity for fear of reprisals).

If eyewitnesses request anonymity for security or other genuine reasons, we should give as clear an indication as possible of who they are (said the mother of one of the victims, who requested anonymity). Eyewitness sources such as “a local person” or “a woman/man” are unacceptable.

People quoted in “vox pop” stories must be identified with their full name, age, occupation, etc. The exception is when the person may be at personal risk if they are identified, but their opinion still adds value to the story. In that case, you must explain why the person requested anonymity.

We do not use pseudonyms to identify sources unless it is unavoidable in order to be able to tell the story, in which case we must explain the reason.

4) ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND SOURCING

Generative AI tools such as ChatGPT and Gemini provide algorithmic responses based on the vast amounts of data with which they have been trained, including material that is incomplete, erroneous, biased or covered by copyright that has not been attributed.

Although they are useful tools, they should not be considered as reliable sources, and answers they produce should be checked. We can quote their responses to illustrate a story, but they should not be written about as if they have human qualities or quoted like a human source with opinions.

We must also be aware that these tools have produced results that promote gender bias and other forms of stereotypes and prejudices.

5) CHALLENGING YOUR SOURCES

It is AFP's responsibility to ensure that the facts we report are accurate, and we must challenge the facts given by our sources, regardless of their rank or position. How does the official know the death toll or the number of survivors or that the victim has died? Is it an official count or is it an estimate? Where did the official obtain the information and from whom? Is the information within their area of responsibility or expertise? If not, they might be repeating hearsay, reports from other media or social network chatter. Does the source have a motive for giving us certain information? It is not sufficient to simply reproduce what we are told, and we should always ask follow-up questions to find out how the source obtained the information. Make fact-checking and corroboration part of your routine. We cannot hide behind the excuse that "this is what the source told me," We must seek the truth.

Eyewitness accounts are an essential part of reporting, but exercise caution in quoting them as proven facts, particularly when it comes to casualty figures. We should try to talk to as many eyewitnesses as possible to build up a consistent version of events.

Elections pose particular problems, and we should be very cautious when reporting statements by political candidates, who are notorious for misrepresenting official statistics or their opponents' records. We can quote them but should fact-check what they have said and seek comments from their rival candidates.

Even if the information given by a source or eyewitness seems compelling and true, seek out corroboration or rebuttal from other sources. The most convincing narratives can sometimes turn out to be half-true or false.

6) ATTRIBUTION

Unless the source says otherwise in advance, everything that they say is understood to be on the record (fully quotable and attributable) and cannot be declared off the record afterwards. However, the reporter can use his or her discretion if the source clearly misspoke or has inadvertently put himself, herself or others in jeopardy.

Journalists should do their best to avoid any ground rules being established in advance (avoid asking " is this on the record?" -- we are within our rights to assume that it is). If establishing ground rules is unavoidable, we should negotiate as much transparency as possible. In such cases there must be unambiguous prior agreement on the terms: the way the source is identified, whether the comments are on the record (fully quotable), off the record (not to be used), or can be used anonymously as background.

A distinction should be made between public figures and other people used to speaking to the media, such as communications professionals, and private individuals.

The former know that their words will be used publicly, which is not the case for an ordinary member of the public. It is our responsibility to explain to private individuals that we work for an international news agency and to make it clear that we will be quoting them. If we provide them with this information, they can give their informed consent to be quoted.

However, we can use our discretion and decided not to identify them if we feel that they are not aware of the potential consequences of their comments and may be putting themselves at risk.
In exceptional circumstances, for example as part of an investigative report when the person may face legal or other repercussions, we should obtain their written consent to quote them. In this case you should contact the Legal Department for advice.

7) SECONDARY SOURCES

When we do not have an AFP journalist present or a direct source, we can use secondary sources, in which case thorough verification of the veracity of the information is required.

It is up to the bureau to judge the value of the source, and experience is a good guide. We can pick up from respected and established news agencies, television networks, newspapers, radios, news agencies, online sites or social network accounts, but should exercise extreme caution when dealing with secondary media, unknown websites or dubious or unverified social media accounts.

In all cases it is our responsibility to judge the veracity and credibility of the information, particularly if the secondary source is quoting unidentified sources. Does their reporting match our standards? Does the report contain accusations that demand a right of reply? Are anonymous officials using other media to spread a particular message? Are they repeating a rumour or chatter that is being spread on social media? If we cannot get any on-the-record confirmation, we can at least put the story in context and quote our own analysts, who can evaluate the credibility of the report.

Even if our agreement with a local news agency permits it, we should not present their work as our own, but clearly identify them as the source of the story.

Beware of secondary media reporting on events concerning persons other than their own nationals or interests in third countries: for example, a national news agency in country A running a report on an event in country B. This kind of information should not be picked up but sent in note form to the chief editor for sending to the bureau concerned for verification. If the bureau is closed, then the chief editor decides how to proceed.

If AFP quotes a secondary report, we give it credibility and it becomes our story, and if it is erroneous we cannot shelter behind the excuse that we were only repeating what was being said.

We must say if we picked up a story from an online edition, whose content may vary from the printed or broadcast version.

We must always clearly identify the source, e.g., *according to a Chinese foreign ministry spokesman quoted by Xinhua*.

If we pick up quotes from a television broadcast, we describe the event (*told reporters in a televised news conference; told waiting journalists outside parliament…*)

If we pick up an exclusive television interview, we source it as such *(Prime Minister X said in an interview on Al Jazeera TV.*)

With the chief editor's permission, bureaux can pick up unreported material relevant to their own territories posted online from elsewhere (e.g. Delhi picking up a statement from the State Department website). In this case the other bureau must be informed.

We must say if an image or footage was provided as a handout and identify who provided it.

We do not plagiarise - all content picked up from a third party must be credited

We must clearly identify Pool material.

Under fair usage, and with attribution, we can usually quote from books, magazines, interviews and other original material within reason. If you are in doubt, consult the chief editor's department.

8) DIVERSITY OF SOURCES

We must strive to have a representative balance in our sourcing that reflects the gender, racial, ethnic and religious diversity of the societies we cover. Numerous studies have shown that the voices quoted in the media are overwhelmingly male, with women accounting for around 25 percent of people quoted. We must strive to correct this imbalance.

We should also guard against stereotypes based on the person's identity, such as only interviewing trans people about LGBTQ rights issues, or only interviewing women about issues affecting women.

9) ANALYSTS

Analysts are vital to any reporter's list of sources and are used both to provide perspective and insight to news reports and for stand-alone analysis pieces.

Analysts should be clearly identified, along with the organisation for whom they work and their area of expertise. Unlike anonymous sources who can provide factual, verifiable information, anonymous analysts lack credibility and must not be quoted except in certain situations where their expertise is vital to the understanding of the story (*e.g. aviation experts involved in the crash enquiry, who are legally bound to secrecy*.)

We should not use the generic "analysts said" in the lead but specify their area of expertise, e.g. "military analysts said'.

We can use one or two analysts in a news report but should aim for at least three in an analysis piece. If you are using analysts, use them to bring added value to the story and not to state the obvious. A militia leader's death "reopening a power struggle between rival factions" is preferable to it being "a blow to the organisation".

We are a global news agency and should seek out analysts who offer different points of view, and not be content with analysts who follow a particular narrative. If you are doing an analysis piece, you must speak to as broad a range of analysts as possible and then write your piece. Do not decide on the angle and then find analysts who will provide quotes that fit your narrative.

To promote diversity and reflect reality, we must speak to local experts and not just experts from international institutions who may speak in general terms. We should seek out sources with original ideas and specific expertise, rather than those who speaking in general terms or are frequently quoted in the media. It is also important to seek to speak to women experts, who are generally under- represented in the media.

10) QUOTATIONS

We must report sources accurately, without modifying what was said.

It is not our responsibility to tidy up ungrammatical quotes (with the exception of minor slips or repetitions), but neither is it our job to unfairly expose an individual to ridicule -- although it is perfectly legitimate to quote precisely a public figure who misspoke. Paraphrase if necessary. Never change the sense of the quote through editing, either in text or video. Avoid ellipses.

Without overburdening the text, give complete quotes as a rule and limit partial quotes.

When we quote more than one source in a story, we must immediately change the attribution to make it clear to readers that there is a new speaker.

For example, write: A said, "*xxxxxx*". *However, B said "yyyyy"*.

Do not write: *A said, "xxxxxx". "Yyyyy", B said*. (which could make the reader think the second quote was a continuation of speaker A's comments).

Do not use quotations without attribution, including in headlines and lead sentences. All quotes must come with attribution.

Do not use what are known as scare quotes, which are used to cast doubt on the appropriateness of a word: *An analysis showed that the "healthy" snack was full of sugar, salt and saturated fats*.

Instead write: *An analysis showed that the snack, described as "healthy" by its manufacturer, had high levels of sugar, salt and saturated fats*.

11) THE EDITING DESK AND SOURCING

If the editing desk has doubts about the quality of a source, believes that the story does not stand up, or questions the veracity of the content, then it has a responsibility to inform the chief editor who may put a hold on the story and contact the author or the bureau for further verification.

The editing desk should never harden or otherwise alter the original source -- "a senior White House official said," should not become "the White House said". The only exception is if a title is abbreviated in the intro for the sake of brevity.

At the same time, brevity should not mean diluting the source: "White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said," is stronger than "a White House spokesperson said". Remember that the first paragraph is often extracted as a stand-alone story.

12) UPLOADED AND EXTERNAL CONTENT

Social media are an integral part of the news gathering process and have created added responsibilities for journalists, who must verify their content.

It is the journalist's responsibility to ensure that all content (posts, photos, videos) obtained from social networks is from a genuine account, and in the case of images or video, that the material is authentic and verified. We must confirm that the uploader is the author and holds the rights, and that we have permission to reproduce it.

Social media are used as communication platforms by individuals, sports teams, companies, governments, etc. Once we verify that an account is authentic, the information has the same credibility as material received from trustworthy and verified sources via a website etc.

Although news agencies are still expected to break news, the first snippets of information often circulate on social networks. Our role is to verify this content before using it in our production. We must be especially vigilant about the dangers of deepfake video and voice. While we are still expected to be fast, the absolute priority is to be accurate.

As with any other source, the journalist should be aware of any potential risks to uploaders, who often will have had no prior experience of the media and may be traumatized and in potential danger.

All sources in a graphic must be clearly cited, and the origin and quality of data carefully checked. Graphics elements protected by copyright, such as corporate or other logos, must not be used. If the graphic includes controversial or contested information the source should be identified, with an explanatory note if necessary.

Likewise, when it comes to data journalism, it is the journalist's responsibility to verify that the data comes from a genuine source, that it has not been manipulated and that it is presented in an impartial and correct manner.

We can report leaked information but we must be aware of secrecy laws that vary from country to country. If in doubt, contact the chief's editor who may seek legal advice.

13) PUBLIC DOMAIN

As a general rule, all of our information should be sourced, even if it is in the public domain. If there is any risk that a client will ask "how does AFP know this?", we should source the story to an AFP journalist at the scene, at least in the first instance to show we are present. At the same time, we have to apply common sense to events in the public arena (*President X was sworn in for a second term, an AFP reporter witnessed, would be unnecessary*.)

14) RUMOURS AND SOCIAL MEDIA

We do not report rumours and should contact sources to confirm or discredit them.

Social media are awash with rumours, disinformation and hoaxes, which have to be checked out if the topic is of sufficient importance.

We must take care in confirming rumours - a dubious confirmation from a weak source (who may have heard the rumour through other channels) plus the rumour does not equal a story.

However, we can report (with the chief editor's approval) that a rumour has provoked a significant reaction, while explaining it through a source:

- Traders at HSBC said the Footsie had fallen because of rumours of the prime minister's resignation
- Civilians said they were fleeing the city because they had heard rumours that ISIS fighters were within striking distance

If a rumour has taken on sufficient proportions and we have confirmation that it is false, then we can do a story to that effect:

- A Buckingham Palace spokesman denied online rumours that the King has been hospitalized

If a journalist or bureau is checking out a rumour of any significance the chief editor should be informed as a precaution. Be cautious when following up rumours when it concerns financial markets to avoid accusations of spreading rumours, which can have legal consequences in some countries.

Also, if we see that a piece of disinformation or a rumour has gone viral and cannot be quashed by running a simple denial, we should inform the digital verification team. They can write their own fact-check and help in debunking the false piece of news.

15) PROTECTING AND RESPECTING SOURCES

Journalists have a duty to protect the identity of their confidential sources and fixers and to avoid putting them at risk. In this era of mass data gathering and surveillance, authorities and other interested parties can easily track a reporter's movements and electronic exchanges, and this should be taken into account when dealing with sources at risk.

In exceptional circumstances it may be necessary to meet a source without carrying an electronic device and revert to notepad and pen.

Confidential sources should feel confident that they can trust the AFP journalist to protect their identity.

An AFP reporter should never divulge the identity of a source to an outside party, and if requested to do so should inform the chief editor. The laws regarding the protection of journalistic sources vary from country to country, and reporters can face extreme pressure from the police and other official and unofficial entities to reveal their sources. If polite refusals are not sufficient, then say you are forbidden to do so by company policy and will contact your superiors for advice.

AFP will defend the right of the reporter to withhold the identity of the source and will seek legal assistance if necessary. However, the reporter must inform the editor-in-chief of the source's identity -- under a strict guarantee of confidentiality -- if requested.

Protection of sources also includes how we treat them, and we should exercise sensitivity when interviewing people caught up in traumatic events. Dealing with the media can be a source of additional distress for many individuals and we should take that into account.

Exercise particular caution when interviewing or photographing children and inform the chief editor if you did so without the consent of a parent or guardian. Make sure you know the legal definition of adulthood in your country and the law concerning media coverage of minors.

Social networks have become essential tools in contacting witnesses to events. However, there have been frequent cases where individuals have been inundated and harassed by information requests from media from around the world. While AFP cannot regulate the behaviour of other media, we must ensure that 1/ only one AFP journalist is designated to contact the individual (witnesses have complained of multiple requests from the same news organisation); 2/ that we show courtesy and sensitivity, and do not put the witness at potential risk (such as asking them to gather additional material).

Social networks are a way of maintaining constant online contact with sources. However, we should be aware that social network relationships can raise questions about our impartiality.

As an example, we should be cautious when accepting social media friend requests from our contacts. If you are obliged to like a Facebook page in order to follow a particular political party or candidate, then you should also like their opponents' page in order to show balance.

16) KEEPING NOTES AND RECORDINGS

We should record interviews and press conferences and keep all original recordings and copies of notes in case of dispute or litigation. If you type out notes and quotes on a screen, save them separately and do not type over them when you write your story.

Never hand over your recordings or notes to a third party, and if requested to do so inform the chief editor who will seek legal advice if necessary.

Material posted on websites or social media can be removed from one second to the next, so all source material taken from online and mobile sources should immediately be downloaded and saved or a screen shot taken and kept.

17) RELATIONSHIPS WITH SOURCES

It is accepted practice that journalists should develop good working relationships with their contacts and cultivating sources is an essential part of our work. However, this cannot be at the price of jeopardizing our impartiality, and it should remain clear that it is a professional relationship and that the contact cannot expect favourable treatment.

AFP journalists should not accept hospitality, gifts, travel, accommodation, tickets, entertainment or other benefits from their sources with the exception of items of nominal value. If it is unavoidable to do so in our pursuit of a story – an invitation to take a corporate jet to visit a remote factory – the chief editor should be consulted on how to proceed.

A reporter should never promise a source how, when and in what form the story will appear or agree to submit a story for prior approval. We may refer back to sources if we want to check on factual information they gave or to clarify a quote, but we should never submit a story to them for vetting.

We never pay sources for information and we do not acquire material by theft or other illegal means. We do not record interviews without the person's consent.

18) REPORTING DEATHS

We must take particular care when reporting deaths. We must ensure that the death has been confirmed by the family, officials with direct knowledge of the situation or an authorised individual such as a literary agent or company spokesperson. We must ensure that we know how the source has knowledge of the death, so they are not just repeating hearsay, other media reports or social media chatter.

We can pick up the death of a major public figure if it is reported by a trustworthy media with an identified source that meets AFP's standards of verification (the BBC quoting Buckingham Palace on the death of the Queen). In all other circumstances we must seek independent confirmation.

The false, or precipitous, reporting of a death can cause unnecessary grief and distress, is extremely damaging to AFP's reputation and should be prevented at all costs.

19) CONFLICT REPORTING

AFP must strive to maintain a neutral tone and wherever possible give balanced coverage of the opposing sides in a conflict, while at the same time presenting a fair picture of the situation on the ground based on our reporting.

We must take particular care to avoid any hint of bias or unfair apportioning of blame in the highly charged atmosphere of the Arab-Israeli conflict, where our coverage is under intense scrutiny on a daily basis.

Truth is said to be the first victim of war, and this must be borne in mind when dealing with statements from the military, armed groups or other combatants. Particular care should be given to claims of military successes, territorial gains and casualty tolls.

We often rely on online and social media uploads from armed groups from conflict zones where it is too dangerous to send our own journalists. No matter how genuine the material may appear, we must always add a note of caution (e.g. *'purporting to show the execution of XXX , which has not been confirmed'*). We must also ensure that local freelancers are working independently of the protagonists.

Material sourced from armed groups and the military must be clearly identified as such so it is not mistaken for original AFP production.

Correspondents embedded with the military are obliged to follow strict rules of conduct that we may not accept in normal circumstances. Embedded reporters are working in a military environment and should treat all information from commanding officers and troops accordingly and guard against partisanship. It must be stated clearly in their text, photo or video production that the material was gathered while the journalist was embedded with the military.

We should exercise extreme caution when invited to accompany armed groups, to avoid being put in physical danger or manipulated. Such missions must be approved by the chief editor.

20) BUSINESS AND FINANCIAL REPORTING

AFP journalists should not benefit financially from any financial or other information obtained from their sources in advance of its publication, nor pass that information on to others for their financial gain. If they are covering economic and financial news, they should make themselves aware of the laws and regulations concerning insider trading.

When covering markets or reporting data releases such as GDP or inflation, it is not necessary to provide a source in the headline if it is from the customary official source.

When rumours move financial markets, we can report that fact, angled on the impact of the rumour.

We should try to confirm the content of newsworthy rumours with the concerned parties, for example rumours of a takeover bid should be checked with the relevant companies.

Be careful to avoid spreading rumours, which may expose us to accusations of market manipulation. We may ask what is causing a market reaction but should not volunteer the information about the rumour.

Market sources who confirm rumours may be liable to regulatory or legal action even when journalists are not. Protect the identify of sources who require anonymity but treat their information with appropriate caution.

IN CONCLUSION

We are working in a real-time environment where vast amounts of information, both true and false, is constantly being published across multiple platforms.

These guidelines should be respected, and should be applied using professional judgement, experience, common sense, and whenever necessary, consultation with colleagues and the chief editor's department.

Agency journalism is very much a team game, and a solution is often worked out through discussion with colleagues throughout the editorial chain of command. The chief editor's department is available 24 hours a day as a sounding board or arbitrator.

If you have any questions about these rules, feel there are omissions or come across any situations that raise new questions, please contact the chief editor at:

rdc-afp@afp.com .

The objective is to make this a living document, which will be updated to take into account evolutions in our profession. Your contributions will be highly valued.