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Thou shalt not trick thy source

Many a slip twixt the promise and the page

There's a fine line between romancing a story out of your sources — and alienating them with complete candor about your intentions.

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Late at night, at the bar, reporters and editors tell each other tales about how they charm information out of their sources, flirt their way past security guards and gently lead interviewees down the garden path.

Journalists know they'd best avoid actual romantic involvement with their sources — and that the other extreme, naked skepticism, is unlikely to encourage sources to spill their guts.

But what about romancing a story? Are you honor bound to tell an interviewee the truth about the focus of your story? Or is it OK to let sources hang themselves without having a clue where you're heading?

One silver lining in the cloud of recent Supreme Court decisions is that journalists are taking a new and careful look at reporter-source relationships (see also "[Thou shalt not break thy promise](#)" regarding *Cohen V. Cowles* as well as "[The great quote question](#)" and "[Thou shalt not](#)



It's different now. Reporters need to consider their promises very carefully since they're no longer free to decide when it's alright to break them. And what counts as accurate representation of a source's words has been dissected as never before.

Yet other subtle ethical quandaries still strew the path between what reporters promise and what newsrooms print or broadcast. Attention now to the subtleties of how reporters *ought* to treat sources may forestall courts from providing further dictates of how they *must*.

For example, reporters don't want to tip their hands, but sources feel burned if they don't know from the start what the reporters have in mind. What do reporters owe their sources? In this case, other professions can't provide much guidance. Reporters *don't* owe sources the kinds of things doctors owe patients or lawyers owe clients. There, the professional is obliged to act in the best interest of the lay person involved. Reporters who did the same would commit the egregious professional sin of acting as PR agents.

There is something about the reporter-source relationship that looks a little like what happens between a judge and a defendant at a juryless trial.

Like the judge, the reporter makes decisions that have enormous impact on the source's life. Certainly the source, like the defendant, is trying to cut the best deal possible. But no matter how manipulative or malevolent a source may be, the reporter literally has the last word.

Even this analogy breaks down. Sources aren't always bad guys; a story isn't a prison sentence. And the source, unlike the defendant, is free to walk away despite the reporter's threats or enticements.

But good reporters treat their sources with respect. Olive Talley, reporter for The Dallas Morning News, tells sources what she knows prior to publication, but not necessarily early in an investigation. "Your opinion is not fully formed early on. You might not have all the facts," Talley says.

And the interview itself might answer some suspicions.

But before the story hits the streets, sources should have the opportunity to comment. "It's only fair," she adds. "I believe that we have a great responsibility to inform our sources, but timing is critical. It's not, 'Do we?' but 'When do we?'" Talley views her practice as pragmatic as well as ethical. "I operate on a level of honesty because I think that people respond better to it."

Even with the increasing amount of time reporters spend prying information from computers today, real live sources are still necessary to get the job done.

And people don't like to be fooled. They especially don't like it when reporters pretend to admire them while preparing to nail them to the wall. They don't like it when the context of quotes changes between interview and publication.



The need for reporters to be honest, straightforward and clear extends even to the sleaziest of sources. What if it were known that reporters would deceive only the bad guys? If reporters always seem friendly, still sources would never know if the reporter was being honest with them.

A story that's won through seduction is sorcery, not sourcing. No professionals (except magicians) can last long if trickery becomes known as the usual method of operation.

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