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## “They said it first”

### *Is that reason for going for the story?*

**Just because competitors publish or air a story doesn't mean you should follow their lead. Here are some factors to consider before deciding.**

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You've known for months that the candidate is gay. And each time you raised the possibility of a story, everyone agreed: the man's sex life was his business.

But now it's different. A local newscast led with a story that highlighted the candidate's activities with the local gay community. Even though the candidate “declined comment on his sexual preference,” the story is undoubtedly out.

And you're stuck between being moral and being misunderstood. You still think that the candidate should be allowed to keep his personal life private. But, you've got another factor to weigh in your news judgments: “They said it first.”

If you don't go with it, it looks as though you can't develop that information on your own, or that you're in the candidate's pocket. And, what's the sense of sticking to your scruples if the



“They said it first” can be a good reason for going with a story. But it can also be just an excuse for letting competition get in the way of responsible judgments.

When a news story is going to hurt someone, the best reason you can ever have for publishing is that the information, so damaging to an individual, is really needed by the community.

“They said it first” can never be that good of a reason. If the community really needed that fact, you wouldn’t have sat on it in the first place.

People may dismiss “they said it first” as a good reason for publishing on the assumption that added exposure leads to greater harm. That’s true in some cases, but not in all.

If your news organization has been sitting on some potentially explosive fact — the candidate’s closet homosexuality, the additional information that a kidnap victim was sexually abused — the argument against publication doesn’t disappear because it shows up on your competition.

The conventional wisdom that once a fact is “out there,” no harm can be done by repeating it, is wrong. If a fact is aired by one television station, it doesn’t follow that everyone now knows it. One assumes that if viewers are watching your 6 o’clock newscast, that they are not watching the competition. Rarely do people who are not news staffers watch competing newscasts at one time. The person watching your news will not know the fact that you choose not to share.

And, while a few people may call their friends with the information, the explosive fact becomes common knowledge through news media repeating the story, not via telephone lines.

Even widespread publication in one place doesn’t change the harm that can come about by publishing it elsewhere. A gay hero’s sexual orientation may not be a problem if reported in the California community in which he lives. The same fact published in Detroit, where his parents live, might destroy his life.

Unless the information is directly relevant to the community welfare, “they said it first” isn’t justification to publish damaging information that an individual wants to keep private. Every additional publication causes additional harm.

But sometimes refraining from publishing material results in more harm than not. Harm to the news organization. Take embargoed material, for example. If everyone agrees to hold a story until midnight and the p.m. runs the story the evening before, the point of the embargo — keeping anyone from knowing the information before a particular time — has been lost. This is different from the private fact situation. Here, whatever harm comes about through early release happens with the first exposure.

There’s no good reason for a news organization, on principle, to hold to a now meaningless embargo. The fact that someone else broke the story is a good reason for going with the information.



The same qualified promise should be made to sources who ask for “off the record” consideration or anonymity from a group of reporters. If the reason for requesting anonymity is that no one links the bit of information with the source, then the link is made with the first exposure.

Here are some questions [1] to ask when feeling swayed toward action by “they said it first”:

- **If you refrain from publishing, will that hurt your news organization?**

In the case of embargoed information, it could.

- **Will your publishing cause more harm than has been caused through first exposure?**

Think of the difference between private facts and a news embargo.

- **Will your publishing encourage others to do things that are equally harmful or worse?**

A competition to see who can get out the most daring information first will result in the truth being trampled in the rush with an ultimate loss of credibility for all news media involved.

- **Is there a chance that others might follow your exemplary lead if you refrain from publishing?**

When an explosive fact first hits the street, the discussion in the newsroom often turns to who has decided to run with it so far and who hasn't.

If it's not going to hurt to sit on the material a little longer, the newsroom that shows restraint may stand out as the moral hero in the community.

If you ask these questions before following the competition's lead, you'll have the basis for a good explanation if someone should ask you why you went with the information. Remember, even your own mother wouldn't accept “everyone else did it” as a blanket excuse.

[1] Based on the work of business ethics consultant Ronald M. Green.

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