Let’s make a deal!

The dangers of trading with sources

Journalists cringe at the suggestion of “buying” information but often these same journalists will “trade” with sources to get a story. Is there really a difference?

By Deni Elliott

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Most reporters insist that there is a difference between checkbook journalism and trading information. Paying is wrong, they say, but trading is an acceptable tool for prying loose needed information.

Former New York Times reporter David Burnham, who wrote major stories on corruption in the New York City Police Department, says that there’s an “enormous symbolic difference” between paying for a story and giving a source something else. “When Serpico comes to me because The New York Times will give him protection, that looks different from money,” he said.

Burnham recently made a trade in the course of his current investigation of the IRS. A source thought that Congress should take its own look at corruption in the agency, but couldn’t seem
“There wasn’t any explicit understanding that we were trading information,” he said, “but I certainly hope that they won’t treat me as an outsider.”

Most trades are less subtle, with the reporter offering a piece of information that is helpful to the source in the hope of getting needed information in return.

Olive Talley, a reporter for The Dallas Morning News, who trades, but says that she would never buy, questions the motives of someone who asks to be paid for information. “If she has a story, why doesn’t she just tell it?” Talley asks.

The same question could be asked of a source who holds back to see if the reporter has anything to trade in return for information. Sources’ motives are often less than pure. But that doesn’t explain why it is okay for the reporter to provide goods (information) or services (protection) in exchange for information, but not cash.

The real difference is that trading is a technique that stays within reporters’ control. They decide under what conditions to withdraw promises of confidentiality or other protection. And, savvy reporters give only a little information at a time when trading, working to get what they need at the least cost. If reporters were to negotiate a cash price for information, they would lose control as soon as money changed hands.

“The key to swapping is always to give less than you get,” said Talley, “A good swapper makes the other person think that they are getting something really great, but, it should be something that they could get on their own.”

Reporters who trade argue that it is necessary. Others, like Philadelphia Inquirer City Editor Bill Marimow, say that reporters compromise their integrity and credibility through the trade.

Marimow has an “intuitive repulsion” when he senses that a source wants something in return for information. Trading, he says, isn’t necessary. “If you really marshal the components of good reporting, figure out how to get public documents and use a whole array of sources, you will be able to independently ferret things out and not have a potentially unhealthy symbiotic relationship with a source.”

Marimow, who has won numerous awards for his investigative reporting, including the Pulitzer, said that he will, however, help “expedite people’s way to public records,” if asked, but only if he is willing to do it for all interested parties. That is, he won’t tell the FBI how he put together incriminating documents unless he is also willing to tell the defense attorney. It’s important that the reporter remain neutral, he said.

When reporters choose to trade, they set up a more powerful position for themselves than usually exists in reporter-source relationships. As with any power, it can be abused. Or, the lure of an important piece of information may entice reporters to ignore the degree of their manipulation. A few guidelines can help reporters avoid some of the more obvious dangers:
The journalistic purpose for trading information is to develop a story for public consumption. Reporters should avoid trades that bring about arrests, investigations or that otherwise make a difference in the world that wouldn’t be brought about through the published story.

Burnham’s current trade has made him into an actor rather than an observer. Trades like this can lead sources or readers to question the reporter’s neutrality.

2) **Don’t trade secrets.**

Trade only that information that can be found or put together through public sources. Secrets can be used to manipulate people or can be turned into published material by users of the information who are less scrupulous than the reporter.

3) **Don’t misrepresent the trade.**

Sources should know that they are being given a shortcut, not a secret.

4) **Don’t let the exchange turn into extortion.**

Secrets should be told or kept, but not used as bargaining tools.

The need for an important piece of information, or the need to continue a good relationship with a source, may make it occasionally worthwhile for reporters to offer protection or information. But trading secrets or trading styles that turn the reporter into a blackmailer are as harmful to the practice of journalism as cash payments.