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ANONYMOUS SOURCES GIVE JOURNALISM A BAD NAME

By

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The term, "idiot" is from the Greek word for "non-political person". Certainly there is nothing wrong with me having political convictions. It is unavoidable. Only an idiot is without political convictions - in rare cases, maybe a holy idiot, but an idiot all the same. I am sure you don't want to read criticism written by an idiot. I am NOT an idiot.

Last year, I found myself supporting Namibia's ruling SWAPO Party congress resolution on the creation of a media council. That support is based on, among other things that the media fraternity has failed to regulate itself. That failure has encouraged very bad journalism in some quarters. As best I know, almost every profession is regulated in one way or another. Doctors, Taxi drivers, Public relations practitioners, Engineers of all sorts, etc, all are regulated. Why then is it that an important institution such as the media cannot be regulated? I ask the question. Over the years, I have come to detest the use of anonymous sources — people who give reporters information only on condition that their identities not be divulged. Anonymous sources create bad journalism in that it leaves room for journalists to make up stories that fit their agenda in variance of the truth. I am quite sure that some journalists suck up sources where none exist, for I am not an idiot.

I know that anonymous sources manipulate the media. Most anonymous sources, where they exist, often tell more than they know. Reporters who are allowed to use such sources sometimes write more than they hear. The result is that fiction gets to mix with fact. A good reporter must check everything that the sources say and if there is some inconsistency or some lie in it, they must go back to the sources. That, in a sense, will increase a reporter's burden to make sure the sources are right. Readers must feel confident that information has been collected with care and presented with accuracy and fairness. The media must

publish stories that give readers as much information about sources as they need to draw reasoned conclusions about credibility and possible bias.

Unfortunately, there is a growing perception that the use of anonymous sources has run amok. When a source asks for anonymity as a condition of giving information, the reporter and the institution for which they work, must agree with them precisely the way they are to be described. However, with an anonymous source, especially a source making serious allegations, the media must give the audience as much information about the source as is compatible with protecting their identity in a way that does not mislead the audience about their status.

I had previously accepted the use of unnamed sources to the most compelling cases where an important story can be told no other way and when a source is reliable and in a position to have accurate information and that information can be corroborated by at least one additional source. I am no longer sure whether I still support this practice because it has, regrettably, been used by the media themselves to “swift-boating” other people.

It is incumbent upon Namibian editors to evaluate their policies on the use of anonymous sources in the interest of transparency and fairness. The only way to win the war against this evil is for journalists at all levels to ban all anonymous sources. Until or unless the media do, the public won't trust them to hold society in check without putting freedom of speech in jeopardy.

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