

CASE 2-D

CAN I QUOTE ME ON THAT?

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During an Aug. 19, 2012, interview with St. Louis television station KTVI-TV, Missouri senate candidate Todd Akin said women cannot get pregnant from “legitimate rape” because their bodies have ways to block unwanted pregnancies. Republican presidential contender Mitt Romney quickly condemned the comments, calling them “insulting, inexcusable, and frankly, wrong” and saying that he found the comments “offensive” and “entirely without merit,” according to an article in the *National Review*.

But did Romney actually say those words?

There is question because government and campaign officials regularly grant interviews to journalists only under the condition of quote approval, according to *New York Times* reporter Jeremy Peters. Quote approval, *Time* media critic James Poniewozik wrote, is when a journalist agrees to send his or her source quotes to be “redacted, stripped of colorful metaphors, colloquial language and anything even mildly provocative.”

Peters wrote that Romney and his campaign advisers almost always require quote approval from any conversation, and that journalists quoting any of Romney’s five sons use only quotations approved by his press office. Quote approval also is the accepted norm for President Barack Obama, his top strategists, and almost all of his midlevel aids in Chicago and Washington.

Several major news organizations—including the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Reuters*, *Bloomberg*, *Vanity Fair*, and *National Journal*—have accepted the practice of quote approval in political stories, according to Peters. (There also is a long-standing, problematic tradition of quote approval for celebrity news and certain types of sports stories.) One reason for the acquiescence by reporters, Poniewozik wrote, is that a reporter who does not accept the condition could be scooped by another reporter who did. A second reason is that reporters often are desperate to pick the brains of a politician or his top strategists. Finally, each of the reporters Peters interviewed said that the meanings of quotes were not altered, and that changes were always small and seemingly unnecessary.

Many journalists perform accuracy checks with sources, ensuring that the quotes and information gained from a source are correct. Some publications require accuracy checks. However, quote approval is quite different from an accuracy check.

The quote approval requirement really is a struggle between reporters and politicians for power and control. News is a construction of reality (Gulati, Just, and Crigler 2004) dependent on the relationship of a news organization with other institutions, interests, or groups in a society (Baldasty 1992; Shoemaker and Reese 1996). News about political campaigns is an ongoing negotiation—or power struggle—between journalists, editors, and owners on one side, and candidates, campaign staffers, and party activists on the other (Gulati et al. 2004). The media need a steady, reliable flow of the raw material of news (Herman Chomsky 2002). Journalists become reliant on their sources because of this constant need for new information, and this reliance allows sources to dictate terms of coverage.

Politicians and their campaign staffs also could be asserting control, calling off the hounds of an attack-dog press. Sabato (2000) suggests that attack journalism during presidential campaigns causes candidates to become increasingly secretive because of their fear of reporters. The result is that politicians limit press access except under highly controlled situations (Sabato 2000). The ultimate highly controlled situation is for a politician to grant interviews only when he or she knows any quote can be deleted or changed.

Micro Issues

1. Citizens need information about candidates' and politicians' views on issues. However, what should journalists be willing to give up in order to obtain that information?
2. How reliable is information obtained after a politician or his or her advisers have massaged or altered quotes?
3. Are there certain sorts of stories, for example, stories about science or finance, where this practice might be more acceptable? Why or why not?

Midrange Issues

1. Quote approval is for newspaper journalists. Should there be such a thing as video approval? What would be the morally relevant distinctions?

2. Should reporters disclose to their readers when they have submitted a story for quote approval?
3. How is quote approval related to truth?

Macro Issues

1. Media based on social responsibility is premised on the idea that freedom of expression is a positive freedom (Nerone 1995). The moral right of freedom of expression is not unconditional (The Commission on Freedom of the Press 1947) but a right granted to do moral good (Nerone 1995). By agreeing to “quote approval,” are reporters opening the debate as to whether they are serving the best interests of the public or serving the interests of politicians?
2. How does the notion of citizen journalism influence the concept of quote approval? Of candidates’ willingness to speak “off the cuff” with citizens?

CASE 2-E

NPR, THE NEW YORK TIMES, AND WORKING CONDITIONS IN CHINA

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On Jan. 6, 2012, Ira Glass, host of American Public Media’s “This American Life,” devoted a 39-minute segment to a report on working conditions at manufacturing plants in China.

The show was based extensively on a single source, Mike Daisey, who recounted what he had seen and what he had been told through an interpreter on a visit to a Foxconn factory in China, a plant that makes parts for the popular iPhone and iPad. Daisey recounted stories about working conditions and stated some workers in the plant had been poisoned during the manufacturing process.

Less than a month later, the *New York Times* ran a series of investigative stories on working conditions at Chinese plants making Apple products.

“Mr. Daisey and the Apple Factory” quickly became the most popular “This American Life” podcast, with about 880,000 downloads. Daisey, a performance artist, became something of a celebrity and Apple critic,