



## 3 FACT SHEET JOURNALISTIC SOURCES

### OBJECTIVES OF THE CURRICULUM

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#### DISCIPLINE AND LEVEL CONCERNED

##### English (Secondary – Cycle 2)

##### Reading and assessing various texts

- Making a critical judgment: taking a critical distance from the text by relying on cultural and media references (recognition of a source by the scientific or journalistic community, editorial line of a medium, etc.) that confirm the credibility or acceptability of a source or information.

#### TARGETED DIMENSIONS OF THE DIGITAL COMPETENCY

- Develop and engage information literacy;
- Exploit the potential of digital technology for learning;
- Develop critical thinking regarding digital information.

#### SUGGESTED DIGITAL TOOLS

- Screen capture and annotation tool;
- Canva;
- Quiz.

#### EDUCATIONAL INTENTION OF THE GUIDE

By the end of these activities, the learners will be able to recognize credible journalistic sources.

### OBJECTIVES OF THE ACTIVITIES

- Identify the primary and secondary sources in an article;
- Recognize reliable journalistic sources;
- Know the traps to avoid when dealing with misleading information.

## INTRODUCTION

Journalistic sources are at the origin of important news that changes the world and makes things move. Who doesn't remember a powerful statement found on the Web or in the pages of a newspaper? Who has never been deeply moved by a poignant, touching or anger-provoking personal account?

The reliability of news and the quality of journalism depend directly on the sources. Knowing how to assess their credibility determines the credibility of an article.

## WHAT IS A SOURCE?

A journalistic source is a person who relays information. Sources may contact journalists to inform them of what they know, or journalists may call sources to gather testimony, draw on their expertise, etc.

### Examples

- A biologist realizes there is a major deficiency in the environmental standards of a Winnipeg plant, but her bosses don't listen to her. She contacts a journalist to share her data.
- After a terrorist attack in Washington, a journalist contacts people present on the scene to gather their testimony.

## TYPES OF SOURCES

Several types of sources can be found in the same article. Whether they are specialists, witnesses or victims of a crime, or politicians, they can be grouped in two main categories: primary and secondary.

### Primary sources

Primary sources are directly related to the subject covered. They may give a personal first-hand account of the subject covered by the journalist.

### Examples:

- Victim;
- Direct witness;
- Expert;
- Participant;
- Journalist in the field, special correspondent, correspondent.

### Secondary sources

Secondary sources have gone through one or more intermediaries to obtain information. They are indirect sources but may turn out to be useful if there is no other way to obtain a direct account.

### Examples:

- Victim's family;
- A participant's representative or spokesperson;
- Indirect witness (person who did not see the scene but reports on what he was told);
- Source questioned by another journalist.

## RECOGNIZING RELIABLE JOURNALISTIC SOURCES

A news item without sources has much less credibility than a news item supported by quotations. The creators of fake news know this, which is why they often use false sources or even non-credible sources to give themselves a more serious look.

Here are some questions to ask to avoid falling into the trap of misleading articles.

## 1 - Who is the source?

A reliable source will be identified clearly. The source's name and status are essential information, which is normally provided by journalists.

When reading an article, this information will allow you to do your own research and confirm the identity of the person quoted.

### Examples:

- According to John Walton, who works as an immunologist at Toronto General Hospital, nobody is protected from indirect contamination. He recommends that worried Torontonians wash their hands regularly.
  - Source: John Walton, Doctor at Toronto General Hospital
- "I couldn't see the attacker's face," says Louise Spencer one of the five women attacked yesterday in a Winnipeg municipal park. He had a male voice and white skin." Also questioned by *The Winnipeg Sun*, the other four victims gave a similar picture of the criminal.
  - Source: Louise Spencer, woman, victim

## 2 - Is the source relevant?

After identifying the source, it is important to understand its relevance to the information given and the subject of the article. Why was the source questioned? Does this person provide expertise that enriches the article? Did the source experience a notorious event? Does the author clearly explain the source's role?

- According to Dr. John Walton, who works as an immunologist at Toronto General Hospital, nobody is protected from indirect contamination. He recommends that worried Torontonians wash their hands regularly.
  - Subject of the article: virus and risks of spreading;
  - Information provided by the source: "nobody is protected from indirect contamination" and people must "wash their hands regularly";
  - Relevance of the source: healthcare professional, specialist in immunology.
- "I couldn't see the attacker's face," says Louise Spencer, one of the five women attacked yesterday in a Winnipeg municipal park. He had a male voice and white skin." Also questioned by *The Winnipeg Sun*, the other four victims gave a similar picture of the criminal.
  - Subject of the article: attack on five women in a Sherbrooke park;
  - Information provided by the source: the attacker remains unknown but is a white man;
  - Relevance of the source: she experienced the event addressed in the article; she is one of the victims.

## 3 - Did the author take steps to confirm that what the source says is true? Do other people say the same thing?

Of course, every potential primary source doesn't necessarily tell the truth. Some people may have good intentions, while giving an inaccurate picture of a situation. The journalist's role is therefore to ensure that the people he interviews are telling the truth.

Journalists therefore must cross-check the information provided by their sources. They must therefore validate the information with other sources, corroborate testimony, verify if a participant was actually present at an event, consult other articles, note the contradictions, etc.

Secondary sources are practical to validate this kind of information.

If the source is an expert, the journalist does not necessarily need to speak to several specialists to validate this person's comments. However, the journalist must ensure, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that the source indeed has the necessary expertise to be quoted in the article.

#### Examples:

- According to Dr. John Walton, who works as an immunologist at Toronto General Hospital, nobody is protected from indirect contamination. He recommends that worried Torontonians wash their hands regularly.  
→ Verification approach: the doctor's expertise is sufficient.
- "I couldn't see the attacker's face," says Louise Spencer, one of the five women attacked yesterday in a Winnipeg municipal park. He had a male voice and white skin." Also questioned by *The Winnipeg Sun*, the other four victims gave a similar picture of the criminal.  
→ Verification approach: the other victims' accounts.

## PROTECTION OF JOURNALISTIC SOURCES

In a minority of cases, people can put themselves in danger when they speak to journalists. If testimony has the potential to jeopardize their physical safety, their employment or their reputation, the journalist must guarantee them anonymity.

If sources are anonymous, their role and relevance nonetheless must be well explained. However, the author will have taken the necessary steps to ensure the source's safety. Ideally, the journalist will explain why the source prefers to keep quiet about his or her identity. Very often, the journalist will have shared the source's identity with the editor in chief to obtain authorization to use an anonymous source.

#### Examples

- Whistleblowers (people who disclose information in the public interest that their employer was trying to conceal);
- Politicians;
- People close to politicians (collaborators, colleagues, employees, etc.);
- Law enforcement;
- Victims of conjugal violence;
- Sex workers.

## Journalistic Sources Protection Act

The Québec and Canadian laws on protection of journalistic sources allow a journalist to object before a court to the disclosure of information that could identify a source.

## TRAPS TO AVOID

People who create misleading, false and dishonest information often follow the same guidelines. Here are some traps to recognize and avoid.

- Articles and reporting without sources;
- Unattributed quotes;
- Anonymous source without justification;
- Generalities (e.g. doctor say that...);
- Fake quotes;
- Excessive use of paraphrases (absence of direct quotes).

# EXERCISES

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## EXERCISE 1

**Identify the sources and their relevance to the subjects addressed in the following fictitious excerpts. Can you rely on them? Why?**

- 1.1** Children under seven years old will have to radically reduce their exposure to screens, warns the Director of the Pediatric Clinic of the University of British Columbia, Kathy Smith.
- 1.2** If you drink hot water and lemon every morning within ten minutes after you wake up, you reduce the risks of breast cancer by 85%, a former American doctor has revealed.
- 1.3** *Regina Today* was able to confirm with a person close to the President that the First Lady is being targeted by at least four complaints by her staff. Our source, who wishes to remain confidential to avoid the risk of losing his job, works in the Presidential family's immediate entourage.

**Suggested activity:** Using a visual design tool, such as Canva, ask the students to develop an infographic that combines tips and advice for recognizing a reliable journalistic source seen above.

**Suggested activity:** Invite the learners to visit [doubtit.ca](http://doubtit.ca) and go to the "Test Yourself" section. They can then take a 10-question quiz, to practice avoiding the traps named above. Each quiz question is a publication or a website that is either credible or not, which will guide the learners in choosing whether to doubt it or trust it. The learners then will have access to explanations of the strategies to adopt to check the source and the traps to avoid when faced with suspicious information.

## EXERCISE 2

**Read the following scenarios. If you were a journalist, which people would you want to talk to? Which sources would be the most relevant? Name at least two per scenario.**

- 2.1** A demonstration against an oil pipeline degenerates in downtown Montréal. Windows are broken and some demonstrators are injured. About forty individuals are arrested.
- 2.2** A gas leak forces the evacuation of a Whitehorse elementary school.
- 2.3** A new virus causes a general panic in Canada. Your boss asks you to report on the situation.

**Suggested activity:** Propose that the students choose an article from a credible medium (*The Globe and Mail*, CBC, Agence Science-Press, etc.) and identify the primary and secondary sources. It is possible to do a screen capture easily from a computer and then write in the document that will be saved automatically in image format. If you have an iPad or an iPhone, the Safari annotation function is useful for writing directly in the article, which will be saved in PDF when you have completed the exercise. The learners can therefore highlight, underline and annotate the article in question to identify the different sources. The teacher may post some of them on the interactive board and analyze them in a class group.

# ANSWER KEY

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## 1.1

Source: Kathy Smith - Relevance: expert (pediatrician) - Trust this source? Yes

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## 1.2

Source: a former American doctor - Relevance: alleged expert (impossible to verify) - Trust this source? No. The doctor isn't named and this practice (water and lemon) is not recognized by specialists.

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## 1.3

Source: a person close to the President - Relevance: works with the Presidential family - Trust this source? Yes. Good reason to remain confidential.

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## 2.1

Demonstration organizers, police department, demonstrators, witnesses, owners of vandalized businesses, etc.

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## 2.2

School administration, parents of pupils affected, police officers, firefighters, school board, evacuated teachers, etc.

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## 2.3

Healthcare professionals, government, authorities, victims, etc.

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