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RYAN M. KELLY / THE DAILY PROGRESS / AP

# Reporters are not your friends

*Journalists aren't looking out for their sources; they're looking for a story*

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by **Malcolm Harris** (/profiles/h/malcolm-harris.html) - @BigMeanInternet (<http://www.twitter.com/BigMeanInternet>)

When talking to reporters, ordinary people are at a disadvantage. Journalists learn how to deal with citizens, but most citizens haven't learned how to deal with reporters. What has prevented this from being a huge problem until recent times is that journalists traditionally haven't reported on private people except under the extraordinary circumstance of their becoming newsworthy. But as social media collapses the public-private binary and all aspects of our lives become more accessible, it's no longer clear who qualifies as private. Is someone with a public profile still a private person? In this rapidly changing environment, in which anyone can accidentally stumble into the newspaper, it's important for everyone to know how to talk to reporters.

In that spirit, here are some tips:

**You do not have to talk to reporters.** When journalists approach you as a source, it's because you have something they want. Usually it's one or two punchy quotes, but sometimes they want more — a narrative, special insight or new information. Whatever it is they want, you are under no obligation to give it to them, and a simple cost-benefit assessment should make most people think twice about talking. Giving answers to a writer always includes some risk, and if a journalist can find you on Twitter, odds are angry commenters can too. If you have a long conversation with a reporter, it's hard to know how they'll translate your emphasis and what they'll choose to have you saying to readers.

The usual best-case scenario for a source is you get to see your name in print. The worst-case happened to Jackie, the source for Rolling Stone's controversial story "A Rape on Campus (<http://www.rollingstone.com/culture/features/a-rape-on-campus-20141119>)," about her alleged sexual assault at a University of Virginia fraternity. As critics have attempted to cast doubt (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/u-va-fraternity-to-rebut-claims-of-gang-rape-in-rolling-stone/2014/12/05>)

/5fa5f7d2-7c91-11e4-84d4-7c896b90abdc\_story.html) on details of her account, the magazine — the party responsible for the full and accurate reporting of the story she told them — left her out to dry (<http://www.rollingstone.com/culture/news/a-note-to-our-readers-20141205>). “In the face of new information, there now appear to be discrepancies in Jackie’s account, and we have come to the conclusion that our trust in her was misplaced,” wrote Rolling Stone managing editor Will Dana in an apologetic note to readers. No doubt Jackie would come to the same conclusion about the magazine.

On television, saying “No comment” can make a person look guilty, but the reality is most reporters won’t waste time or space on you if you don’t comment and you’re not crucial to the story. Unless you have something in particular to gain by talking to a reporter, the best approach is simply not to. Think of it like turning away a telemarketer or fundraiser: They’re just doing their job, but it’s not your job.

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## 🗨️ Even though it’s a reporter’s job to make you feel as though you’re under oath when you’re talking to them, you’re not. 🗨️

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**If you talk to a reporter, make sure you use the right code words.** When Uber executive Emil Michael started chatting over dinner to BuzzFeed Editor-in-Chief Ben Smith, Michael knew he was talking to someone who happened to be a journalist, but he didn’t realize that journalist was working during their dinner, that he was talking on the record to a reporter. The only way to know for sure the status of your conversation with a reporter is to ask explicitly at the beginning — a lesson Michael learned the hard way. Assume reporters are always on, even if you’re talking informally. The best way to protect yourself from being unexpectedly quoted is to begin every conversation with journalists by saying “Off the record.” This may sound silly when you’re talking to reporters who are friends or acquaintances, but you’re really doing them a favor. If you accidentally say something newsworthy, you don’t want to put your reporter buddy in the awkward position of having to decide whether to betray your implied confidence. Better to make the separation clear. It’s true that these conditions make it hard to relate to reporters as people, but that’s a price that they have chosen to pay.

As with many questions of journalistic ethics, there are no legal standards for on and off the record, but most publications recognize four kinds of conversations with sources: on the record, off the record, background and deep background. Nothing from off-the-record conversations may be used, and the reverse goes for on the record. In a background interview, the information may be printed under conditions set by the source, the most common of which is his or her anonymity. In deep-background conversations, the reporter may use the information, but it’s not to be attributed to anyone, not even an anonymous source. Most journalists are trained in and respect these categories, but you can’t take that for granted. Make sure you’re working with the same ground rules, and if they’re taking written or audio notes, check that your comments are marked properly. And no matter how you say it, if you tell a reporter something, assume he or she will try to get it corroborated on the record by someone else.

**Talk like an athlete.** One group of people who are contractually obligated to talk to reporters all the time is professional athletes, but they all seem to give the same rote answers about team, effort and God, regardless of context. A lot of people think this is a dumb-jock symptom (David Foster Wallace even argued it’s a condition of athletic excellence), but athletes talk like that because they have media training. Learn from them. In the vast majority of cases, reporters are talking to you in order to fill two quote slots. Before you answer a journalist’s call, decide what your two quotes are going to be, and then repeat them over and over despite their agonized groans and awkward silence. If you want to thank God, praise him 15 different ways and trust the reporter to pick out the best one. If you want the reporter to write about Saddam Hussein’s weapons of mass destruction, talk only about his weapons of mass destruction. Unless you have the charm and wit of Richard Sherman (<http://deadspin.com/richard-sherman-mocks-nfl-with-brilliant-press-conferen-1663377486>) or Chris Rock (<http://grantland.com/features/chris-rock-interview-qanda-about-celebrity-comedy-cosby-and-the-art-of-casting/>), there’s no reason to go off the cuff. You don’t get any bonus points for spontaneity; when quotes get printed, they all look the same. Work from the assumption that only the two least convenient things you say will be published.

**It’s OK to tell a truth rather than the truth.** I know your kindergarten teacher probably told you it was never good to lie, but adults learn there are situations in which it’s appropriate, necessary or even professionally required. Reporters get lied to all the time, and even though it’s their job to make you feel like you’re under oath when you’re talking to them, you’re not. It’s on them to distinguish truth from falsehood. And when you go on the record, someone is probably going to call you a liar, no matter what. The intensity of the scrutiny you get as a source depends less on whether you tell the truth than on who you are and what your role is in the story. Government sources routinely mislead reporters without facing individual consequences, and women like Jackie get harassed for telling their story, regardless of their credibility. Even if you don’t want to lie, you shouldn’t feel compelled to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Reporters are not civic priests; they’re storytellers, and they obfuscate just like everyone else. Your engagement with them is wholly optional, so say what works for you. That’s what the pros do, after all.

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