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Study Finds Big Drop in Anonymous Sourcing

“Off The Record” Quotes Down by 1/3 Since Reagan Years

WASHINGTON, DC—The use of anonymous sources in the media shrank by 33 percent between Ronald Reagan’s first year in office and George W. Bush’s first year, according to a study conducted by the **Center for Media and Public Affairs (CMPA)**. The study also found that the national press uses the highest proportion of unnamed sources and the network nightly news uses the lowest.

According to **CMPA** President Dr. S. Robert Lichter, “Newsweek's controversial Koran story was the exception. Over the long term, journalists are making the news more transparent and sources more accountable.”

For this report **CMPA** compared coverage of the Reagan administration’s first year in office (1981) with that of George W. Bush (2001) on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening newscasts, and in front page stories in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* (the “national press”), and in four local newspapers—the *Austin American-Statesman*, *Des Moines Register*, *San Jose Mercury News* and *St. Petersburg Times*. These data come from **CMPA’s** ongoing study of “Government In the News,” conducted jointly with the **Council for Excellence in Government**, and funded by the **Pew Foundation**. A total of **22,923 stories and 77,488 sources were examined in the study**.

Major Findings:

- Overall, the use of anonymous sources declined by 33 percent, from nearly 1 out of 4 sources (24 percent) cited during Reagan’s first year in office to 1 out of 6 (16 percent) in Bush’s first year.
- The *Washington Post* and *New York Times* cited unnamed sources nearly 1/3 of the time (30 percent) in covering the administration in 1981 but only 1/5 of the time (20 percent) in 2001. The decline was sharper at the Post -- 37 percent, compared to the New York Times’ 28 percent drop.
- The use of anonymous sources in the local papers fell even more sharply - a 42 percent drop, from 1 in 4 sources (24 percent) in 1981 to 1 in 7 (14 percent) in 2001.
- The broadcast networks had the lowest proportion of unnamed sources during both administrations but still cut back on their usage of unnamed sources, from 16 percent in 1981 to 14 percent in 2001.