



Monthly newsletter: December 2019

Message from Keith

Should journalists rely on anonymous sources?

There has been much recent talk among media analysts, critics and journalism educators about reporters overusing anonymous sources. This is often cited as one of the many factors leading to a decline in public trust of the news media.

Some critics say the persistent use of anonymous sources allows journalists to push their own opinions in the guise of unnamed “experts”. Other complain that anonymous sources might have their own motivations, and are using reporters to further hidden agendas. Many even question whether anonymous sources exist at all.

But anonymous sources are also the lifeblood of journalism. We rely on leakers, whistleblowers, informants and tipsters to alert us to stories of corruption, malfeasance, human rights abuses and illegal behaviour that journalists—and the public—might otherwise never know about.

Two huge recent examples come immediately to mind. The [impeachment probe of U.S. President Donald Trump](#) for trying to strong-arm the Ukrainian president into helping Trump’s re-election campaign was sparked by an anonymous whistleblower. His identity is still Washington’s best kept secret, and it reminds us that some of the biggest U.S. government scandals, from Watergate to National Security Agency surveillance, came from insiders who were initially anonymous.

And more recently, *The New York Times* was the recipient of more than [400 pages of leaked, top secret Chinese government documents](#) that revealed how Communist Party ruler Xi Jinping laid the groundwork for the brutal crackdown in Xinjiang province, including the detention of a million Muslim Uighurs in de facto concentration camps. It was the biggest leak of Chinese secret documents in decades, and suggests fissures at the top level of the Communist Party leadership.

Clearly anonymous sources play a vital role in helping journalists expose the truth.

What we try to teach students at JMSC is that full names and identities should be used in stories whenever possible. But we recognise that is not always possible. Sources have many reasons for wanting their identity kept secret—most often fear of reprisal, particularly in an authoritarian country like China.

We tell students to ask themselves a series of questions before agreeing to give anonymity to a source, or before deciding to use anonymously sourced information. Does the source have a legitimate reason for remaining secret? Is this source giving vital, first-hand information on a topic of public interest? Can the information be obtained by any other means? Can the source offer any documentation or proof of their claims?

Another key is for young journalists to treat anonymous sources or their tips as a roadmap

for more investigation. Rather than dismissing an anonymous tip as unreliable—whether it comes in an unsigned letter, an email or a whispered phone call—reporters should do something now considered old-fashioned in this age of opinion journalism; put on some comfortable walking shoes, go out and do some real reporting and try to verify it.

That was a lesson I learned in 1985 as a young journalist fresh out of graduate school and newly assigned to the national desk of *The Washington Post*. I got a small scoop that the new chairwoman of a federal regulatory agency dealing with royalties and copyrights had a secret in her not-too-distant past; she had cowritten a book which said African-Americans “insist on preserving their jungle freedoms, their women, their avoidance of personal responsibility and their abhorrence of the work ethic”. [The book contained other overtly racist notions.](#)

The story sparked a mini-Washington scandal, and [led the official, Marianne Mele Hall, to resign from the position.](#) I worked hard to nail down the scoop, finding a copy of the obscure book at the Library of Congress, reading through it, and confirming that Hall was indeed the co-author. I received congratulatory backslaps and kudos from the Post’s top editors for the scoop.

And the tip had first come to me through an anonymous letter. I never knew the writer’s identity.

Keith Richburg
Director of the JMSC

Highlights



We had a small but very proud and happy JMSC contingent at the Faculty of Social Sciences reception on 4 December. Held at the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre, the event celebrated the achievements of our 2019 graduates and faculty accomplishments in the past year. Congratulations Class of 2019!



The [Bachelor of Journalism](#) admissions team gave an interactive webinar on 27 November to talk about what makes our programme so unique. Programme director [Jeff Timmermans](#) and deputy director [AJ Libunao](#) also answered questions in a live chat room from prospective students. Click [here](#) for the video.



We held an info session in our studio on 4 December for prospective applicants to our [Master of Journalism](#) programme. [Matt Walsh](#), programme director, covered the course structure, classes and entry requirements. MJ hopefuls were also given a tour of our facilities and took part in a mock newscast.



The [Hong Kong Documentary Initiative](#) has been revamping its [YouTube channel](#) to include re-edits of event videos, including "Master Class with Documentarians" and "Dialogue with Filmmakers", and add Chinese subtitles to make content accessible to non-English speakers. Videos are categorized into playlists as online documentary filmmaking courses and are a great way for students to prep for Uli Gaulke and Ruby Yang's course next semester.

Student & Alumni News

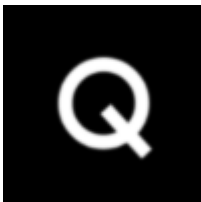


We marked the end of the first semester with some holiday cheer last Friday, 29 November. First up was a "Low Table Lunch" with our undergrads in the student lounge at Eliot Hall. We feasted on pizzas and pasta courtesy of programme director Jeff Timmermans.



Later in the evening, it was drinks at High Street Grill with our Master of Journalism students. Several alumni also came along for some much needed catching up. Congratulations to everyone on surviving the semester and see you all in the new year!

JMSC in the news



(11 November) Quartz: [The Hong Kong protests are the most live-streamed protests ever](#)



(12 November) The Strategist: [Too important or too irrelevant? Why Beijing hesitates to intervene in Hong Kong](#), by Keith B. Richburg



(12 November) Bloomberg: [How fake news and rumors are stoking division in Hong Kong](#)



(15 November) Washington Post: [China thinks it can defeat Hong Kong's protesters. It can't.](#), by Keith B. Richburg



(20 November) Agence France-Presse: [Fake news amplifies fear and confusion in Hong Kong](#)



(29 November) Nikkei Asian Review: [Hong Kong demonstrators look to Korea for inspiration](#), by Eduardo Baptista (MJ 2020)



(2 December) The Strategist: [Beijing needs to change tack in wake of Hong Kong elections](#), by Keith B. Richburg

Coming up



We will be running the first of two live admissions webinars for the [Master of Journalism](#) programme on 17 December. Programme director Matt Walsh and our admissions team will be answering questions in a live chat format from prospective students about the application process, student life and career progression, including our extensive [internship programme](#) and what some of our alumni are doing today. More info [here](#).

