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The Handling of Leaked Information

To edit a journal that wishes to maintain the highest standards of journalism and science is a challenging and humbling experience. It is challenging because high standards are always challenging and humbling because combining two professions in one journal reveals how difficult it is to develop universal ethical standards.

One example pertains to the use of "leaked" documents. A leaked document is in effect a piece of stolen goods. Our most recent example is the report of the Office of Scientific Integrity of the National Institutes of Health on the Baltimore case (see News and Comment, 29 March, p. 1552). In the scientific world, this report is a privileged report that should not be disseminated further to any unauthorized individual. In the world of journalism, however, leaked information is usually accepted as publishable information. Thus, in the current example, refusal by *Science* to report the information when it knew that the same report had been leaked to many other news outlets would only have denied the readers of *Science* information that was fully available elsewhere. Nevertheless, there are troubling aspects of such events that trigger consideration of the proper standards of conduct.

The first journalistic standard that we demand of ourselves in such a case is to characterize the leaked information as completely as possible so that the reader is able to discern the degree of potential bias. In this case, the document was the official committee report (and therefore not a preliminary draft that might have been more questionable) containing both majority and minority opinions. It did not, however, contain the responses of the principals accused, a final step that is an essential component of the quasi-judicial process. *Science*, on receipt of the document, contacted several of the report panel to verify the official character of the report, the accuracy of the released document, and its degree of finality. The individuals contacted were extremely reluctant to comment, because they were bound by confidentiality, an attitude we respected. They were convinced, however, that the minimal verification requested was appropriate once a leak had occurred. With this verification *Science* could be confident that it was providing its readers an accurate, official report. However, it was as important to emphasize to our readers that the leaked report was incomplete. Thus, the second journalistic standard that we apply is to supply as soon as possible the information missing from the leaked document so that a balanced account is available to the readers. In the rush to deadlines, the first report rarely contains the full story.

This is not the only case, nor the last one, where partial information is leaked. The leak of names from selection committees is another example that is troublesome. Thus, we might ask whether there should be stringent rules against the entire practice of leaking, a cottage industry in Washington, D.C. The answer seems to be that there are both positive outcomes and potential for abuse.

Many organizations, including the U.S. government, sometimes suppress information and reports that the citizens should see. The leak of such documents and the threat of leaks that accelerates release of others that might be concealed are positive benefits to a democracy. The negative aspect occurs when premature or one-sided leaks generate judgments that would not have been made if all the facts were known. Leakers in some cases are risking their jobs for a worthy cause but in other cases are distorting information in an unfair way. The leakers may have an axe to grind, and the journal that serves their purpose, even temporarily, has an obligation to correct the record as soon as possible. That is not always easy because it requires sorting out a complicated story.

The handling of leaked information is thus a case in which pure standards would not be beneficial to society. In the long run, fairness and accuracy will be the final arbiters of standards of journalism, which of necessity are a compromise between pure ideals of confidentiality and a desire to provide the reader with full information without censorship.

The leaking of the Pentagon papers undoubtedly served democracy well, but the leaking of the saccharin study probably prevented an objective analysis of the risks involved. Because leaks will probably always occur and because they are sometimes valuable, the press has a heavy responsibility to be fair over time and the public should learn to respond to a leak by saying, "There's going to be more to this story."

—DANIEL E. KOSHLAND, JR.