

Survey on Use of Quotes by Agricultural Communicators

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In public-information work writers may modify or generate direct quotes for news releases (non-verbatim quotes). In contrast, journalistic news writing traditionally uses verbatim quotes. How do land-grant communicators say they use quotes?

Survey data (sent to 50 randomly-selected land grant news writers, response rate 80 percent) indicate the majority (79 percent) said they use non-verbatim quotes at some time. They do so with the understanding that the quotes will be checked with the source before release. Ninety-two percent reported their communications office had no official policy about the use of non-verbatim quotes.

Introduction

In public relations or public information work, writers use, change, or generate quotes in news releases that are sometimes not precisely what the source said. Many news releases are collaborative efforts between the source and the writer. There is evidence that public information or public relations practitioners exercise the freedom to modify quotes ("The Speakes Case," 1989).

In contrast, in journalistic news writing the direct quote traditionally has consisted of precisely what a news source said (verbatim). Nevertheless, there is evidence in journalistic news writing that direct quotes sometimes differ significantly from what the source said. There also is evidence in recent literature that this may be becoming more acceptable. One bit of evidence is a 1991 Supreme Court decision involving a

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libel charge a psychoanalyst brought against a writer, *The New Yorker* magazine, and Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. The court ruled that altering quotes results in libel only if it changes the meaning of the statement made by the person being quoted (Kaplan, 1991; Winfield, 1991; Gersh, 1991; McManus, 1990; Henry, 1989).

Generating or changing direct quotes, as described above, is not the same process of "cleaning up" quotes that many journalists use on a regular basis. Cleaning up quotes is generally thought to mean making minor changes, such as ensuring pronoun-verb agreement, proper adverb placement, addition of minor omitted words such as articles and prepositions, and the like (French, Powell & Angione, 1984). On the other hand, generating or changing direct quotes (we term these "non-verbatim" quotes) may modify what a source said, to help clarify a news story.

Purpose

This survey intended to explore how agricultural communicators in higher education handle direct quotes in news releases and to investigate what influences their decisions as they write direct quotes. Key questions that shaped our study were: Do land-grant communicators use direct and cleaned up quotes only, or do they generate or modify a source's quotes? If so,

when might the writer be more likely to help put words in the source's mouth? Our study addressed the following questions:

- 1) How do institutional communicators who work for colleges and universities in agricultural communications use quotes when writing news releases?
- 2) Do they use direct or "cleaned up" quotes only, as many journalists do, or do they generate or change direct quotes to clarify a story?
- 3) Are there official policies about the use of non-verbatim quotes?

Methodology

The subjects of the study were agricultural communicators at land-grant institutions across the United States. Fifty news writers were selected randomly from a total of 156 land-grant university agricultural communications office news writers identified from the 1990 Directory of Land-Grant and USDA Communicators. No USDA communicators were included in the survey. Before names were selected, the sample was stratified according to number of staff in agricultural information offices, to avoid over-representation of news writers from larger offices in the final sample.

We constructed a survey consisting of 15 questions intended to reveal communicators' tendencies when working with

direct quotes. The survey began with a definition of the terms *direct quote* and *non-verbatim quote*. We defined a *direct quote* (verbatim) as being constructed of words actually spoken by the source during the interview. The survey definition of a *non-verbatim quote* was a quote not constructed of words actually spoken by the source. A non-verbatim quote was defined as based on the writer's understanding of what the source said, but constructed using words chosen by the writer. Our survey also said that direct and non-verbatim quotes are both enclosed in quotation marks in the written article produced by the writer and approved by the source before release.

The survey questions fell generally into five categories:

- 1) Whether or not respondents or their colleagues write *non-verbatim* quotes,
- 2) Official policies or lack thereof about use of non-verbatim quotes in news releases,
- 3) Special circumstances or situations where respondents would be more likely to write a non-verbatim quote,
- 4) Respondents' opinion about the survey's definition of and direct and non-verbatim quotes, and
- 5) Demographic information about survey respondents.

The survey was pre-tested on 10 land-grant communicators

who were not selected for inclusion in the final sample. The 10 were not selected randomly, but were picked by geographic region, to ensure that the survey was understandable and acceptable.

The first mailing, survey with cover letter and return envelope, went to the final sample of 50 in September 1991. The first follow-up mailing went out six weeks later, and the final follow-up mailing was in January 1992.

Response

After the three mailings 40 of the 50 surveys were returned, a response rate of 80 percent. Raw data from completed surveys were gathered by office clerical staff. The results, calculated as percentages of those responding to each question, are discussed below.

Results

When asked about the use of non-verbatim quotes in the offices where they work, 82 percent of the respondents indicated that non-verbatim quotes are acceptable if checked with the source and okayed. Seventy-nine percent of the respondents reported that they wrote non-verbatim quotes (43 percent regularly, 36 percent occasionally).

Seventy-nine percent of the respondents reported that their colleagues used non-verbatim quotes (42 percent regularly, 37

percent occasionally). Of these, almost all (97 percent) reported that if non-verbatim quotes are used, they are checked by the source prior to release. Though non-verbatim quotes were used in the majority (79 percent) of the offices where agricultural communicators work, 92 percent of the respondents reported there was no official policy regarding the use of non-verbatim quotes.

When asked about the situations where they would be more likely to use a non-verbatim quote, 76 percent (37 percent regularly, 39 percent occasionally) reported that they use non-verbatim quotes in feature stories based on university activities in teaching and research. Sixty-five percent (14 percent regularly, 51 percent occasionally) reported that they use non-verbatim quotes in meeting and conference announcements. Sixty percent (11 percent regularly, 49 percent occasionally) reported that they used non-verbatim quotes in scholarship and awards stories. Forty-seven percent of the respondents (14 percent regularly, 33 percent occasionally) reported that they use non-verbatim quotes in new position announcements.

Fifty-nine percent (10 percent regularly, 49 percent occasionally) of the respondents reported that their institutional news sources asked them to write non-verbatim quotes. Another 13 percent said the decision to write

non-verbatim quotes depended on the subject and situation.

Seventy-one percent (34 percent regularly, 37 percent occasionally) of those surveyed answered that they wrote non-verbatim quotes for Extension Service faculty and staff. Seventy percent (14 percent regularly, 56 percent occasionally) reported that they wrote non-verbatim quotes for university researchers. Sixty percent of the survey respondents (22 percent regularly, 38 percent occasionally) reported that they wrote non-verbatim quotes for university administrators.

When working with a familiar source, 69 percent of the respondents reported that they were more likely to use non-verbatim quotes (5 percent were less likely to use non-verbatim quotes, and 23 percent not likely). Fifty-nine percent of the respondents reported being more likely to use non-verbatim quotes when working with a familiar subject (10 percent less likely, 23 percent not likely). Eighty-five percent of the respondents reported that they doubted quotes in newspaper articles are always what was actually said by a source.

When asked whether they agreed with our definition of verbatim and non-verbatim quotes, 77 percent of the respondents agreed somewhat to agreed strongly. Twenty-one percent of the respondents disagreed.

Demographically, respondents averaged 10 years experience as

agricultural communicators. Thirty-eight percent had bachelors degrees and 62 percent had masters degrees. Fifty percent had academic degrees in areas other than journalism. Eighty-two percent of the respondents were between the ages of 25-55. Ninety-six percent had professional backgrounds in communications, public relations, or journalism.

Discussion and Conclusions

The survey results indicate that the majority of agricultural communicators working in land-grant universities use non-verbatim quotes and that they do so with the understanding that the quotes will be approved by the source before release. But our data indicate that there are few official policies about the use of non-verbatim quotes.

More than half the respondents reported that their sources ask them to write non-verbatim quotes. A significant percentage of respondents are more likely to use non-verbatim quotes in stories with sources (69 percent) or subjects (59 percent) with whom they are familiar. Non-verbatim quotes are most widely used (76 percent) in feature stories about university activities in teaching and research, but they are also used in announcement, scholarship, award, meeting, conference, or new position stories. More respondents said they would be most

likely to write non-verbatim quotes about Extension Service faculty and staff than about university administrators and researchers.

Additional Studies Needed

- 1) How commercial journalists say they handle direct quotes and their perceptions of how university communicators handle direct quotes.
- 2) Scientists' and Extension workers' perceptions of how university communicators and commercial journalists handle direct quotes; also, how scientists and Extension workers think university communicators and commercial journalists ought to handle direct quotes.

For a copy of the survey conducted, contact the author, Carol Savonen.

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