

O P I N I O N

Anonymity and accountability

By Jim Cornelius
Editor in Chief

We live in a world awash in information — and every day it gets harder to separate the wheat from the chaff. It’s increasingly challenging for people working in good faith to sort out fact from fiction, truth from misinformation, disinformation and outright lies.

During Oregon’s recent spate of catastrophic wildfires, rumors spread as virulently as the wind-driven flames. Law enforcement agencies from the FBI to the Douglas and Jackson County sheriff’s offices found it necessary to address persistent rumors — presented as established fact — that extremists were starting fires. They published statements that the rumors were not only unfounded but categorically false.

While arsonists were found to have started some of the fires — and arrests were made — law enforcement investigated claims that extremists were engaged in a concerted campaign of terroristic arson and found them to be untrue. Which didn’t stop the rumors from spreading.

While it’s not in the same category as wild rumor, the over-reliance on anonymous sources in national media also feeds a climate where information cannot be trusted. A recent article in *The Atlantic* by editor in chief Jeffrey Goldberg cited multiple unnamed sources who claimed that President Donald Trump disparaged American service members as “losers” and “suckers” in the context of an aborted trip to a World War I military cemetery in France in 2018.

Those inclined to think the worst of Donald Trump were quick to seize upon the report, which rings true to them: Trump, after all, has mocked and derided lots of people, including his very public disparagement of the late Senator John McCain, who was a POW during the Vietnam War.

Trouble is, other people who were present categorically reject the report. And those people are not anonymous. How should a person working in good faith weigh the relative credibility of people who are willing to put their names to their statements and those who are not?

In his recent memoir,

former National Security Advisor John Bolton, who is, to put it mildly, not on friendly terms with the President, said the decision not to visit the cemetery was weather-related. Bolton told *The New York Times* that he did not hear Trump use the disparaging words depicted in Goldberg’s story.

“I didn’t hear that. I’m not saying he didn’t say them later in the day or another time, but I was there for that discussion.”

Goldberg is arguing that we should trust his reporting. In a letter to the editor in *The Nugget* last week, D.S. Findlay said that *The Atlantic* “retracted the validity of their anonymous ‘source.’” That’s not accurate.

In an interview with CNN, Goldberg said, “I stand by my reporting, I have multiple sources telling me this is what happened, and so I stand by it.” He also said that he is sure that all of the things that Bolton wrote in his own account are true.

We’re unlikely to get the chance to see how Bolton’s account and Goldberg’s report can both be true, because we don’t know who Goldberg talked to. Much has

been made of reports that the Associated Press and FOX News “confirmed” parts of Goldberg’s reporting. But we should be aware of what “confirmation” means in this context, as noted by Glenn Greenwald of *The Intercept*:

“(J)ournalism is not supposed to be grounded in whether something is ‘believable’ or ‘seems like it could be true.’ Its core purpose, the only thing that really makes it matter or have worth, is reporting what is true, or at least what *evidence* reveals. And that function is completely subverted when news outlets claim that they ‘confirmed’ a previous report when they did nothing more than just talked to the same people who anonymously whispered the same things to them as were whispered to the original outlet.”

There are valid reasons to protect the anonymity of sources who provide critical, substantive and verifiable information — on tax data, for instance. Saving insiders from owning what amounts to gossip about the boss isn’t one.

By relying solely on anonymous sources, Goldberg undermines trust in his

reporting and dilutes the potential impact of his work. It seems he may have a glimmer of realization to that effect. When Chris Hayes of MSNBC pressed him on anonymous sourcing, he replied:

“I share that view that it’s not good enough. But, you know, like other reporters, I’m always balancing out the moral ambiguities and complications after anonymous sourcing with the public’s right to know... These are people in the various rooms. But, yeah, obviously it would be better if people would say, attach their names to what they know.”

Yeah, obviously, it would.

Standards for journalists and for folks posting online or talking with friends really shouldn’t be much different. If information cannot be verified from a responsible source that has accountability, it should be treated very carefully — and the more inflammatory it is, the more skeptically it should be viewed. We should all do our best to follow *verifiable* information where it leads — and then let the truth will out and the chips fall where they may.

Letters to the Editor...

The Nugget welcomes contributions from its readers, which must include the writer’s name, address and phone number. Letters to the Editor is an open forum for the community and contains unsolicited opinions not necessarily shared by the Editor. The Nugget reserves the right to edit, omit, respond or ask for a response to letters submitted to the Editor. Letters should be no longer than 300 words. Unpublished items are not acknowledged or returned. The deadline for all letters is 10 a.m. Monday.

To the Editor:

I have been curious of Laird Superfood’s interest in Sisters since CEO Paul Hodge announced that the company would build their factory and headquarters here in Sisters and employ about 500 people. Now we see that Hodge and his partner, Paul Schneider, have purchased 36 acres of the old U.S. Forest Service property at the west end of town and have requested approval of a plan to build workforce housing for 300-500 new homes there on 25 of those acres. As letter writer Gary Leiser said, (*The Nugget*, Sept. 23) they should become multi-millionaires almost instantly from selling all those “workforce” homes.

And let’s consider this: 500 Laird employees could mean 500 new residents of Sisters. If half of them are married, add 250 more people. If half of them have one child, add 125 more for a total of 875 new residents. And most families these days have two cars, so here comes another 750 cars.

Mr. Schneider said, “We don’t want to change the community. We want to expand on it, providing workforce housing.” Well, sir, 875 new residents and 750 more cars will change the community, irreparably. I sincerely hope that the Sisters City Council denies this devastating request.

Jim Cline

To the Editor:

A message for Jeff Mackey

Thank you for your service. Thank you for your patriotism. Thank you for your courage — it has not gone unnoticed. And thank you for sharing your common sense — a rare commodity these days and apparently a foreign concept to many.

God bless you, Jeff.

Sharon Hrdlicka



To the Editor:

I don’t like to write letters to the editor anymore,

See **LETTERS** on page 4

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Sisters Weather Forecast

Courtesy of the National Weather Service, Pendleton, Oregon

Wednesday Sunny 85/49	Thursday Sunny 86/50	Friday Sunny 84/49
Saturday Sunny 83/48	Sunday Sunny 80/49	Monday Sunny 80/49