

Hoods make not monks...

15th November 2018

As every man and his dog continues to deny being the anonymous author of the recent *New York Times*' stunning editorial against Donald Trump, it is worth considering not so much the polemics of what is said but the manner in which it was delivered. Opposition to Trump is well-established but this is the first time such a message has come from an anonymous informant: a source on the inside. Even in a world where technological advances threaten to outpace everything else, there is still room for the human element.



There were immediate calls for the NYT to reveal the identity of the author – but to do so would be to miss the vital information and value that can sometimes, only come from someone acting in secret. There is immense value in anonymity: whether it be a Watergate-style source inside an administration saying things that could never be said with attribution and exposing the worst of political discourse, or ‘whistle-blowing’ on a particular company and making necessary facts known. This often rises above personal ambition/motivation to be a matter of public good. If it is right that the general public should be made aware of hidden crimes within a major private company which impacts them, is it not also right that a client company should know of prospective problems concerning an individual/entity that they are engaging with?

Note that acting in secret is by no means synonymous with acting illegally. It is entirely possible – and indeed, the only acceptable way to practice - to pass on information, or obtain informal testimony, without breaking any law: it is just that such work and questions must be enacted and phrased with great care, so as to maintain the discretion and protection of the source.

In this manner, ‘the secret source’ remains one of the cornerstones of intelligence. While open-source information is increasingly at the risk of being edited or faked, and to trawl the deep web for hints and answers relies on them already being set down in type, a source is able to go where others cannot and discern what is kept only (as the Corsicans would say) ‘behind the teeth’. With access to the key players and circumstances, and a lifetime of understanding the dynamics and politics of the regions and industries, human sources are the most crucial part of intelligence gathering.

However this is being offset on occasion by demands that these figures reveal their identities and methods, to have 'confidence' in their conclusions, or that information (that by necessity) cannot be documented and laid out in the manner of a paper trail is of lesser value. These approaches are directly contradictory to the purpose and rationale behind a secret source: the anonymity and lack of requirement for a paper trail is precisely why such sensitive intelligence and information can be gotten. That which is derived from human sources is often the edge that is needed: provided that this has been obtained through legal means, there does need to be the element of trust that sources do what they say and that the intelligence they provide is true.

Above all there can be no double-standards between those on the grand scale perceived to be acting in the public good, and those doing so for private clients – but this must be matched by the acceptance that some degree of secrecy is a must. Clients should remain aware that not every hooded figure is by convention up to no good.

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