

AS LEVEL  
FACT FILES  
**Journalism**

For first teaching from September 2013

For first AS award in Summer 2014

For first A Level award in Summer 2015

**Sources in Print  
Journalism**



**journ  
alism**

*in the Media and Communications Industry (JMC)*

## Sources in Print Journalism



### Learning Outcomes

#### Students should be able to:

- Select, prioritise and use information provided from a range of sources provided in the exam including:
  - press conference statements;
  - press releases;
  - interviews;
  - archive material; and
  - public documents.



### Content

#### Skills and Practice in Print Journalism (page 8, specification)

Print journalism, like all types of media communication, is used for the purpose of communicating newsworthy events. These stories have to be sourced by the journalist.

#### What is a source?

In journalism, anyone or anything that provides you with information is called a source. Sources can be people, reports, official documents, blogs, letters, books, audio or video recordings – anything that a journalist uses when putting together a story.



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A journalist will look at many sources of information and put aspects of what they find together to create an unbiased, factual account of how, when, where, why, and to whom, something happened. In some cases the journalist will take on a story and research every aspect of the story independently. In other cases, stories will be brought to their attention and sources of information will be given to the journalist.

In all cases the journalist must, of course, take care in ensuring that what they have written in their article is both factual and ethical. No matter how “juicy” a story may seem, or how tantalising a rumour may be, if a journalist cannot prove it to be a fact it cannot be printed.

#### Credibility of sources:

Treat everything you are told with a healthy scepticism. People often have their own reasons for giving you information, and it may be biased or simply untrue. Strive to get a balanced, objective picture by getting as many sources as possible – two is the minimum.

Journalists often rely on trusted sources, or contacts – people with whom they have developed a professional relationship over time and who have proved to be reliable and accurate (read more on this below).

#### Press conference statements

Press conference statements are statements that are made at a press conference. Usually representatives from the media are invited to listen to a statement read by a party about a story that is already in the public domain, for example, an update on a criminal investigation, or to a newsworthy announcement such as the release of a new film or a celebrity wedding.



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Press conference statements are made by many parties who want publicity; celebrities, sports teams, film makers, politicians and commercial organisations. Typically after the statement is read, journalists are able to ask questions, but this is not always the case.

Occasionally press conference statements are impromptu, for example, if a statement is read outside a courtroom. In such a situation the press may not necessarily be expecting a statement but one is made.

If more than one party makes a statement at a press conference it is called a 'joint statement', for example if the President of the United States and the Prime Minister call a joint press conference.

### **Press conferences:**

Bear in mind that most press conferences are staged to get publicity, for example the publication of a government report or the launch of an arts festival. Others may be held in response to major events, such as an earthquake or flood, and are aimed at getting the bare facts out to the media as efficiently as possible.

Always try to ask at least one question – don't simply let other journalists do the talking. Don't be afraid to go 'off message' and ask difficult (but well informed) questions.

## **Press releases**

Press releases are deliberately sent to a journalist or publication. A press release is a communication released to news media announcing a newsworthy story to the public. A press release is usually written in the third person, on behalf of a person or organisation (A press statement is by the person themselves and written in the first person). Press releases usually arrive to a newspaper by fax or e-mail and are used frequently by publicists of celebrities, but are also used by other sources such as Government bodies, the police or large corporations; therefore some are more reliable than others. As such, certain press releases may

be written from a particular perspective in order to put a positive or negative spin on a given story and so a journalist must bear this in mind when using a press release as a source in an article. Some press releases have an embargo, which means the content of the press release must not be published before a certain date and time. This may be a press release regarding a speech that hasn't been made yet. Politicians do this frequently so that newspapers can report about their speech but not publish it before they've made it.

Always take the press release as a starting point for further investigation – don't simply rewrite it as a news story. Ask yourself questions such as – what message is the press release emphasising; what information is left out; what do other people/organisations think about what is being claimed?

## **Interviews**

An interview is when one party asks another a series of questions. In journalism interviews are used in order to find out a source's opinion on a newsworthy event or how the event has affected them, often leading to a more interesting article for the reader.

Sometimes a journalist will interview a range of people to find out the opinion of the public on a particular issue, this is called a "vox pop".

Other times a journalist may interview individuals; a celebrity may give an interview to put across their side of a story or to publicise a venture or a journalist may interview a crime victim to hear how they have been affected. Journalists also frequently interview professionals to get a deeper understanding of a particular issue and to have a reliable source, for example a doctor, if the article is about a health scare.



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It is up to the journalist to interpret who the readership will want to hear from when reading a particular article. The journalist **must** ensure that any quotations they use from

an interview are reported accurately. It is usually important that a journalist asks open questions when **conducting** an interview, i.e. questions that allow the interviewee to give a substantial answer rather than a simple 'yes' or 'no'. Exceptions to this are when journalists want simple 'yes' or 'no' answers, for example, in a recent interview, Oprah Winfrey asked Lance Armstrong a string of closed questions to facilitate clarification on questions she knew the public wanted answers to.

When conducting an interview a journalist must be prepared with a list of questions for the interviewee, but a good journalist will also listen to what their subject is saying and react to it with follow-up questions. Some journalists like to audio-record interviews, others prefer to write all the information down in note form. Either way, it is vital that what the interviewee said is reported accurately and in context by the journalist.

## Archive material

Journalists may use information that has been gathered by other journalists or cite other articles in their own work. They may also revisit or update a story in their own catalogue of work. This is particularly relevant if new material relating to a previous story comes to light or when writing a feature article. Advances in technology mean that journalists have archive material, such as interviews, photographs and historical articles at their fingertips using online resources. If a journalist decides to use archive material in their work the onus is on them to ensure that any material they use is credible and accurate.



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## Other sources of news

### Emergency services:

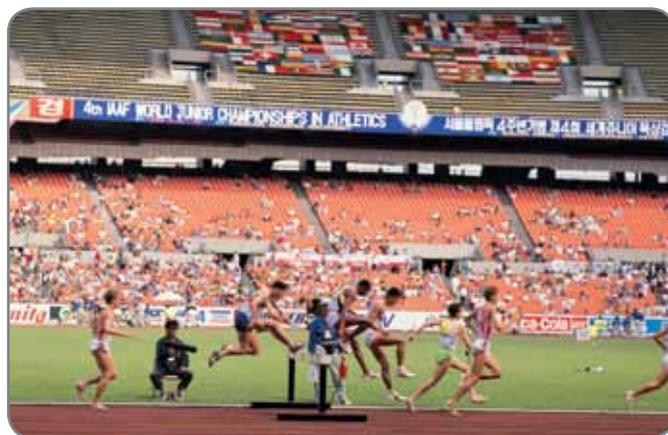
All newsrooms have some system for getting updates from the emergency services, which are a major source of news. Typically, someone will make 'check calls' several times a day to the police, fire service, ambulance service and coastguard, for example. Most services have dedicated media centres and may email updates or record them on a special phone line.



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### News diary:

This carries details of future events, such as press conferences, meetings, court hearings, sporting events and so on. Every newsroom will have one. If you are freelance, keep your own news diary, either physical or digital.



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### Contacts:

To find original stories, a journalist must develop contacts. Start small – try to build relationships with people in your local area. Get to know them and ask them what their concerns are. That way, people will eventually contact you with stories and you will have built up a bank of contacts you can call on for information and comment.



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A contact might be an important or official person, like a police officer, politician, civil servant, trade union official or business person. People such as taxi drivers, secretaries and shop keepers can also be a rich source of information – don't rule anyone out.

Keep the details of anyone you speak to who might be useful for a story. Use a real book or digital method, whatever you prefer.

### Eye witnesses:

Ordinary people caught up in newsworthy events can be a great source, especially of colour and comment. They could be an eye witness to a robbery, a plane crash survivor or a neighbour who rescued a child from a burning building. Always check anything factual they say with other sources and make it clear you are quoting an eye witness.

## Public documents



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The Freedom of Information Act came into force in 2005. This has had implications for journalists and the wider public. Documents that were deemed to be in the public interest are now available to everyone. This has led to an increase in the resources available to investigative journalists in particular. Journalists, like other members of the public have to apply to see certain public documents, and they do. Birth records, crime statistics, details on government expenditure, and more besides are now available to the public. Many journalists are using the opportunities that this knowledge provides to write some very interesting articles that draw the public's attention to certain issues. Journalists can use these public documents to add credibility to, and enhance their publications. For example an article about crime is made more interesting with the addition of crime statistics, while an article about how the NHS needs more funding is sensationalised if a public document states that money is being squandered elsewhere.

## Social media and blogs

Information found online can help journalists find potential stories, spot trends and make contact with new sources. While the internet, particularly sites like Twitter and Facebook, has transformed the way in which journalists find and verify stories, be wary – it is easier to pretend to be something you're not online than in person or even on the phone. Direct contact with a source is best, even if you find them online. Use trusted websites and check and triple check information with other 'real-life' sources.



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### A note about secondary sources:

Secondary sources are one step away from the event or issue – they interpret and analyse primary sources. The secondary sources used by journalists are most often other media reports, including news agencies reports.

### Accessing other media reports:

All UK and Irish national newspapers have an online presence. Most can be accessed online for free (The Times can only be accessed via a paywall).



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There are also scores of regional and local newspapers across the UK and Ireland. The Newspaper Society website has links to the UK ones ([www.newspapersoc.org.uk](http://www.newspapersoc.org.uk)). Local papers can be a rich source of ideas that can be further investigated or 'localised' for a fresh angle. Both consumer and trade magazines generally only have limited content on their websites. Libraries often carry some titles. Trade magazines in particular can be a great source of ideas because they often carry news-worthy industry specific stories which haven't yet been picked up by the mainstream media.

Remember to treat other media reports as a starting point only. Think of a new angle, always check facts for yourself and don't simply lift quotations – do your own interviews.

**On the record and off the record:**

Most people are happy to go 'on the record' and be identified and quoted in your story. However, some people may only speak to you 'off-the-record' – on the condition that they are not identified as the source or quoted directly. Sometimes the information and quotations can be printed or broadcast, but the source not identified, e.g. A top government official said: "The government is terrified there will be another terror attack in London in the coming weeks." Always try to get your source to go on the record, as the reader tends to trust information more when they know where it has come from.



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