

CAN WE TALK OFF THE RECORD?



*Increasing Understanding
Between Reporters and
Media Relations Experts*

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Executive Summary

There can be disagreement — sometimes strong disagreement — about how and when media sources should conduct “off the record” interviews with reporters. Some communications practitioners see the value in this technique; others say it should never be used (with some even going so far as to claim there is no such thing as off the record).

This qualitative research was undertaken to help shed light and, to the extent possible, begin to resolve those disagreements. In addition, the report aims to increase understanding between journalists and their communications colleagues.

As a baseline, it must be acknowledged, even by those communicators antagonistic toward off the record interviews, that the practice is very real, as evidenced by its long-standing tradition as part of the media relations toolkit. Those who ignore this reality are depriving themselves and their spokespeople and clients of a potentially valuable tool.

Some of the findings are hardly surprising. For instance, there is a lack of consistent definition of off the record. Indeed, there is much blurring of lines over such journalistic terms of art as off the record, “on background,” and “not for attribution.”

An additional expected finding: Trust about the use of off the record is fragile. Media relations staffers, for example, tell us that reporters sometimes break pledges to keep material off the record. No reporters, on the other hand, admit to violating such confidences.

The research also unearthed some rather unexpected discoveries. First, even those who argue against speaking off the record have evidently used the tactic at some point. Second, communicators with a journalistic background discern far more value in utilizing off the record interviews than their colleagues who lack reporting experience. This finding may be most useful in helping to increase the understanding between journalists and their sources if those with a reporting background can be persuaded to help educate their colleagues who are inexperienced in the ways of a newsroom.

The essence of this report rests with 10 recommendations set forth in an attempt to help achieve the goals noted above. An outline of those 10 recommendations:

- 1) Keep media interviews on the record unless there is a compelling reason to do otherwise.
- 2) Develop and adhere to the recommended standard definitions of off the record and other media relations techniques outlined in this report.
- 3) Distribute those definitions to reporters, communications experts, spokespeople, and to professional societies to which they belong in an effort to achieve greater consistency and to minimize misunderstanding.

- 4) Educate communicators, especially those with no media experience, on both the meaning and the value of conducting interviews off the record when warranted.
- 5) Enter into off the record arrangements only with trustworthy reporters and sources.
- 6) Agree to ground rules before beginning an interview.
- 7) Ensure that both parties explicitly agree to abide by the ground rules.
- 8) Confirm that both parties are empowered by their organizations to enforce the confidentiality of off the record interviews.
- 9) Negotiate ground rules before every interview, even if simply renewing the conversation after a short break.
- 10) Refrain from using such canards as “there is no such thing as off the record” or “off the record is a lie.”

I hope that these recommendations will help lead to the twin purposes outlined above: First, begin to resolve disagreements over the use of off the record; second, increase understanding between journalists and media relations practitioners.

Purpose of the Research

Sharp disagreement exists among media relations advisors — including among consultants who specialize in media training — about the value of reporters and sources having conversations “off the record.”

Barks Communications undertook *Can We Talk Off the Record? Increasing Understanding Between Reporters and Media Relations Experts* in hopes of 1) resolving disagreement among those who say that, used properly and professionally, off the record is a valuable tool vs. those who go so far as to call it “a lie” and 2) advancing understanding between journalists and media relations experts.

Methodology

Several research methods were used in the information gathering phase. An online survey posing questions about using the off the record technique was sent to select experienced journalists and media relations specialists.

In additional attempts to gain qualitative data, an open-ended question was distributed to an online group exclusively for members of the National Press Club on LinkedIn and to a listserv for communications professionals operated by the American Society of Association Executives. Select responses from those sources are included in the narrative of this report.

A question was posed on LinkedIn allowing any user of that service to respond in an effort to gauge broad attitudes before beginning formal research. These responses yielded little of use. No responses from that question were used as a basis for this report.

Who Responded

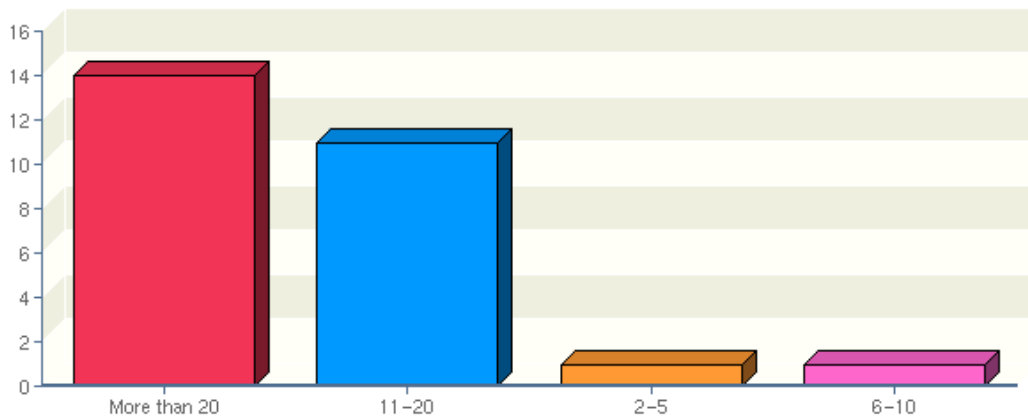
The target population for this research project was highly experienced reporters and media relations practitioners. This target was achieved as a plurality of respondents to the online survey indicated more than 20 years of experience in those fields. Moreover, the vast majority, 92 percent, have more than 10 years experience (see Illustration 1).

The sample size of the online survey was 138 candidates. Twenty-seven responded, yielding a response rate of 20 percent. Clearly, no statistical significance can be obtained from this size survey. The intent, however, was to discern attitudes, not to arrive at set-in-concrete conclusions.

Sampling for the online survey was taken from the leadership rolls of press clubs nationwide, select reporters who cover the media beat, chapter leaders from the Public Relations Society of America, and other senior communications thought leaders.

Of those who responded to the survey, 52 percent were female, 48 percent male.

Illustration 1: "How many years of experience do you have in your current profession?"



What Does Off the Record Mean?

One of the most perplexing facets of conducting media interviews off the record is the lack of a consistent definition. On the positive side, 88 percent of respondents said they agree to ground rules before going off the record. On the negative side, the fact that there is little agreement on what the term means seems a sure-fire recipe for confusion.

Reviewing some of the responses to the question, "How do you define off the record?" it appears highly likely that much of the problem centers on a lack of basic understanding when it comes to media relations ground rules.

To be sure, some respondents evidenced a clear understanding of the common definition of off the record:

- "Off-the-record means I cannot use the information for publication unless I can get it from another source. It's as if I hadn't heard it. It's most often going to be used to send me in a particular direction or call me off something that is wrong."
- "[N]othing can be used for the story, but info can be used for 'directional' help."
- "The information you receive from the source will not be used without getting on the record confirmation from another source."
- "[W]hat you have told me does not appear in the story however the information you give me can be used to develop on the record sources for the information."

On the other hand, some respondents confused the common definition of off the record with what should be considered **on background**:

- "Anything I say cannot be quoted, but the information can be used to explain certain topics."
- "Nothing I say can be attributed to me as a source."

In addition, others confused the common ground rules for off the record with **not for attribution** (with one respondent going so far as to define off the record as, literally, "not for attribution"):

- "[N]on-attributable information."

- “[C]omment or information with no attribution.”
- “Either I can’t use the information at all or I find a way to describe the person so their identity is not obvious. In other words...loosely define [sic].”

One respondent to the question posed on the American Society of Association Executives’ listserv helped clarify matters: “If you talk with a reporter, please don’t say AFTER commenting that the conversation (or parts thereof) is now off the record. Interviews cannot be put off the record retroactively...if you babble on before they agree, the information is theirs to use as they see fit, with attribution.”

This individual added, “Reporters are working when they’re in your company. It’s not a social occasion, even if you are talking over a meal or drink. If you make a casual conversational remark or reaction within view or earshot of the reporter, it’s part of the interview...Reporters aren’t out to get you, honestly. They have a job to do. But they serve the interests of their readers and viewers, which may differ from your organization’s interests.”

Two clear outcomes of the research become apparent. First, journalists and media relations professionals would both benefit were there a consistent definition of off the record. Second, until such an industry standard is attained, a conversation beforehand about what the ground rules mean is vital.

When to Speak Off the Record

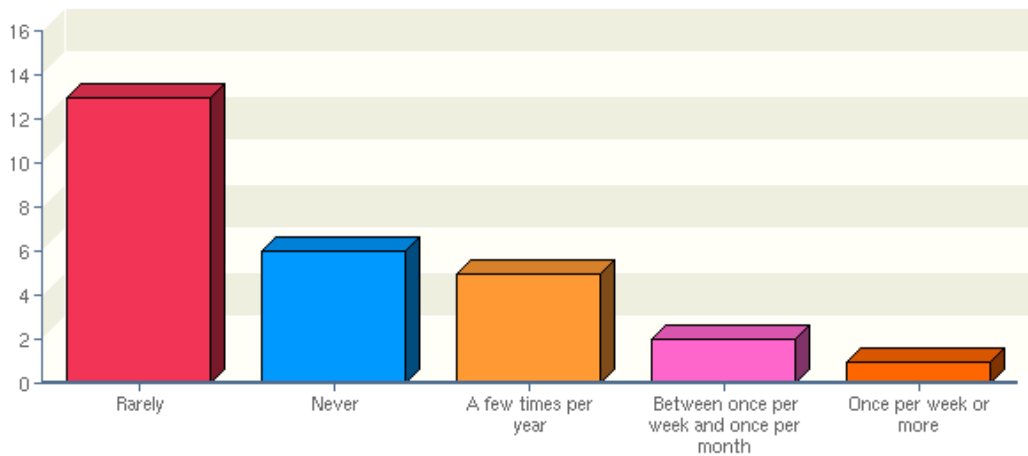
Everybody — reporters and those they cover — would likely be happier if all exchanges stayed on the record. Indeed, Illustration 2 from the survey findings reflects the fact that off the record interviews are far from an everyday occurrence for most individuals.

The fact is we live in an imperfect world and there are times when the only way to get important information to the public is to shield one’s identity.

So the question was posed as part of the survey, “Under what circumstances do you believe it is permissible to go off the record?” Here are some representative answers:

- “For additional background information that the reporter could probably get anyway with a lot of work. When I sense that the reporter doesn’t really understand what is going on.”
- “To help the reporter gain a better understanding of a particular issue — i.e., for background.”
- “Crisis or emergency in which lives are or large-scale public welfar [sic] is at stake.”
- “Only when you trust the reporter and only when you feel without guidance, the story might go in the wrong direction.”
- “When I have a pre-existing relationship with the source.”
- “When giving background information that will help the journalist to understand a particular situation.”
- “[O]nly if you know and trust the reporter — no exceptions.”

Illustration 2: “On average, how frequently do you participate in interviews off the record?”



It is instructive that, in several of the above responses, the word “background” was used. This is another indication that some respondents lack knowledge of important journalistic terms of art. This further bolsters the need to define terms and gain agreement on their use before each interview.

One respondent to the National Press Club LinkedIn group query offered the following advice to clarify ground rules: “I always clearly define the terms before we proceed, because on background, not for attribution and off the record mean different things to different people. In fact, there is so much confusion I often don't even use the terms, but rather just work out an agreement in clear language.”

When celebrated *Washington Post* reporter Bob Woodward was honored by the National Press Club with its 2012 Fourth Estate Award, the veteran scribe displayed a humorous series of doctored photos that showed him present at a series of newsworthy moments, such as his face appearing in the helicopter that took President Richard Nixon from the White House following his resignation.

Woodward then delivered a tongue-in-cheek reference to “off the record” media interviews: “My lawyer said, ‘Make sure that those pictures do not get on the Internet. And so will everyone agree that it’s off the record?’ Laughter cascaded through the ballroom full of reporters and news sources. Woodward, pretending to appear oblivious, reacted by saying, “You think it’s too late? Oh, okay.”

He then recalled a time early in his career at *The Washington Post* when the late publisher Katharine Graham would hold “off the record” events with notable newsmakers. “The rule for a reporter was it’s totally and absolutely off the record. And I believed that — for about six months. And then one morning, Katharine Graham herself called me up and said, ‘You know, the secretary of defense was here for dinner last night and he had the most interesting things to say. Oh, wait a minute and let me go get my notes.’

“So she read out what the secretary of defense had said and clearly it was off the record, but that didn’t mean that you couldn’t ask others and check it out, so we got a bunch of good stories,” he continued. “And I used to joke with her that we had the Graham

modification of off the record which was you absolutely and totally can't use it unless it's really good.”

As lighthearted as Woodward's comments were intended to be, it does raise a serious ethical question for reporters: Is it principled for one reporter to tell another about an off the record conversation with a source? I would argue not. It strains ethical boundaries to suggest that it is okay to share secrets within the journalistic guild. Remember, one of the prime tenets of these tools is confidentiality. That privacy is violated whenever reporters reveal such privileged exchanges. Thus, I consider Woodward's definition of “the Graham modification of off the record” disreputable.

Another important aspect of these ground rules: It is important to realize that the terms of the deal apply only to the single interview in question and do not represent a blanket agreement. As an example, let us consider a case in which a reporter and source conclude an off the record telephone interview. Immediately after hanging up, the reporter thinks of another question, so calls back. Both parties must agree explicitly once again on the ground rules. If none are discussed at the beginning of the second telephone call, that interview is on the record.

The upshot of this research is that the “default switch” for all interviews should be set in the on the record position. Other ground rules should be pursued only when special circumstances prevail.

Do as I Say, Not as I Do

Even many of those who argued, in some cases forcefully, against speaking off the record find themselves using the technique.

Forty-nine percent of total respondents to the online survey replied negatively when asked whether interviews should be conducted off the record. Yet, paradoxically, 78 percent of all respondents acknowledged that they have participated in off the record interviews (see Illustration 3).

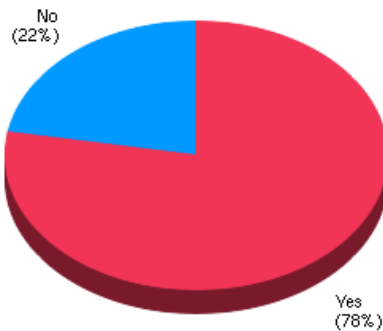
The survey asked those who identified themselves as public relations/public affairs professionals the following question: “If you are currently a public relations/public affairs professional, have you ever earned your living as a reporter?”

Among those who answered “Yes” to that question, 60 percent replied, “It is permissible to speak off the record.”

Strikingly, among those who answered “No,” 64 percent replied, “One should never speak off the record.”

It appears that those with a journalistic background (and who thus may have relied upon off the record interviews during their tenures as reporters) see greater value in talking off the record. Granted, the findings from this small sample size may or may not hold true in a larger survey. But this analysis points to the need to consider the possibility that media relations pros with newsroom experience view their world different than those without such experience.

Illustration 3: “Have you ever participated in a media interview on an off the record basis?”



Thus, it appears that communicators who disdain the concept may nonetheless sometimes succumb to pressure to get their company’s story out in as favorable a light as possible. On the other side of the fence, their journalistic peers may yield to temptation from sources with promises of juicy stories if allowed to speak off the record.

The Risks in Going Off the Record

One recurring theme in responses from all sources tapped during this research was the need for trust between reporters and sources when negotiating off the record interviews. But it appears that trust can be fragile, particularly in the eyes of communications professionals.

Thirty-nine percent of that group indicated that a reporter broke a pledge to keep information off the record. In an eye-opening counterpoint, none of the reporters responded that they ever broke such a pledge.

What factors could account for this disparity? A difference in the understanding (or a misunderstanding) of the ground rules seems the most likely culprit. Other possibilities not considered within the scope of this research:

- Editors who overruled their reporters’ agreements to keep matters off the record.
- Communications practitioners seeing their story in print or on a broadcast outlet believed the reporter violated their agreement when, in fact, the reporter used the off the record information to get the story from other sources.
- Hesitance among some reporters to acknowledge they broke the rules.
- Failure to follow the rules of journalistic tradition.

Washington Post reporter Radley Balko offers two instances under which a reporter may wiggle out of such pledges, opining in a December 11, 2020, column, [“I’m burning a source. Here’s why.”](#) He writes, “The first is if a journalist learns a source lied during the conversation in an attempt to deliberately mislead the journalist,” adding, “The second scenario is if the source himself discloses the contents of the off-the-record conversation to other parties.”

Both conditions appear to be reasonable and ethical. In fact, both seem logical to apply to any confidential conversation, be it with a reporter, co-worker, friend, etc. I will add one stipulation: If a reporter suspects a source of shady conduct or knows the source has been

untruthful in the past, they should confront it openly, informing the source that lying will result in the voiding of the off the record agreement.

Former Reporters Have a Different Perspective

Another interesting factor that appears to have a bearing on the attitude of communicators toward use of off the record is previous journalistic experience or lack thereof.

The survey asked those who identified themselves as communicators the following question: “If you are currently a public relations/public affairs professional, have you ever earned your living as a reporter?”

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Stated in more direct terms, a journalistic background should be viewed as a mandatory prerequisite for those in the media relations field since, by the very nature of their work, they need to know how reporters work and think. Moreover, their companies must rely on them to pass along this perspective to their executives and other spokespeople.

Companies that fail to employ ex-reporters in their media relations shop place their businesses at a severe disadvantage. I would go so far as to argue that they are practicing corporate malpractice.

This means that reporters are well-served when they take time to learn whether a source has a journalistic background in order to ascertain the source’s level of sophistication and basic comprehension of such tactics as off the record.

Personal Observations from the Field

Apart from the research conducted for this report, anecdotal observations over many years help to provide some context. I have witnessed media training consultants advise clients never to go off the record. Some even go so far as to claim “off the record is a lie.”

As an inside-the-Beltway creature of more than two decades, I can say with certainty that the journalistic techniques of off the record, on background, and not for attribution work. I have employed them many times over the years and never been burned.

Geography may play a role here. Use of off the record and the other confidentiality techniques are a way of life in Washington, D.C., where I have practiced for decades. They are

perhaps employed less in other regions, so that lack of routine familiarity and insight may be a factor in some communicators' reluctance to or hostility toward such tactics.

Granted, it takes a high degree of sophistication to utilize these tactics effectively for the naïve can be burned if they do not adhere to the rules of the road (perhaps in large measure, as noted earlier, due either to a lack of clarity regarding those rules or ignorance that such rules exist). To be sure, the safest way for sources to proceed is to keep everything — words, paperwork, nonverbal signals — on the record.

If the intent of those consultants who advise never speaking off the record is to shelter those less experienced in media relations folkways, that is fine. Indeed, I agree (and explain to my clients during media training consultations) that only veteran communicators should attempt to use such advanced techniques.

But to insist that there is no place for off the record is naïve and wrong. Off the record can be crucial in steering a reporter toward a story that may otherwise never reach the public's attention. On background is commonly used by businesses that use media relations professionals to conduct outreach to the press, and prefer that on the record quotes be attributed to its senior executives, technical experts, or board members. Not for attribution can prove useful in getting stories, including unattributed quotes, to see the light of day.

Consultants who argue against these techniques are taking the easy way out and ill-serving their clients. They are blind, intentionally or otherwise, to the many subtle nuances of relations between reporters and their sources (indeed, there are cases in which the consultants have no practical knowledge of their value because they have never served as reporters).

Best Practice Recommendations

These findings lead to a series of best practice recommendations for reporters and media relations practitioners who choose to speak on a basis other than on the record. Among the proposals:

- 1) Keep media interviews on the record unless there is a compelling reason to do otherwise.
- 2) Develop an understanding among the journalistic and communications communities that each should commit to adhering to the following definitions:
 - a. **On the record:** Anything a source says can be quoted and any information supplied can be used with no restrictions. Be aware that documents left in plain sight, the visible screens of any devices, office décor, hallway conversations, nonverbal signals, and more are also fair game. Anything the reporter can see, hear, smell, or taste is subject to being reported. Unless there is a compelling reason forbidding it, on the record interviews are the safest way to proceed.
 - b. **Off the record:** Nothing provided off the record can be used in print or broadcast. This is most frequently used to steer reporters in a particular direction while attempting to leave no fingerprints. Only experienced media

relations hands should go off the record, and then only if they know and trust both the reporter and the media outlet.

- c. **On background:** The reporter can use freely any information a source provides, either orally or in writing. However, the reporter cannot quote the source either by name or by other identification. Going on background is useful for individuals who deal with the media and prefer that quotes come from others in the company.
 - d. **Not for attribution:** The reporter may publish information provided by sources. In addition, the source can be quoted, though not by name. The reporter and media relations officer must negotiate how the source will be identified (e.g., a company vice president, a source familiar with the negotiations).
- 3) Distribute these definitions to reporters, communicators, and to professional societies to which they belong in an effort to achieve greater consistency and to minimize misunderstanding.
 - 4) Educate media relations practitioners, especially those with no newsroom experience, on both the meaning and the value of conducting interviews off the record when beneficial. Communications professionals with a news background can be invaluable when it comes to teaching their less knowledgeable peers.
 - 5) Enter into off the record arrangements only with trustworthy reporters and sources.
 - 6) Agree to ground rules before beginning an interview.
 - 7) Ensure that both parties explicitly agree to abide by the ground rules.
 - 8) Confirm that both parties are empowered by their organizations to enforce the confidentiality of off the record interviews.
 - 9) Negotiate ground rules before every interview, even if the parties have spoken off the record recently or habitually.
 - 10) Refrain from using such canards as “there is no such thing as off the record” or “off the record is a lie.”

The Bottom Line

The practice of both journalism and media relations stands to improve when there is increased understanding between the two camps, and less disagreement about the value of conducting off the record interviews.

Off the record and other similar tools are very real options for those practicing media relations. This fact of life must be acknowledged even by those who currently claim there is no such thing as off the record.

Consistent definitions (as provided in the Appendix) are a necessary component of forging trust between reporters and media relations officers and, in some cases, within the communications community.

Perhaps the key to greater understanding rests in large part with former journalists who now serve as media relations staffers. Their greater understanding of the journalistic rules of the road empowers them to teach their colleagues who are inexperienced in the ways of the newsroom about the value of conducting interviews off the record when appropriate.

Another key to greater understanding: Broad distribution of the 10 recommendations listed above within the journalism and communications professions and to professional societies serving those fields.

In the final analysis, the most straightforward way to proceed is to keep most interviews on the record. But when that is not feasible, adhering to the 10 recommendations contained in this report can guide both reporters and media relations officials to a deeper understanding and to a lessening of disagreement over the use of such techniques as off the record.

Appendix

Following are the suggested definitions for distribution to journalists, media relations experts, spokespeople, and the professional societies to which they belong:

On the record: Anything a source says can be quoted and any information supplied can be used with no restrictions. Be aware that documents left in plain sight, the visible screens of any devices, office décor, hallway conversations, nonverbal signals, and more are also fair game. Anything the reporter can see, hear, smell, or taste is subject to being reported. Unless there is a compelling reason forbidding it, on the record interviews are the safest way to proceed.

Off the record: Nothing provided off the record can be used in print or broadcast. This is most frequently used to steer reporters in a particular direction while attempting to leave no fingerprints. Only experienced media relations experts should go off the record, and then only if they know and trust both the reporter and the media outlet.

On background: The reporter can use freely any information a source provides, either orally or in writing. However, the reporter cannot quote the source either by name or by other identification. Going on background is useful for individuals who deal with the media and prefer that quotes come from others in the company.

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About the Author

Ed Barks is a communications strategy consultant and author. His corporate and association clients hire him to provide them with the messages and everyday communications skills their executives need.

He shows them how to gain an enhanced reputation, greater confidence, added opportunities for career advancement, and realization of long-term business and public policy goals.

Ed is the author of [three books for communications and government relations experts](#), and for executives who represent the public face of their companies:

- *Reporters Don't Hate You: 100+ Amazing Media Relations Strategies*
- *A+ Strategies for C-Suite Communications: Turning Today's Leaders into Tomorrow's Influencers*
- *The Truth About Public Speaking: The Three Keys to Great Presentations*

Clients who turn to him for strategic advice say he “knows how to elicit peak performance.” They call him “a master at connecting with his audience” and “an effective educator,” and give his counsel “two thumbs up!”

As President of Barks Communications since its founding in 1997, Ed has guided more than 5500 business leaders, association executives, thought leaders, and communications and government relations professionals toward a sharper message and enhanced communications skills.

He is also the founder and community leader of the [C-suite Blueprint blog](#).

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