

The International Language of Journalists

By Gina F. Rubel, Esq. and Lukasz Walewski

When conducting local, regional, or international media relations, there is a language shared among journalists and public relations experts globally.

Here is what you need to know about media terminology.

Terms of The Trade

On the record: On the record or for the record mean that what you say may be included in the story with attribution to you. Your comments should be accurate, concise, and memorable. They are statements that you want the media to repeat.

“Any time you’re talking to a reporter, assume that what you’re saying is on the record until it’s agreed by both parties that it’s not,” said Gina Passarella, the editor-in-chief of ALM Global, LLC.



[*On Record PR Podcast: How Best to Work with Legal Media with Gina Passarella, Editor-in-Chief at ALM Global, LLC*](#)

Off the record: Off-the-record comments should be avoided. It is best for law firm and corporate representatives never to make off-the-record comments because nothing is truly off the record. If you say it, then there is always a chance that it will end up published. “Off the record” means your name will not be attached to it (if the reporter agrees). If you do not want it researched or repeated, do not share it.

“If you say to a reporter during an interview, ‘For this part, I’m going to go off the record,’ and you don’t hear them say, ‘Yes, we are off the record,’ that is not an agreement,” ALM’s Passarella said. “You need to stop before you continue talking with what you want to say off the record, and make sure that the reporter agrees, and then be clear about when you’re going back on the record.”

Soundbite: A soundbite is a short, memorable statement or phrase that journalists use to capture the essence of a story or interview. This could be a quote from the person being interviewed, or a summary of what they said. For journalists soundbites are like single Lego blocks used to build up their reports (refers especially to radio and television).

Some tips for creating effective sound bites:

- Make sure your statement is clear and concise
- Use strong, catchy language
- Keep it brief - no more than a sentence or two
- Be prepared to explain your statement in more detail if needed

“The goal is to empower lawyers, government affairs professionals, and tax accountants, with everything that they need to do their jobs better and faster, whether that’s a technology tool or super news,” said Cesca Antonelli, editor-in-chief of Bloomberg Industry Group.



[*🎧 On Record PR Podcast: Bloomberg Industry Group Editor-In-Chief, Cesca Antonelli, Talks Legal, Tax and Government News*](#)

Embargo: An embargo usually entails providing an advance copy of an important press release or other information to the media with the explicit understanding that they will not release the story to the public until a specified date and time. When done right you maintain control of when the story breaks, and you give the media enough time to conduct research, gather quotes, and cover the story. If you offer an embargoed story to a sole reporter, never give that story to another reporter without the permission from the other. In addition, just because you offered it does not mean the reporter accepted the embargo. An embargo is an agreement between two parties.

Do not simply send a press release or email that says “Embargoed” at the top and expect the media to honor it. They have no duty to do so, and often they will not honor an embargo unless it is an explicit agreement with appropriate language to that effect.

You always risk a leak because there are no guarantees. A hungry member of the media could break an embargo without repercussion, or someone could have leaked the story. Know what you are dealing with and with whom.

Offering content under embargo does not mean you will retain control over the story. About embargoes, “I’ll be honest, they’re not a reporter’s favorite,” Passarella said.

Sometimes it does make things easier, but it can’t stop us from being completely ethical and responsible in our coverage. Meaning, we can’t not call the other side, and sometimes folks try to use the embargo to limit how much of the story we can report. We can’t stop reporting the full story. We can work with you on timing.

Exclusive: An exclusive is when you give a particular media outlet the opportunity to be the only outlet to get the interview. Many journalists insist on exclusives. The more prominent the media outlet, the more likely they will want an exclusive.

Follow-up or Second-day story: A follow-up or second-day story should turn hard news into a multifaceted story that blends the issues with human interest. It is an update with added information about a previously told story. A second-day story fills gaps in the original story, provides another angle, and shares expert opinion, data, or other new information. A follow-up can cover a range of topics, such as new developments in a breaking news story, updates on an ongoing investigation, or additional context on a topic that was previously covered.

Follow-up stories help to provide readers with a more complete and nuanced understanding of a given topic or event. By providing additional information and context, follow-ups can help readers stay informed and engaged with the news, even as events continue to unfold.

Follow-ups can take many forms, depending on the nature of the original story and the updates or additional information that is available. They can be short news briefs or longer, in-depth articles that delve into the details of a complex issue. Regardless of the format, the goal of a follow-up is always to provide readers with a more comprehensive understanding of a news story or topic.

Therefore, follow-up commentaries can be an important aspect of follow-up stories in journalism because they can provide valuable feedback, insights, and perspectives from readers and members of the community. They can help to provide additional context or information on a story, to supplement the reporting in the follow-up article, and provide a more complete picture of the issue.

Secondly, commentaries can foster community engagement and encourage readers to participate in a dialogue about the news. By allowing readers to share their thoughts, opinions, and reactions to a story, comments can create a space for discussion and debate, which can lead to a deeper understanding of the issue at hand.

For attribution: For attribution is like speaking on the record. The information the source provides is to be quoted and attributed to the person making the statement. The statement is usually followed by, "You can quote me on that."

Not for attribution: The exact opposite of for attribution, "not for attribution" is when you provide the media with information that can be quoted or used, but that same information cannot be attributed to the source. Here the information or statement should be preceded by, "You cannot quote me on this." This can be a sticky way to present information to the media. If you do not want it attributed to you, then it is better left unsaid, like "off the record." If you do not wish to provide certain information, you might consider earning some points with the reporter by suggesting an alternative source.

On background: According to a colleague who is an undercover investigative reporter, "on background" means that this reporter will not identify the source and will use the information provided by the source. "On background" can also mean that the information will not be attributed or used. It depends on the source's preference, which should be clarified between the source and the reporter.

On deep background: When you say you are providing information to a reporter "on deep background," it means that the information is not for the public, but the reporter can use it to enhance the story or get additional information from other sources. This is another example of a situation in which it is better not to put it out there if you do not want it published.

Lead: Unlike a new business "lead," a media lead is the opening sentence or paragraph of a news story or article that is designed to grab readers' attention and provide a concise summary of the most important information in the piece. The lead is often considered to be the most important part of a news story, as it can determine whether or not readers will continue reading the article.

Journalists' way of thinking can be described as a continual seek for the lead. What is the lead here? This is the question reporters and editors ask regularly. That is why it is crucial to present your story in such a way that the lead the journalist is looking for is already present in the first line of your commentary or message.

"The Reuters legal team is part of a very big global news organization. Everything that we cover is for a reason. We're not just pumping out stories just to have stories. We really have a focus on providing context about why someone should be interested in reading this," said Sara Merken, legal reporter at Reuters.



[*On Record PR Podcast: Trends in Legal Media with Reuters' Legal Reporter Sara Merken*](#)

A strong lead should be clear, concise, and engaging, while also conveying the most essential information of the story. It should answer the "five W's and one H" of journalism: who, what, when, where, why, and how, providing readers with a clear understanding of the basic facts of the story. The lead may also include a "hook" or an attention-grabbing element, such as a surprising fact, a strong data point, a compelling quote, or a vivid description, to entice readers to keep reading.

Overall, a journalistic lead is a crucial element of news writing, designed to quickly and effectively convey the most important information of a story to readers and capture their attention from the very beginning.

Evergreen: Evergreen refers to a type of content that is timeless and can be used repeatedly without becoming outdated or irrelevant. This term is often used in journalism to describe articles or stories that remain relevant and interesting to readers over a long period of time, regardless of when they were originally published. Evergreen content can include how-to guides, listicles, and other types of content that provide value to readers regardless of current events or trends.

One of the main benefits of having a few evergreen stories or pieces of content prepared is that they can provide a consistent source of traffic and engagement for your publication or website. Because evergreen content is timeless and remains relevant over a long period of time, it can continue to generate traffic and interest long after it is originally published.

In addition, evergreen content can be repurposed and reused in a variety of ways, such as in newsletters, social media posts, or even in follow-up articles or updates. This can help you get the most out of your content and ensure that it continues to reach new audiences over time. Having a few evergreen stories or pieces of content on hand can also help ensure that you have a steady stream of content to publish, even during slower news cycles or periods of low activity as well as media or PR crises. This can help you maintain a consistent publishing schedule and keep friendly journalists engaged, even when there may not be as much breaking news to report on.

How to Decide on Terms

The general rule of thumb should be to believe that everything is on the record, fair game, quotable, available from someone else, attributable, and about the story (not you).

As public relations professionals, we advise clients to approach off-the-record or background conversations with care. Any degree of this type of interaction requires one vital element: trust between the journalist and the source.

When deciding whether to approach a journalist with an off-the-record or background tip, consider how well you know the reporter's beat. Will the information be of value to the reporter and their readers/listeners/viewers? Is the information valuable to the target audience overall?

Consider, too, how well you know the reporter as an individual. Have you shared sensitive information with that person before? Were you able to agree on terms of a previous conversation, and did the reporter and the publication uphold those terms?

That type of trust can only be developed over time. It also can be subject to the whims of an editor with whom you do not have a relationship. A reporter may have agreed not to use a source's name, but by the time the piece gets to the editors, they may decide the agreement is not in the publication's best interest. Either the piece gets killed or the reporter must go back to the source and renegotiate terms.

Bottom line: If you are at all uncertain about the terms of a conversation, do not say anything you would not want to see printed on the front page or home page.

Even if both parties agree to go off the record or on background, the impressions and feelings created in the mind of the journalist by that conversation are long-lasting and can shape future coverage.

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