Protecting your sources: a short guide

THE ABILITY to protect sources is essential to journalism that holds power to account. Sources must be seen to be protected. This isn’t going to be technical: I am now taking seriously the joke conclusion of earlier advice – Bronze Age methods of organisation and communication rock.

The new Investigatory Powers Act doesn’t change anything about the ways your sources can be unmasked. It provides a legal framework for what the security services are doing anyway. The Act includes warrants for interception, equipment interference and bulk communications data acquisition – gathering “metadata” – see below.

The Act recognises the need for journalists to protect sources. But Section 264(5) excludes such material “if it is created or acquired with the intention of furthering a criminal purpose.” So no protections if your source is revealing something covering the Official Secrets Acts.

You may eventually win a court ruling on these provisions being unlawful, but then your source may have spent time in jail, or lost their job and their pension. Andrew Bousfield told the Branch in 2011: “if you can’t deal with someone who’s on an emotional roller-coaster, “don’t do whistleblower stories.”

There’s a difference between interception of content and of “metadata” – who’s communicated with whom. Usually the authorities are more concerned with this than what you said. Listening to content is expensive. Programming a computer to build a map of who communicates with whom, and when, is cheap. If you take no precautions it can identify candidates for being your source.

In 2016 Ross Anderson – Professor of computer security at the University of Cambridge – suggested we avoid using computers. Meet in person. Take notes with a pencil. Do not take your own phone with you to a face-to-face meeting. Tell your source not to bring theirs.

Make sure you’re not followed. Doubling back, rather than going to a meeting by the shortest route, may help. You can still buy a prepaid Oyster card for cash. Or cycle there. It’s about pushing up the cost of tracking you. Digital surveillance is cheap. A 24-hour tail involves 9-20 salaries.

There are no magical technological fixes. Indeed, using an unusual and “secure” communication channel may draw attention to you and to your source.

There’s more on how safe the communications system WhatsApp is, the Committee to Protect Journalists’ advisory on taking your laptop to the US (don’t), on “burner” phones bought for cash, on not back-upping your devices on the “cloud” – all at www.londonfreelance.org/fl/sources.html

This is a discussion document. No guarantees are possible. Send comments to sources@londonfreelance.org.

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Come all ye to the Freelance Salon

For a fun and informative evening of networking and journalism workshops with a special focus on diversification and new ways to make journalism pay, come to the London Freelance Branch Salon. Our speakers have made a living from all kinds of things, and attendees should come away with ideas on how to use their skills and experience to add an income stream.

It’s from 6.30pm till 9pm on Thursday 13 July in Central London and it costs £10 for NUJ members and £20 for non-members. Booking is essential and is open now: see www.londonfreelance.org/fl/1706salo.html. Our speakers include David Quantick, who started as a music journalist (Q, NME) and now does a mixture of gag and script writing across TV and radio; and Remona Aly, a journalist, commentator and broadcaster with a focus on faith, lifestyle and identity who is a presenter of BBC Radio 4’s Something Understood.

Below: the crowd at the salon in October 2015: photo © Hazel Dunlop