

It's Considered Unethical for Journalists to Pay Sources. Here's Why We Should Reconsider.

By Nora Neus, *Poynter*, July 18, 2023

The first time I [sent] money to a source, my stomach twisted uneasily. [...]

I was in the early stages of a set of interviews that would take up the bulk of my time for the next 18 months: interviewing activists, survivors, first responders, students, counterprotesters and clergy who were on the ground and formed the first line of defense against the armed and violent neo-Nazi demonstrators who killed counterprotester Heather Heyer and injured scores of others in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017.

[...]I had never exchanged money for information or a story before working on my book.

[But] a community backlash was slowly growing, a rising frustration among local activists and survivors who, years into this work, were getting burnt out contributing so much unpaid labor to these journalism projects.

On one level, it was a practical concern; spending hours in interviews is time not spent working for a wage[...]. But it was also a deeper question about the ethics of unpaid labor, and especially of what kind of people we ask for unpaid labor. Too often, it's women of color.

So it was in this context that I started thinking about how I could possibly ask survivors to spend hours speaking to me[...]. It sounded like *work*, work they deserved to be paid for.

Around the same time, I was researching the practice of oral history. [...]In that research, I learned that compensating “narrators,” as sources or characters are called in oral history, is a strongly valued, common practice.

“If you think about the roots of oral history in Indigenous cultures and how strategically white supremacy was used in order to silence those voices, now when we uplift those individual voices and we value them, we are counteracting this oppressive belief of devaluing the voice,” according to oral historian Noor Alzamami, [who] worked with me on this project.

Part of that “valuing” is literally assigning a financial value to these people’s time. They are folks who often hold marginalized identities and who may not be financially privileged. “We all deserve to get paid for our time,” Alzamami said.

But most journalists would say that exchanging money could also create a conflict of interest. That’s part of the Society of Professional Journalists's position, in addition to the concern that accepting money in exchange for stories or information incentivizes people to lie or embellish what they know, trying to drive up their price.[...] Putting money on the table at all can skew incentives and, the argument goes, journalistic truth.

At the same time, I still felt it was ethically gray to return to my former home and ask marginalized people, many of whom are still recovering from physical and mental wounds from the summer of 2017, for hours upon hours of unpaid labor for my book project. [...]So, consultation with oral history experts and my publisher, I decided to go ahead and compensate “narrators” for my project.

[...]I was able to interview a wider range of people with diverse perspectives, especially those who had to take a few hours off work to talk with me. Perhaps paradoxically, my final product would not have been as accurate as it is without their stories, which I could not have gotten if I required their unpaid labor.