



# The Sift<sup>®</sup> News Goggles

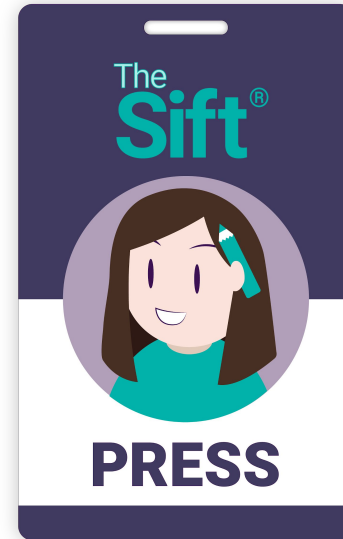
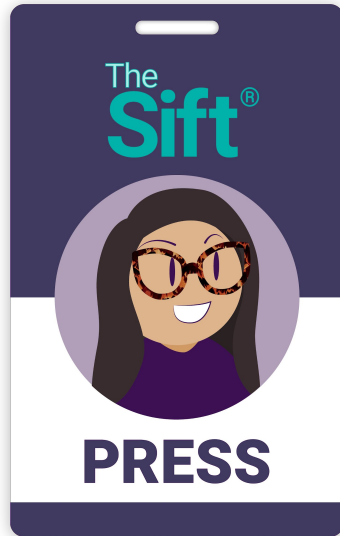
Chasing scoops and verifying raw information

Jan. 11, 2021

# First things first

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- Be sure to view these slides in presentation mode.
- Suzannah and Hannah, former reporters who work at NLP, are going to help you examine this topic through journalists' eyes.



On Jan. 3, The Washington Post [broke the news](#) about a recorded telephone conversation between President Donald Trump and Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger, during which the president pressed Raffensperger to “‘find’ enough votes to overturn his defeat” to President-elect Joe Biden.



The Post's initial reporting has been called “the scoop of the year.” In journalism, a “scoop” refers to an important news story first reported by a particular news organization or reporter(s). (Journalists call this “breaking” the story.)

So, how do journalists balance the desire to be first on a competitive, quickly developing story with the need for accuracy? How do other news organizations chase and verify scoops? Grab your news goggles. Let's go!

The Washington Post

top EXCLUSIVE

'I just want to find 11,780 votes': In extraordinary hour-long call, Trump pressures Georgia secretary of state to recalculate the vote in his favor

Audio: Trump berates Georgia secretary of state, urges him to 'find' votes



In a phone call on Jan. 2, President Trump insisted he won the state and threatened vague legal consequences. Here are excerpts from the call. (Obtained by The Washington Post)

By [Amy Gardner](#)

Jan. 3, 2021 at 8:59 p.m. CST

+ Add to list

Click [here](#) to read the full report.


Here's the story! Notice the "Exclusive" label at the top. This means that the Post obtained this information and was the first to report on it. The word "exclusive" is used to describe information, like an interview, documents or a recording, that is given to only a single news organization or obtained by it first. Let's look at the top few paragraphs ...

top EXCLUSIVE

'I just want to find 11,780 votes' hour-long call. Trump pressures

President Trump urged fellow Republican Brad Raffensperger, the Georgia secretary of state, to “find” enough votes to overturn his defeat in an extraordinary one-hour phone call Saturday that legal scholars described as a flagrant abuse of power and a potential criminal act.


The Washington Post obtained a [recording](#) of the conversation in which Trump alternately berated Raffensperger, tried to flatter him, begged him to act and threatened him with vague criminal consequences if the secretary of state refused to pursue his false claims, at one point warning that Raffensperger was taking “a big risk.”



In a big scoop like this, I first want to know how the newsroom got the scoop (maybe it's former reporter envy). This second paragraph — or graf, in journalist speak — offers our first clues. It looks like the newspaper “obtained a recording,” which, for me, raises a few quick questions: How did the Post obtain it, and from whom? It's unclear here. Sometimes, journalists choose not to name sources in order to protect them. Still, even if a source remains unnamed in a story, sources are known to the journalist(s) who received and vetted their information and confirmed their credibility before publishing. Standards-based journalists do not simply publish leaked information without taking careful steps to verify it to make sure they aren't being misled.

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A main part of a reporter’s job is balancing the desire to be the very first to publish, or break, news — knowing that competing news organizations may also have the same information (in this case, the recording) — and the need to be accurate. I recall an editor once telling me that there’s no slower than wrong. In other words, it’s better to be accurate, than first and inaccurate.






President Trump walks to the Oval Office after returning from Florida on Thursday. (Bill O'Leary/The Washington Post)

Trump dismissed their arguments.

“The people of Georgia are angry, the people of the country are angry,” he said. “And there’s nothing wrong with saying, you know, that you’ve recalculated.”

Raffensperger responded: “Well, Mr. President, the challenge that you have is, the data you have is wrong.”

*[\[Read the full transcript of the Trump-Raffensperger call\]](#)*



These are the first quotes in the story, which means the Post found this part of the recorded conversation especially important. Raw information, such as an audio recording, can be challenging to work with on deadline. Journalists have to first confirm it’s authentic and then must decide what is most important or relevant to include. In this case, it’s vital that the journalists accurately and fairly represent the nature of the call. From my newsroom days, I know how tough it can be sifting through information like this on deadline, and I often relied on my colleagues and editors to help me make these difficult decisions.




President Trump walks to the Oval Office after returning from Florida on Thursday. (Bill O'Leary/The Washington Post)

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*[\[Read the full transcript of the Trump-Raffensperger call\]](#)*



The audio of the phone conversation and a full transcript of it accompanied the Post’s exclusive story, providing additional information for readers. Making the original file available is a common practice when a report is focused on a recording, document or other piece of raw information. Releasing the full recording helps back up the reporting and guards against accusations that coverage is incomplete and/or inaccurate.

CNN

## In call, Trump demands Georgia officials 'find' votes to tilt election

By Jason Morris, [Chandelis Duster](#) and [Devan Cole](#), CNN

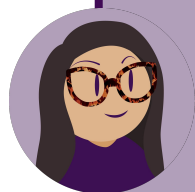
Updated 10:19 PM ET, Sun January 3, 2021



Click [here](#) to read the full report.

Here's CNN's report on the recording! Let's see how it handled chasing this scoop ...

**(CNN)** — President Donald Trump pushed Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger to "find" votes to overturn the election results after his loss to President-elect Joe Biden, according to an audio recording of [a phone call obtained by CNN](#) and [first reported by the Washington Post](#).



In this first graf (the first part of a story is called the "lede"), CNN is being transparent about getting the recording to verify the Post's scoop, while also crediting the Post for being the first to report on the audio. If a credible, standards-based newspaper, such as the Post, is reporting a big story, it's something that other major news organizations cannot ignore. They will work to chase and confirm the story themselves for their own reports.



**(CNN)** — President Donald Trump pushed Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger to "find" votes to overturn the election results after his loss to President-elect Joe Biden, according to an audio recording of [a phone call obtained by CNN](#) and [first reported by the Washington Post](#).



I really like that CNN included this hat tip to the Post so high up in their reporting (the very first sentence, in fact!). Not only does it show transparency; it's also a sign of respect. Think of it as giving credit where credit is due. As a local reporter, I had a pet peeve about national news organizations that would use reporting from local journalists without prominent or proper attribution. The Post broke a major story here, and it's best practice for other news organizations — even though they are competitors — to acknowledge that scoop in their own reporting.



Officials in Raffensperger's office recorded the call with Trump on Saturday, according to a source who was on the call and had direct knowledge of the conversation. Raffensperger told his advisers he did not want the recording or a transcript of the call released unless Trump attacked him or misrepresented the call, according to the source. Trump tweeted attacking Raffensperger Sunday morning.

[The New York Times](#) first reported on who recorded the call and Raffensperger's instructions on releasing the audio.



Here's another h/t (hat tip) — this time directed at The New York Times, which was first to report certain background details about the recording and its release.

The New York Times



# The New York Times

## *Trump, in Taped Call, Pressured Georgia Official to 'Find' Votes to Overturn Election*

The president vaguely warned of a “criminal offense” as he pressured Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger in the call, according to an audio recording.



President Trump has spent almost nine weeks making false conspiracy claims about his election loss. Anna Moneymaker for The New York Times



By Michael D. Shear and Stephanie Saul

Published Jan. 3, 2021 Updated Jan. 5, 2021

The News Literacy Project

|  @NewsLitProject

Speaking of the Times  
— here's the Times'  
report on the recording.  
Let's see how it handled  
chasing this scoop ...

Click [here](#) to read the full report.

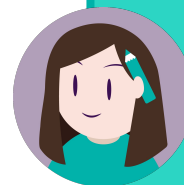
WASHINGTON — President Trump pressured Georgia's Republican secretary of state to "find" him enough votes to overturn the presidential election and vaguely threatened him with "a criminal offense" during an hourlong telephone call on Saturday, according to an audio recording of the conversation.

Mr. Trump, who has spent almost nine weeks making false conspiracy claims about his loss to President-elect Joseph R. Biden Jr., told Brad Raffensperger, the state's top elections official, that he should recalculate the vote count so Mr. Trump, not Mr. Biden, would end up winning the state's 16 electoral votes.

"I just want to find 11,780 votes, which is one more than we have," Mr. Trump said during the conversation, according to a recording first obtained by The Washington Post, which published it online Sunday. The New York Times also acquired a recording of Mr. Trump's call.



Here's the top of the story. Let's look at this third graf in particular. Like CNN, the Times also credits the Post as being first to break the story. That attribution gets a thumbs-up from me, even if it comes a bit later in the story.



We can also see that the Times didn't take the Post's word for what this recording contained. Times journalists obtained the recording for themselves to verify it and do their own reporting.

**Note:** Information “leaked” to the press has historically played an important role in watchdog journalism to hold the powerful accountable.

The New York Times [recently published](#) journalist Neil Sheehan’s account of how he obtained the leaked Pentagon Papers, a “blockbuster scoop” on America’s involvement in the Vietnam War. Sheehan, who [died Jan. 7](#), asked that the story remain unpublished while he was alive.

# News Goggles: Next steps

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**Discuss:** How should journalists balance speed and accuracy in reporting? Why is information sometimes “leaked” or shared with journalists? Can journalists trust the information that is leaked to them? What are some ways to fact-check or verify raw information, such as a phone recording? Why might standards-based news organizations pursue certain “scoops” over others? How is the Post’s report an example of watchdog journalism?

**Related:** [“Trump’s phone call to Georgia was illegal, immoral or unconstitutional. Here’s how some journalists decide what to call it.”](#)  
(Kelly McBride, Poynter).

# News Goggles: Next steps

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**Idea:** Ask students to put themselves in reporters' shoes and imagine that someone had sent them a copy of the phone recording. What should they do next? Should they immediately report on the recording and release it, or should they take other steps to verify this piece of raw information? Who could they contact to make sure it is authentic? How should they determine if the source of the recording is credible? Finally, how should they decide which excerpts of the [hour-long call](#) are most important to feature in a news report to be fair and accurate?

**Resources:** ["Practicing Quality Journalism,"](#) ["Democracy's Watchdog,"](#) ["What is News?"](#) and ["InfoZones"](#) (NLP's Checkology® virtual classroom).





This exercise originated in the Jan. 11, 2021, issue of The Sift® newsletter from the News Literacy Project. You can read archives of the newsletter and subscribe [here](#).



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