

A story in this newspaper yesterday described the small storm kicked up by The Post's decision a day earlier to unmask Dr. Henry Kissinger as the source of a report from a "background" press briefing that "a new look might have to be taken at the President's summitry plans" if the Soviet Union does not exercise a little more restraint on India. Mr. Ronald Ziegler, a White House spokesman, said our identification of Dr. Kissinger was "unacceptable to the White House." Mr. David J. Kraslow of the Los Angeles Times called The Post's action "unprofessional, unethical, cheap journalism." Well, those are pretty strong words and in our continuing interest in bringing to you, For Your Information, some greater insight into what we are up to, and up against, in the news business, we would like to examine this incident and the larger issues that it raises about the relationship between press and government.

The facts are these: Dr. Kissinger, while flying back from the Azores on the President's jet, had a chat with a five-member "pool" of reporters representing another 88 newsmen who were traveling on two separate aircraft and had delayed their return by three hours to finish filing their reports on Mr. Nixon's meeting with French President Pompidou. There is no argument over what Dr. Kissinger said about summitry and Soviet-American relations and other matters or over the terms under which he said it—no attribution to any administration official. Shortly after the President's plane landed, the "pool" report was made available for general use, but under the "not for attribution" rule, and began appearing on news wires and TV newscasts with the source dutifully concealed. This newspaper, which had no trouble learning independently who the source was, decided that its readers also had a right to know. Almost one hundred newspaper reporters knew; the Russians knew, and also the Indians, and before the night was out anybody in town with the slightest interest in the question would know. So why not the readers of The Post—or of the Los Angeles Times, who were told by Mr. Kraslow only that "there was good reason to believe" that the President "is expected to

reassess his plans for a summit meeting in Moscow . . ." While we would not wish to raise issues of professionalism, or ethics or cheapness, that doesn't strike us as nearly good enough—to mumble about "good reasons" when what you mean is that you have just heard it stated in plain terms by the President's leading White House adviser on foreign affairs. Obviously, both Dr. Kissinger and the President wanted word of this threat to reach the Russians and the American public and the rest of the world—but without any official accountability.

Is this a game newspapers ought to be playing? We think not, especially since it is always played at the expense of the reader, whose right to the most complete and candid account of events has to be any newspaper's first concern. It is all very well to talk about the sanctity of "ground rules" for "background" meetings with the press. But what is the validity, or durability, of rules or agreements about a secret which has been confided to almost one hundred people, almost all of whom can be counted on within hours to pass it along, at the very least, to one hundred more. Once upon a time—and to be fair about it that was several administrations ago—"background" press conferences used to be concerned with just that—background, elaboration, explanation, education, something to help reporters understand a news development. Increasingly over the years the government has taken to exploiting them for anonymous dissemination of news itself—threats or charges or views on this or that for which the government or a particular official does not wish to acknowledge responsibility. And increasingly the press has gone along, playing it straight, getting some bit or piece of something which passes for a news story and passing it along. It is a bad habit—which this newspaper itself has fallen into—and we are persuaded, as The Post's Executive Editor Benjamin Bradlee put it the other day, that "we have engaged in this deception and done this disservice to the reader long enough." That is why The Post has decided to apply a stricter, more skeptical policy toward "background" press conferences or any other mechanisms by which the government or its officials seek to ladle out information or opinions for which they are not prepared to accept responsibility.