

Beyond the inverted pyramid: Teaching the writing and all-formats coverage of planned and unplanned breaking news

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Abstract:

For generations, journalism educators have focused on the structure of a basic news story as following the inverted pyramid style, structuring it from the most important information to the least important—not chronologically. The current environment still demands that at times, but also requires journalists to cover events live, chronologically, in short bursts of headline-style reporting. Using a descriptive case study method, this paper explores a pedagogical technique for teaching breaking news in the 21st century, whereby students *concurrently* produce the different writing styles required for tweets, broadcast, print and web audiences. The study concludes that such a staged approach works to help undergraduate students efficiently learn how to cover both “planned” and “unplanned” breaking news.

Introduction

The primary role of a journalist in society has long been to get out the truth to the audience, the most pertinent facts of what is happening in the world. Scholars have noted how the additional criteria of objectivity first arose in the 1830s in American journalism and grew to be a standard journalistic tenet by the early 20th Century (Schudson, 1978, p. 3-9). Together, truth and objectivity have long been established in American journalism, and in American journalism education, as foundational principles of the discipline. Likewise, the importance of getting that information out quickly has been the nature of news as long as competition has been involved. Notably, the rise of the telegraph after its invention in the 1840s, which led to the creation of the first American wire service, The Associated Press, helped to inspire speed as a

third key value that has only become more enmeshed in journalism today (Schudson, 1978, p. 4).

As the industry enters the second decade of the Social Media Era, a time where breaking news and speed are king, it is critical for scholars and practitioners alike to consider the questions surrounding how the writing structure of daily reportage has evolved under those pressures – how journalism education and practice have evolved and must evolve further. The micro-blogging site Twitter was started in 2006 (Java, Song, Finin, & Tseng, 2007) and less than two years later created a seminal moment in journalism history when it was used by a witness to capture and distribute the defining images of the “Miracle on the Hudson,” when U.S. Airways Flight 1549 made an emergency landing in the Hudson River (Langer, 2014).

Keywords: breaking news, mobile journalism, broadcast, inverted pyramid

The headline-style reporting used by citizens and journalists alike gathered steam as it helped to fuel information dissemination during major news events such as the 2008 California wildfires, the 2008 U.S. elections, the Mumbai massacre and the Iranian election protests in 2009 (Lenhard & Fox, 2009). In the years since, the growth in smartphone ownership has skyrocketed in the U.S., with about 77 percent of the population owning one (up from 35 percent in 2011) and ownership is especially high among younger Americans (Pew Research Center, 2017). Combined, the increasing number of smartphones and the increase in number of Twitter users since 2007, with 68 million users in the U.S. and 328 million worldwide in the second quarter of 2017 (Fiegerman, 2017), have led to a unique moment in the world of citizen journalism and in breaking news. Those changes have altered the way breaking news has been reported – shifting the priority to the short, 140-character headline style bursts, reported and sent chronologically. To this end, Messing (2010) argues that the “model of journalism” has remained unchanged for decades and that “adding multimedia, using new storytelling techniques and delivering the product over the Internet does not change the basic model” (p 512). Messing observes that journalism schools need to be re-evaluating their practices. That challenge is a significant impetus of this study.

Much of the pedagogical research done in this area has focused primarily on the use of mobile technology in the classroom (Jones, 2015) or how to incorporate Twitter and other forms of social media into a journalism curriculum (Bor, 2014). Others have explored the collective experience of a class as they live-tweeted the same event together (Hsu & Chin 2012, Kinsky & Bruce, 2016). Much of the scholarly work being done in these areas – whether it is considered mobile journalism research, social media research, or just another form of journalism research – has centered on the technical aspects of this type of work and has referenced how much more research needs to be done in this area of journalism education. The focus here will be on the actual writing of breaking news, not just the technology and platforms used to distribute that information. Scholars in other fields routinely cite the fact that journalism as a discipline lends itself to “pedagogical praxis,” where the best way to learn it is to *do* it (Schaeffer, 2004).

The general methodology that this study will use is this type, but specifically a type of “pedagogical

praxis” that incorporates social media tactics and classic journalism instruction while using (in some cases, simulating) a live news environment. This paper is a descriptive case study of a new journalism course launched in 2016 called “Breaking News: Consuming, Reporting and Writing.” In the context of existing research on the pedagogy of breaking news and mobile reporting (Jones, 2015; Laskin & Avena, 2016; Squire & Dikkers, 2012), this piece will explore the pedagogical challenges of the *writing* portion of this kind of reporting – which stretches beyond the classic inverted pyramid style of newswriting that has so long been the foundation of breaking news reporting (Scanlon, 2003), and the techniques and best practices that can be used with journalism students as they report live, breaking news around them, events that they cover on their own and in-person. The issues here revolve around how journalism education must focus both on live reporting and on the construction of stories for all formats that are produced from material gathered during a live reporting event. The question this paper will address (RQ1) is: **How do undergraduate students respond to a pedagogical approach in which they are asked to find breaking news, report the developments live, and then write stories for broadcast, Web, and print platforms afterward?**

In this case, one independent variable is the focus on one 300-level course of sophomore, junior, and senior students, all enrolled either in the Professional Writing major or Professional Writing minor in the English Department at a public university in eastern Pennsylvania; all of the students had already completed an introductory journalism course. Another independent variable is the “planned” breaking news events they were assigned to cover live – student government meetings, faculty senate meetings, sporting events etc. The main dependent variables involve 1) an assignment in which the students are tasked with finding an unexpected or unplanned piece of breaking news in their community and 2) an assignment in which they are randomly teamed into three separate groups to report on a planned breaking news event. Considering these variables, the review began with the following, **Proposition #1: Using a modeling approach, along with an in-class simulation exercise, and repetition, undergraduate students with a basic foundation in journalism can develop the skills to independently and clearly report planned and unplanned breaking news live online, and then form well-constructed, well-written stories for all formats.**

Literature Review

News organizations for years have been using live blogging and social media to report breaking news such as the 2011 Japanese earthquake and tsunami, and the subsequent search for survivors and the Fukushima disaster (Thurman & Newman, 2014). In their study, Thurman and Newman also found that the increase in the use of live blogs came partly as a reaction from the mainstream news organizations to the way social media and blog cites “introduced the idea of bite-sized chunks of content arranged in a chronological order” (Thurman & Newman, 2014, p. 656). This shift toward live, chronological reporting is significant in terms of the foundation of basic news writing and where reporters start, how they structure their information when reporting breaking news – defined here as urgent news that is developing and changing quickly.

With the changes in the structure of written reporting and with the impact of social media, there has been much scholarly debate on the way the academy must change to alter its pedagogy. Much has focused on technology, but the actual journalistic approach must be revamped as well. Donica Messing notes that “General interest journalism, written in a particular style and convention, does not resonate with readers who have more choices for information and entertainment. The Internet is a driving force in changing the way information is produced, consumed and paid for, affecting news companies in every way imaginable” (Messing, 2010, p. 512). This can suggest many things, but it definitively shows that the “style and convention” of news writing pedagogy needs to be re-evaluated. Other scholars have noted that journalism educators need to make more of an effort to get students beyond just the basics of interviewing, objectivity and balance to get at other fundamentals and culture of the profession, something professional organizations are looking to them to do (King, 2010). In today’s journalism world, those learned skills that are falling to the academy to teach include learning to report and write something live and in real-time bursts.

Much research on how mobile technology is used in journalism has found a home in the academy, but little of it has focused on the pedagogy of how that technology can be put to professional or practical use (Walck, Cruikshank & Kalyango, 2015). Furthermore, journalism students acknowledge that exposure to mobile technologies makes them take a more crit-

ical approach toward writing for new communication platforms; but all of this points back to the lack of pedagogical standards in these areas of reporting, “the urgency to develop new qualitative and quantitative ways of evaluating this important utility to society because mobile journalism has transformed information gathering, analysis, publishing or broadcasting with immediacy, and live reporting” (Walck, Cruikshank & Kalyango, 2015, p. 247).

Others have found that, while the literature shows a need to incorporate social media and digital reporting skills into the journalism curriculum, the literature on instructional approaches is lacking. Stephanie E. Bor (2015), in researching the question of how to integrate social media into the existing curriculum, noted the importance of emphasizing ethical considerations in social media reporting, the use of in-class experiences to develop an audience, of technical instruction, and of instruction on the importance of the distinction of personal versus professional on social media. But, while touching on the importance of helping students avoid typing errors, Bor did not get into the issue of developing techniques to help improve the overall writing and writing structure of students producing news content for social media and the Web.

Before delving into this question further, however, it is first important to briefly explore one of the oldest principles of journalistic writing, the “inverted pyramid” structure of most-important-to-least-important order of information in a news story, and how it remains important today, but needs to be deviated from in the areas of breaking news pedagogy. There is much debate over when the inverted pyramid became the standard in American journalism, but Horst Pottker (2003) argues it was between 1875 and 1895, although evidence of it can certainly be found before that. He argues that the structure came about not just because of the economic and technological reasons that have been put forth by other scholars, but instead mainly because of its “communicative quality” of how it conveys information quickly (p. 509). In one sense, scholars and practitioners alike have long seen the inverted pyramid as the ideal structure for reporting breaking news (Scanlon, 2003). But, in the context of social media and mobile reporting, that question becomes more complicated as we consider a world of breaking news reporting where information is increasingly first consumed as bursts of information – tweets, text alerts, scrolling headlines – before it is

consumed as “stories” seen or heard on radio/TV, or read online and in print. Therefore, the question here centers on how the pedagogy of teaching breaking news reporting must change to reflect this.

Method

This descriptive case study centered on analysis of work produced in the aforementioned new course in the spring of 2016. The study focused on work produced by 13 students in the course – including hundreds of tweets they sent live as they covered breaking news, mock tweets they developed as part of class exercises, and thousands of words they produced in the form of complete broadcast scripts and full stories intended for a print or Web audience. The study, therefore, focused more on qualitative than quantitative elements of the work, although there were quantitative requirements, such as the number of tweets that needed to be sent, the time frame in which they needed to be sent, and the word counts for the stories, all of which were specific. The review assessed the assignment goals and the ways the students met those goals – including the number of tweets, the grammatical quality of the tweets, and the way each tweet did (or did not) clearly delineate a development in the news event. The review also looked at the improvements and weaknesses that were apparent at each stage – the revisions of the actual stories produced. All of the student work was submitted with the explicit understanding that it be available for public consumption, but no names are used here.

The reasoning for **Proposition #1** comes from research on student responses and student work, as well as from models used by professional news organizations. Using the AP style as a praxis approach proved instructive in the new course’s development, according to the study, and provided a pedagogical basis that can be used in teaching the progression of breaking news:

1) First, report a development as a 90 to 140-character headline or information burst (in AP parlance, a NewsAlert);

2) Second, report the development as a 130-word script for TV or radio, and show urgency by using present, present perfect, or present perfect progressive verb tense;

3) Create a 250 to 300-word “breaking” story for print or the web, using concise, but traditional print style structure and verbs.

Each of these stages was taught with the aid

of *The Associated Press Stylebook and Briefing on Media Law* (The Associated Press, 2013). Each of the 13 students in the course was required to purchase that text. Each was also required to have a public account on Twitter and to use the hashtag #breakingku for all assignments for the class, for the first stage of the breaking news reporting – the live, chronological developments. Much like when the telegraph came into use in the 1840s and newspapers made use of it (Schudson, 1978), the students were instructed that Twitter would be used to report live developments, and that their extensive notes would then also be used to piece together complete stories – and that all information had to be attributed and be free of obvious personal bias. For the purpose of the live developments, the inverted pyramid must be put aside – live reporting was to be done chronologically. The following course objectives were given:

Table 1: Course Objectives

This course has the following objectives. In other words, upon completion of this course you will be proficient in the following areas, each of which is critical in both professional writing and basic information consumption in today’s world. You will be able to:

- *Follow a live, breaking news story on all platforms – social media, Web, TV, radio and print sources – and identify the major developments*
- *Look for and identify the sources of information in each development in a breaking story*
- *Assess and evaluate the speed and accuracy of the reporting of such stories*
- *Identify things happening around you that qualify as breaking news in your community*
- *Use your observation skills and conduct live interviews to confirm the facts and basic information of breaking news happening around you*
- *Take detailed notes and use social media platforms to report the individual developments of breaking stories in your community*
- *Write basic, short, balanced news stories on news you cover*

In terms of the qualitative assessment, the review first looked at whether the live tweets gave the essential facts of each particular development of the news event, were grammatically correct, were written with a strong present-tense action verb, and were concise but detailed.

The review then assessed the broadcast version of the story compiled from the facts as of the last tweet

that was sent. This assessment evaluated whether the story was within the word count for a 30-second read, whether it was written in broadcast style, utilizing appropriate verb tense, short sentences, and inverted pyramid structure. The stories were assessed largely based on how well they sounded when actually read aloud.

Finally, the review evaluated the full stories for print and web audiences, assessing how well they would translate if they were actually posted on a live news site shortly after the news event, and then put into print. The stories were assessed for inverted pyramid structure, how concise they were, and how well they focused on the actual news itself, and without commentary. Likewise, they were assessed for how clear and grammatically correct the writing was, and how well edited they appeared to be, despite the aggressive deadlines given the students.

Discussion & Analysis

A scholar recently posted to a Facebook forum for journalism instructors the following question, which is relevant in this discussion: “Do you still teach the inverted pyramid?” (Eve Byron, Teaching Journalism, July 14, 2016) The question comes in the context of the increasing amount of information that is consumed via 140 characters on Twitter or other social media platforms in bursts, rather than in full stories. The question, which received varied responses, adds context for the question being posed in this paper: How do the tactics of journalism scholars need to change in an era where news is first reported in bursts that are often chronological, rather than fully structured stories. It was this question that led to the creation of an upper-level journalism class at Kutztown University a public university of about 9,200 undergraduates (Kutztown University, n.d.) that sits about 90 minutes northwest of Philadelphia.

The idea of this class was to focus on how to set standards for reporting on developing news in the community, with the idea of students writing stories and producing multimedia content (photos, video, graphics, or sound clips) for the respective major platforms: social media, Web, TV/radio, and print. In doing so, the course followed a similar model as that used by The Associated Press, which, as noted previously, was also instrumental in the creation of the inverted pyramid news story structure.

The course had a prerequisite of an “Introduction to Journalism” course. The online course site for the

new course featured “model” samples of recent breaking news, drawing primarily from Associated Press stories, in which were posted the major tweet-style “NewsAlerts” of the stories’ developments, the broadcast versions, and then the full print/Web versions. Students were instructed of the two major types: “planned” and “unplanned” news events, terms borrowed from the world of daily journalism. “Planned breaking news” was defined as any newsworthy event that the students knew about in advance and would likely impact the community and have developments – i.e. protests, court hearings, noteworthy public meetings in the community. “Unplanned breaking news” was defined as anything unexpected that would have developments and impact the community.

The sample stories were a combination of planned and unplanned news covered by the AP – a fatal Amtrak crash in Philadelphia (Sisak, 2015), the shootings in San Bernardino, Calif. (Myers & Pritchard, 2015), the Supreme Court’s ruling on gay marriage (Sherman, 2015), criminal charges being announced against Bill Cosby (Dale, 2015), and the Democrat Jim Kenney winning the Philadelphia mayoral primary (Sisak, 2015). The course drew from other outlets and news that developed through the semester, but used these primary examples as models to show the different stages of a breaking news story.

The course required students to follow daily *The New York Times*, the *Reading Eagle* (a local newspaper), and a TV or radio station of their choosing. Per university policies, the course could not require the students to have a smartphone, but all of the students had smartphones. They were informed that they would be using them throughout the course and that, if they had trouble accessing one, a smartphone could be obtained through the university’s library.

The semester began with a series of practice exercises – including having students research some historical examples of breaking news from before the age of the Internet and social media, and then break down the developments, and having them write a series of practice “tweets” and a practice story on a mock “breaking news” event that was acted out in class. The goal was to get them first to focus not on the inverted pyramid, but on identifying key chronological developments and reporting them in quick, present-tense, headline-style (active verbs with no articles or complete sentences) tweet-style bursts. The goal in these practice tweets was to focus the pedagogy on the writing – using strong verbs, correct attribution, avoiding

articles, and making the writing strong and clear so it would work as a tweet, text alert, “crawl” headline, or online headline reporting the development.

For these two assignments, the historical event and the practice news story that was role-played in class, they had a day or two to work up their model tweets, as well as a 130-word broadcast script and a 250 to 300-word online story. In those stories, the course reinforced the key principles of this type of live reporting: They could only report in that tweet what they knew at that moment. Again, this is the principle of reversing the inverted pyramid structure, and reporting what they knew right now, even though it may or may not be the most important thing ultimately. Live reporting, it must be taught, does not always follow the inverted pyramid: A student journalist can’t *wait* until the most important thing has happened. To instruct on that, in the first practice exercise, students had to choose a historical event from before the age of the Internet, pick out the developments, and write a present-tense, tweet-style alert for each development, writing only information known at that moment. Samples are included here as Table 2, Table 3 and Table 4.

Table 2: (Student A)

Joseph Warren sends for Paul Revere
British moving to arrest revolution leaders
Revere sets out to warn Hancock, Adams
Revere alerts revolutionaries
Revere arrives in Lexington
Revere arrested for aiding rebels
Revere released, returns to Lexington

Table 3: (Student B)

Apollo 11 astronauts Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin and Michael Collins sit at Launch Complex 39A at Kennedy Space Center
9:32 a.m. Apollo 11 engines fire and lifts off
Apollo 11 passes through Earth orbit
Crew journeys into lunar orbit
Armstrong and Aldrin climb into lunar module Eagle, begin descent to moon landing
Collins writes Eagle is “the weirdest looking contraption I have ever seen in the sky”

Table 4: (Student C)

Terrorists bomb Oklahoma federal building
Two suspects face trial; Timothy McVeigh, Terry Nicholas

FBI discover massive truck bomb
168 people found dead after terrorist attack
Homegrown terrorist charged with murder

In the next assignment, students were informed the day before that they would be “covering” a mock breaking news exercise in class. On the day of the mock breaking news exercise, the instructor posted a reminder on the board that what was about to occur was an exercise and that they should not tweet it live, but that they should take careful notes so that they would be able to construct “tweets” that would report the developments, and ultimately construct short stories reporting the “news.” For the exercise, the instructor collapsed in class and they reacted, “calling” 911; the instructor then also played the role of a paramedic attempting to resuscitate the fallen person (the instructor) and then play-acted carrying the “fallen” instructor out to an ambulance. The students then pondered what to do next, “calling” the department chair and trying to track down the instructor’s wife for details. Afterward, students wrote a series of “tweets,” a broadcast story, and a full story reporting the “news.” It was emphasized that this was a “mock” assignment that was not to be posted online – only in the private course “dropbox.” A sample from one student is included here as table 5.

Table 5: (Student D)

Tweets:

Professor Patrick Walters, from Kutztown University, collapses in class after having chest pain
Students call 911; Paramedic from Lehigh Valley Hospital performs CPR on Walters
Walters is escorted and transferred to the Lehigh Valley Hospital
Professor Walters students call Dr. Andrew Vogel, the English Department
Chair of Kutztown University, to inform him of the news

Students obtain Walters’s wife phone number and call to give her the news, she is shocked and worried

Broadcast Story:

Kutztown University Professor, Patrick Walters, collapses in class after having chest pain and has just been transferred to the Lehigh Valley Hospital.

Authorities have not yet confirmed the cause of the collapse.

The students of called 911 for help. As they arrived to room 140, in the building Old Main at Kutztown

University, a Paramedic called Bill Flanders, treats Walters immediately.

The paramedic performs CPR and checks Walters wallet to identify him with his ID. "His heart isn't beating," Paramedic Bill Flanders says. Information about Walters health condition still do not exist.

Walters students thought he was faking it or couldn't believe what was happening. "I was in the other side of the room so I couldn't really see him collapse very well, but I thought he was faking it," Kutztown University professional writing major, Andrew Kutzer says.

More information and updates about Walters health conditions will become available.

Full Story:

Kutztown University Professor, Patrick Walters, collapsed in class after having chest pain and was transferred to the Lehigh Valley Hospital. Authorities have not yet confirmed the cause of the collapse.

The students of Walters called 911 for help. As they arrived to room 140, in the building Old Main at Kutztown University, a Paramedic named Bill Flanders, treated Walters immediately. The paramedic performed CPR and checked Walters wallet to identify him with his ID. "His heart isn't beating," Paramedic Bill Flanders said. Information about Walters health condition still do not exist.

Walters students thought he was faking it or couldn't believe what was happening. "I was in the other side of the room so I couldn't really see him collapse very well, but I thought he was faking it," Kutztown University professional writing major, Andrew Kutzer said.

Students then called Kutztown University English Department Chair, Andrew Vogel, 41, to inform him about what happened to Walters. "What did you say happened!?", Vogel said in shock. Vogel also stated that Walters has never had a medical problem at Kutztown University before, since he started working there since fall 2013. Students were also able to obtain Walters's wife's phone number during this phone call.

One of Walters students calls Jennifer Walters, 39. At first, Jennifer Walters thought he was faking his collapse, but then she was worried when she realized it wasn't fake. "Oh my God, my children!" Jennifer Walters say. "He's a pretty healthy guy, we've been married to 13 years and nothing like this ever happened before." Patrick and Jennifer Walters have two kids, Cecilia of 3 years old, and Alexandra of 8 years old.

More information and updates about Walters health conditions will become available.

As evidenced from this sample in Table 5, the students were able to take the next step with this mock news event, piecing together information from a live, simulated breaking news event and constructing stories in all three formats: the live, tweet-style bursts; a broadcast style script to be read over the air; and a full story for print or online. What this assignment did was to take the next step in the instructional process. The students encountered basic issues that included: lack of attribution; tense issues in all three formats, but especially in the broadcast stories; factual issues; and basic structural issues. They learned that with the tweets, again, they had to go chronologically, reporting the urgent news as it became available in their notes. But then they learned the tactic of having to go back to inverted pyramid style for when they wrote the broadcast and full stories. They learned the challenges that they would face when they covered both planned and unplanned breaking news live.

At this stage they had read sample news-breaking stories, produced tweets of a historic breaking news story, and from a roleplay event produced news story in tweets, broadcast, and print form. In the next stage they launched into the covering of actual breaking news. For the first live assignment, they had two weeks to seek out some "unplanned" breaking news either on campus, or wherever they were at the time of the spring break week. The instructions included:

This kind of breaking news is not something that you know about in advance – it's something unexpected, something that happens around you and impacts people in your community. The first thing you will need to do is be ready to react when it happens, so that you can quickly move into reporter mode.

The assignment was intended to be flexible, allowing the students to find news around them that was unexpected. The 13 students produced these news story ideas:

Table 6

- Student A: Abortion protester outside women's center*
- Student B: Hundreds of spiders hatching in parking lot, covering cars*
- Student C: Flight cancellation at San Francisco airport*
- Student D: Unexpected death of co-worker's brother*
- Student E: 5-year-old injured in fall at playground*
- Student F: Air conditioner breaks in office*
- Student G: Construction leads to traffic congestion*

near campus

Student H: Campus shuttle breaks down, stranding students

Student I: Restaurant altercation

Student J: Candidates announce bids for student government president

Student K: Pit bull escapes, is captured

Student L: Florida International announces new women's basketball coach

Student M: Hotel pool suddenly closed due to construction

As evidenced by Table 6, the majority of students in the course were able to meet the expectations of the assignment – unexpected news happening and developing around them, wherever they were. The news and the effect of the news varied, but all worked for the purpose of the assignment. Student J found news that was technically planned, but we were able to work with it for the purposes of the assignment. Each student successfully found news that could be reported in developments, even if some of the news was far less significant than other news. Here, the students demonstrated their ability to find breaking, developing news that was not expected. This was a key element of the pedagogical goals of teaching breaking news and the assignment engaged the students by challenging them.

Of the thirteen students, all but one successfully live-tweeted the developments of the news event they found. They successfully demonstrated the skill of reporting something live, in short bursts, using a mobile phone at the scene of the news. These skills built on those shown in mobile reporting (Jones, 2015) and they are different from the experiences demonstrated in the work of scholars who have had students live-tweet the same event together (Hsu & Chin, 2012; Kinsky & Bruce, 2016). The students also built on the lessons learned in the previous exercises and this assignment showed improvements in the live reporting that they did, as evidenced by the sample in Table 7:

Table 7

Student B Tweets:

Employee at Phila. Premium Outlets reports recently hatched spiders covering cars in parking lot #breakingku

Cars in back half of front parking lot covered in cobwebs and spiders #breakingku

Spiders black in color, appear to be slightly smaller

than the size of a dime #breakingku

Karen Mueller, assistant manager of Toys R Us outlet calls security to scene #breakingku

3 security guards arrive on scene & discuss calling pest control #breakingku

Security decides to call pest control to scene #breakingku

Pest control arrives, spray down cars to remove spiders and clear off cobwebs #breakingku

Outlet Operations Director Darrick Smale arrives on scene shortly after pest control #breakingku

Smale says there have been spiders in the past, but never this many #breakingku

The student sample in Table 7 demonstrates how the class made improvements in this style of writing after the earlier assignments. Like others in the class, the live reports in this assignment did a better job of using the present, headline-style tense, active voice and strong verbs. There were also improvements in detailing the key developments of the news, and making sure there was attribution when needed. However, this assignment showed that getting key information out live still sometimes presented a challenge; in Table 7, for example, the student neglected to give a ballpark estimate of how many spiders – the fact that it was hundreds is what made it newsworthy. This assignment demonstrated not only the importance of finding news, but also in teaching students how to craft urgent news as bursts sent in real time.

From a pedagogical perspective, using Student B's assignment as an example, the next step of this assignment also demonstrated another key skill of teaching breaking news, one where students must then revert back to the inverted pyramid and construct full stories for a broadcast audience, and for print and/or the Web. This is where this study shifts into the second half of **RQ1**, regarding the skill of returning to the inverted pyramid structure once the news event is completed. The challenge for students was in using more of the information they already had, and then filling in holes to create a complete story to be posted online or put into print; this is what Scanlon (2003) meant when he wrote that the inverted pyramid was ideal for breaking news. Here, the students were instructed to think about how they were now taking a breath, but not a long one, and putting together complete publishable stories, using the verb tenses previously discussed for each, and the structure of the inverted pyramid. Student B's stories are in Table 8.

Table 8

Student B:

Broadcast Story:

Spiders falling from a lamppost in the Philadelphia Premium Outlet parking lot are covering cars.

Witnesses are reporting hundreds of spiders in the affected area and are afraid to try and get into their cars.

Assistant manager at Toys R Us, Karen Mueller, had made the call to outlet security informing them of the spider infestation. Three security guards arrived on scene to discuss what should be done.

Mueller says she was worried to get into her car because the spiders covering it almost looked like they were jumping.

Security made the decision to call outlet pest control so they could spray and wipe down the cars in the affected area.

According to Operations Director Darrick Smale, the outlets remain open and are operating as usual.

Full Story:

HUNDREDS OF SPIDERS FALL FROM LAMPPOST

LIMERICK, Pa. – Hundreds of spiders fell from a lamppost in the Philadelphia Premium Outlet parking lot on Wednesday, covering several cars, according to employee Karen Mueller. Security was then called to the scene along with pest control, which both sprayed and wiped down the affected area.

Mueller, Assistant Manager at Toys R Us, was one of the first to find the spiders after they hatched. She arrived early Wednesday morning around 9 a.m. and saw nothing out of the ordinary. She was leaving work at 4 p.m. when she happened upon the spiders. She described them as “completely taking over her car.”

“I was so scared,” said Mueller. “They looked like they were hopping around so I didn’t want to get too close to my car.”

Mueller later stated she had not seen anything like this in the eight years she has worked at the Outlets.

Only a small area of the parking lot was affected and Operations Director Darrick Smale, 33, speculates the spider eggs were laid near the top of the lampposts.

“We’ve had spiders in the past but never this bad,” said Smale. “It must be because it was warmer this week. Normally it’s still cold and they mostly die off.”

Pest control was still present in the area around 6 p.m. making sure more spiders did not hatch.

Outlet security placed cones to section off areas of the lot that should not be parked in.

The stories at this stage of the assignment, including this sample, showed improvement from the practice story – and from another practice assignment after that, in which students were allowed to cover something on a credit/no credit basis for more practice. The structure and writing improved, as they were asked to go back to an inverted pyramid style structure, using the same notes they gathered while reporting the news live. They had the advantage of a few days to put together the story, and the added advantage of a rough draft with feedback from both a classmate and instructor. What all 13 students demonstrated, however, was the ability to follow an inverted pyramid structure for both the broadcast script and the full story. Some stories still came in with some basic grammatical and writing issues, but the general approach and structure were much improved from the practice stories. The biggest issue students complained about was stress of not being able to find unplanned breaking news. In dealing with this key variable, the pedagogical challenge was having to be flexible in terms of newsworthiness, keeping it in context of the local community, and something unusual or interesting, but not necessarily earth-shattering.

The next stage of the course strove to build on these skills by having each student cover a meeting of the university’s elected board of students that is charged with deciding on funding for various student groups (the money coming from an activities fee all students pay), representing the student body and advocating on students’ behalf. In this assignment, the students were assigned to cover any meeting of the board over a two-week period; they were charged with doing the reporting on their own, relying only on their information to report their stories, an example of which is included here in Table 9.

Table 9: (Student J)

Broadcast Story:

Kutztown, Pa. – Student government board has begun reviewing the university’s proposal to require first and second-year students to live on-campus at its meeting on Tuesday.

Board members appeared confused when Leah Caselia, from the office of student involvement, announced open forums for the proposal had already been scheduled.

President Joe Scoboria says, he had not been informed of the forums.

Members made no sign they had been informed when Scoboria asked for a show of hands on who had been in-

formed. Scoboria says, promotion for the forums were advertised “poorly”.

Casselia says, the forum schedule was posted on the university’s daily brief and she had not seen it on emails. She informed members the event was held earlier Tuesday in the Dixon Hall conference room.

Members Erika Lynn and Nykolai Blichar made a report that gold status requirements would remain the same going forward.

Full News Story

Headline: Student government reviews KU housing policy, gold status requirements

SGB reviewed KU’s proposed mandatory on-campus housing policy for first and second-year students at its meeting Tuesday.

After passing a resolution against the policy at its previous meeting, President Joe Scoboria reported that the university president appeared set on its approval but willing to look at adding exemptions.

Members appeared shocked after Leah Casselia, from the office of student involvement, announced that an open forum, presenting the policy to students, had already been held. A second forum will be held in the Dixon Hall conference room Thursday.

Members made no sign they had been informed when Scoboria asked for a show of hands on who had been informed. “That’s a problem,” said Scoboria.

Promotions and advertising for the forums were advertised “poorly”, according to Scoboria. “We’re going to get this up on social media tonight and get it up for Thursday,” said Scoboria.

The forum schedule was posted on the university’s daily brief and not seen on emails. The event was held earlier Tuesday in the Dixon Hall conference room, according to Casselia. “I learned about it from the Daily Brief otherwise, I don’t know how a student would know about it. There were a lot of student’s there,” said Casselia.

Treasurer Erika Lynn and Parliamentarian Nykolai Blichar reported that gold status requirements would remain the same going forward. The decision came after making proposals mandating fundraising and longer wait periods for a status change in previous meetings.

SGB meets in the MSU formal dining room on Tuesdays at 5 p.m.

Twitter posts:

Scoboria says promotion of forum advertised “poorly” [#breakingku](#)

3:57 PM – 22 Mar 2016

2nd open forum to be held March 24 [#breakingku](#)

3:53 PM – 22 Mar 2016

Casselia: forum held earlier Tuesday in Dixon Hall conference room at 3 p.m. [#breakingku](#)

3:31 PM – 22 Mar 2016

No board member aware of mandatory housing forum, vote shows [#breakingku](#)

3:26 PM – 22 Mar 2016

OSI Casselia says, gold status title does not guarantee clubs a budget. [#breakingku](#)

2:36 PM – 22 Mar 2016

Treasurer: gold status clubs open forum held today, providing info on new guidelines [#breakingku](#)

2:14 PM – 22 Mar 2016

SGB plans look into mandatory housing exemptions with President Hawkinson [#breakingku](#)

2:10 PM – 22 Mar 2016

Scoboria: KU hires new VP of enrollment management [#breakingku](#)

2:08 PM – 22 Mar 2016

SGB meeting begins in MSU formal dining room 223 [#breakingku](#)

2:04 PM – 22 Mar 2016

A qualitative review concluded that students tended to make great progress in the writing here. The degree of difficulty was actually slightly less than the unplanned breaking news assignment, as they could request the agenda for the meeting and prepare with prior research. But the work generally showed strong improvement in the writing and structure in all three phases of the assignment. Covering it live, with tweets, the students were forced to figure out issues like numbers, spellings, technical issues, bureaucratic issues, and other details on the fly. Often, as in Table 9, the students showed great progress in their news judgment. In this instance, the student seized on the most newsworthy thing live, and also focused on it in both the broadcast and full stories. In some instances, however, the students tweeted live about one thing, and then, after a few hours to reflect, realized that the most important thing was something else. They then needed to use different parts of their notes to write the stories, thus learning key differences between live reporting and using the inverted pyramid.

Across the board, the review showed that the tweets were much stronger in this assignment – in terms of the grammatical structure, writing, and focus on the most newsworthy elements – demonstrating how the students had improved in the areas of includ-

ing attribution, using strong and present-tense verbs, and getting quickly to their points. They made strides in their preparation, writing and story structure, demonstrating the abilities to send material urgently, respond to complicated situations (budgets, enrollment figures etc.) and then compile their information in complete stories after the fact.

The final stage of the course emphasized that breaking news is rarely covered alone and that students must learn to work in teams to cover breaking news in print, photos and video effectively. Students were put into three groups – two groups of four students, and one of five students – and given a two-week time frame in which they were to find and coordinate coverage of one piece of planned breaking news. Once the groups were assigned, they were required to meet to discuss a planned piece of breaking news they would cover together, develop a plan for covering all the elements of the assignment (ten well-constructed tweets, including two photos, sent live; a broadcast story; and a full print/Web story with quotes and background) and then meet with the instructor. They were instructed that the news must impact significant parts of the community, and that it must have developments.

Initially, two of the three groups suggested ideas that either didn't work in the time frame of the assignment or weren't likely to generate news that impacted or would interest large numbers of students on campus. Eventually, with guidance from the instructor, the students settled on news they could cover. One group settled on covering a baseball game between their university and a rival school; a second group elected to cover a meeting of the University Senate, a group of faculty that controls or influences many university policies; and the third group elected to cover a popular beauty pageant fundraiser on campus. Once settled on what they would cover, each group developed a coverage plan and doled out roles: all were required to interview and take notes; some sent tweets, while others looked over the shoulder of the person who was sending them, to give a second set of eyes to the writing; others primarily had the responsibilities of writing the stories, while some had primary editing responsibilities; and some had primary responsibilities for shooting video or photos.

The student work in this area served to culminate the course, as the groups presented their work and critiqued each other's stories, as well as the writing and

news judgment decisions made during the sending of the live tweets. For example, the class had vibrant discussion over the objectivity of the live coverage of the beauty pageant fundraiser. The class also found issues with facts and news judgment in the coverage by the group that attended the University Senate, which was discussing complicated tuition issues regarding international students. And the class commended the clarity with which the group covering the baseball game detailed the key plays. After those critiques, each group used the feedback to revise and strengthen their full stories. This discussion focused on the challenge of going from chronological, live coverage, to the structure of two inverted-pyramid style stories put together after the fact.

While the students complained about some group dynamic issues, and the challenges of working together, they ultimately acknowledged that covering breaking news was much easier with multiple people working together – allowing them to interview more people, take better photos and shoot better video, and improve the quality of their live reporting with someone looking over their shoulder.

Limitations, Future Research, and Conclusions

In considering the previous research on mobile reporting and incorporating social media into the journalism classroom, this study, as noted in **RQ1**, sought to explore how students responded to this particular technique of teaching the reporting and writing of breaking news. Scholars have pointed to the need for more focus on teaching the actual writing, reporting and news judgment, rather than just on the multimedia and technical skills (Du & Lo, 2014). In this study, that need became abundantly clear. In terms of how the students responded, it was clear they were well-acquainted with basic use of smart phones, basic web applications, and basic photo and video technology – much of that was part of their daily lives. But the way they responded confirmed that the need was rather for more focused instruction on strong and clear writing for different audiences, and on the speed with which that writing and editing must be done in a breaking news situation. The conclusion is that the field cannot get overly caught up in the technical instruction, at the risk of forgetting to emphasize the different writing styles needed for different audiences and platforms.

The descriptive approach utilized in this study showed that students gravitated to the writing style

used in headlines, as they are accustomed to writing tweets in their daily lives. What it also showed, while focusing on multiple assignments done in this way, was that students responded well and improved in all three phases of the breaking news writing: the headline-style tweets, the broadcast stories, and the full print/Web stories. They proved better able to identify all the major developments in live situations, and then to assemble complete stories shortly afterward.

The biggest challenge was on emphasizing the need for attribution and sourcing. Students showed improvements as the course went on and it reinforced **Proposition #1**, that the modeling and simulation could help translate into improved writing and reporting in the field. Other challenges, in addition to sourcing, proved to be typos and grammatical mistakes that came up during this live writing. The speed emphasized in the course definitely led to sloppier writing at times – and this study showed that is a risk of this type of pedagogical approach. Nevertheless, **Proposition #1** was supported as students consistently showed improvement in the clarity and effectiveness of their live tweets from one assignment to the next. That was especially clear in the final group assignment, as they edited each other's work before it was sent live.

The next stage of the writing of breaking news – the 130-word broadcast script – proved to be a significant challenge for the students, especially regarding the complicated tenses involved with writing scripts to be read aloud. They learned to evaluate this kind of writing by listening and reading out loud to each other. However, **Proposition #1** was largely supported as their response showed they were able to switch from the chronological, present-tense headline style of live reporting back to an inverted pyramid structure for broadcast scripts.

Finally, the student work demonstrated that the strategy of culminating in the full story for a print and online audience was effective. The students reported being most comfortable with this style of writing, and were able to execute complete stories in this format. In some instances, it was a struggle for them to understand that they could use material they had not tweeted, but, as evidenced in the attached tables, they adjusted and grew accustomed to being able to write full stories, again smoothly reverting to the inverted pyramid for them. Again, they were able to successfully model professional examples given to them. This group of students was able to successfully chase down,

report, and write stories for social media, web, and print/online audiences, demonstrating that the praxis approach could be applied in conjunction with basic social media instructional techniques. Thus, **Proposition #1** was supported.

The conclusions cannot be overgeneralized since the sample size of this study was limited due to the size of the course, and the students were drawn from one university. Optimally, this type of writing – and how it is taught in these three stages – needs to be studied more as breaking news is consumed in these formats, with large numbers of younger news consumers getting information in bursts from Twitter, Facebook and other outlets using these formats. In the Pew Foundation study “Twitter News Consumers: Young, Mobile and Educated” (2013), researchers show that social media is not necessarily a panacea for the news industry. But what *is* clear is that this type of writing is essential in order for breaking news to be reported and conveyed effectively. More research needs to be conducted on specific news events and what can be learned from the writing in each of them, as they are reported live. Other researchers (Kinsky & Bruce, 2016) have begun to focus on the writing pedagogy of teaching the writing/reporting of live, real-time events. This case study helped to build and go beyond that – including having the students actually *find* the breaking news *in their communities*, report and write it live in headline form, and then use the information they gathered to finally create full, inverted-pyramid style stories for broadcast and print/Web audiences. What this study showed is that a methodological approach of “pedagogical praxis” (Schaeffer, 2004) can be applied with the pedagogy of “mobile reporting” (Jones, 2015; Laskin & Avena, 2016; Squire & Dickers, 2012) to teach undergraduates the skills of covering and writing breaking news for all platforms.

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