Thinking inside the box:
A simple sidebar helps students expand reporting skills

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Abstract:

Journalism programs have always taught students the importance of transparency in their reporting. Too often, though, this means student reporters, as well as their professional counterparts, are transparent only with their editors, not the public at large. But by allowing the public access to the same materials editors are privy to—the raw research and reporting that goes into producing a thorough and complete story—journalists can begin to rebuild audience trust.

Trust in the media is eroding. Only 22 percent of Americans heavily trust the information they receive from local news organizations (Mitchell, Gottfried, Barthel, & Shearer 2016). The numbers are worse for the national media, with only 18 percent deeply trusting the information they get from those outlets. Couple that with an election cycle that saw media outlets large and small mishandle their coverage, and many journalists have begun to not only openly wonder how to regain the confidence of their readers, but see it as the most difficult problem in journalism at the moment (Rosen, 2016).

Many have cited the work of *Washington Post* reporter David Fahrenthold, particularly his sharing of materials while researching President Donald Trump's charities, as an example of how reporting transparency builds trust with the audience. One Fahrenthold tweet from Sept. 23, 2016, included a photo of a notebook where Fahrenthold was documenting his interactions with 346 charities to see if any had in fact received money from then-candidate Trump. This one tweet was retweeted 3651 times, liked over 4500 times, and included 284 comments. It's the latter that is the most interesting. The comments ranged from partisan bickering to questions about methodology, suggestions for further reporting, and verification of information from potential sources. Also included were multiple readers thanking Fahrenthold for his work and his transparency.

Rosenstiel (2016) used Farhenthold's example as a means to lay out a system by which journalists, students and professionals alike, can add transparency to their reporting.

> Consider a written news story that is accompanied by a box … with five questions: What is new about this story? What is the evidence? What are the sources? What proof do they offer? What is still missing? (§ 17).

Bringing Fahrenthold's style into a recent advanced reporting class, which covered everything from the local legislature to national politics, students were required to submit a modified version of Rosenstiel's questions as a sidebar for every story. The questions were simple:

> *What do we know?*
> *What don't we know?*
> *Who or what are the sources?*
> *How are the sources relevant to the story?*

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Students were required to answer each question as succinctly as possible, generally in a sentence or two. Bullet points were also allowed. The average sidebar added 100 to 150 words to each story's overall word count, depending on the depth and length of the piece itself. The sidebar was turned in as a part of both the rough and the final draft of each story.

While the work required by students was generally minimal, the benefits of the sidebar were myriad. These benefits are based on a personal comparison between two classes, one that used the sidebar and one that did not, as well as end-of-the-semester comments from students.

It helps students focus their writing. The benefits of pre-writing strategies, including the use of the six core journalistic questions, as a means to focus student writing are long established. (Mogahed, 2013; Cotton, 1988) Using the transparency sidebar, though, as a pedagogically specific pre-writing strategy allows students to assess their reporting while also providing direction for their story. The first two questions act as a simple outline—what pertinent points need to be included and what can be avoided—while the final two help students identify which sources are the most relevant to the piece. Together, the sidebar also provides a quick check of student thinking and, when necessary, a way to redirect their approach to the piece through either direct feedback or discussion.

It helps students differentiate between good and bad sources. Many student journalists accept the sources they get rather than pushing for the best sources for their stories. Asking students to identify the relevance of each source to their story forces young journalists to judge the value of every person, document, and data point they intend to use in their piece. Sometimes this analysis resulted in further research. Sometimes a source was scraped altogether, like when writing a story about a proposed freeze of Iowa's minimum wage, a student dropped a source who had worked minimum wage jobs in other states but not Iowa.

It helps identify holes in the reporting. When a student turned in a rough draft on an upstart Midwest amateur football league, he realized something even before its review: he was missing a source. It wasn't because he had failed to connect with the right person. He simply never even considered he'd need a source that could speak directly to the history of the league. Only after listing his sources and thinking critically about what wasn't known did he decide he needed to talk to the commissioner of the league to supplement his own research to make the story complete.

It helps generate new story ideas. Generating story ideas can be difficult for young journalists. Rarely do great ideas fall out of the sky. But identifying what isn't known about a story opens new opportunities. Example: A student was working on a piece about a proposed state bill to allow local distilleries to sell individual drinks on premises, something Iowa breweries and wineries have been able to do for years. One of the things he identified as missing from that story was how distillers are coping, and even innovating, under the current system. He opted to re-focus his feature story for the semester, talking with several Iowa distillers about their businesses and the state of their industry.

Of course, there are scenarios where this exercise either didn't work exceptionally well—the questions felt redundant in a Q&A scenario—or would be particularly out of place, like students' service pieces or how-to's. But, overall, this sidebar requirement will be a valuable addition across all writing and reporting classes. It helps student learning and makes the reporting process more transparent, increasing trust in media both on campus and off.

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