

Writing a breaking news story for web and print

Overview

This assignment is designed to simulate a breaking news event in real time. Students hear about the incident when the class period starts. It is their job to look up relevant sources and contact information. In the process, they must make news decisions and ethical judgements. They must consider their audience—both online and in the print version. They must do all of this on deadline.

Objectives

- A. Break and update a story for the web
- B. Write a final "print" version of the story

The scenario

Class begins at 9:30, and I tell students we are working on a made-up scenario designed to replicate real-world experiences. Students are told that as soon as they arrived in their “newsroom,” they learn from a colleague with a high school student that Palm Bay High School is being evacuated.

I then ask the students what they should do. Some suggest visiting the high school, but others suggest that might be able to gather more information before leaving the newsroom. They typically decide to try calling the high school. They all look up the phone number for the high school and check on the spelling of the principal's name.

I pretend to “answer the phone” as the principal and confirm the evacuation, but give no more information.

Deadline 1—9:40

Reporters must compose a headline and a tweet, uploaded to our Canvas assignment page.

At 9:40, I ask them what to do now. Someone usually suggests calling the Palm Bay Police Department. Students look up that number. I pretend to answer that, suggesting that they call the Brevard County Schools. Students then look up the public information officer for BCS, who confirms the evacuation and mentions that there was a bomb threat called into the school. The PIO (Matt Reed, played by me) declines to answer any further questions, as the situation is being handled by Brevard County Sheriff's Office.

Deadline 2—9:50

Reporters are to write a two- to three-paragraph story that would run under their original headline.

At 9:50, students begin to realize what else they need to do. They look up the number to BCSO and contact the PIO (David Jacobs, played by me). Jacobs reads a prepared statement:

We were alerted to a threatening comment via Twitter. School officials reported a backpack that had been left on a bench outside the cafeteria. The BCS bomb squad team has been deployed. All students and staff have been evacuated for their safety.

They have a chance to ask two or three questions before the PIO has to go.

Deadline 3—10:05

Reporters are to write a two- to three-paragraph update to their original story.

At 10:05, Brevard County Sheriff Wayne Ivey (played by me) reads a statement to the reporters.

At 8:15 a.m. this morning, an assistant principal for facilities at Palm Bay High School was notified of a threatening Tweet made by a 16-year-old sophomore student named Jeremy Schottler. The assistant principal called my office and notified the rest of the administration. A teacher noticed a backpack on a bench outside of the cafeteria. The principal called for an immediate evacuation of the premises. The bomb squad located the pack, and found two empty shoeboxes. The young man who posted the Tweet has been arrested. Thank you. I will be available for questions in 20 minutes.

He tells them he'll be available in 20 minutes for questions. During that question and answer period, usually a student asks what the tweet said. The sheriff reports: "The Tweet said, 'As a new follower of ISIS, I am proud to f---ing blow up PBHS #isis4life.'"

Deadline 4—10:45

Reporters file copy before the 10:45 deadline. It should be a final version of the story to be printed the next day. They have to wrestle with things like where in the story to place the hoax, what to do with the ISIS reference, and the ethics of profanity in journalism or naming a minor as they rewrite the story from mostly chronologically organized in the updates to inverted pyramid in the final piece.

Key take-aways

Students typically enjoy this simulated class breaking news assignment. The topic feels relevant and realistic. The deadlines generate some stress and excitement. Here are a few of the key lessons students learn from this assignment:

- You need to have a good list of contacts for stories.
- You need to write for different audiences, in this case online readers as the news breaks and the next day readers in print.
- You need to assess the best way to attribute so your information is authoritative.
- You need to consider what information is most newsworthy (many students ignore or bury the ISIS connection while some rewrite their leads to include the ISIS reference.)
- You need to address ethical issues in all reporting, in this case what to do with profanity and the minor's name.