



Digital Deadline: The St. Louis *Post-Dispatch* and the Kirkwood Shooting Teaching Note

Case Summary

As the Internet's role in journalism evolves, media outlets must negotiate a difficult balancing act: harness the Web's potential while maintaining traditional journalistic standards. Among the challenges that news organizations face is how to handle breaking news online, especially when the price of getting it wrong in a tight-knit community could have a long-lasting impact on the outlet's reputation and its relationship with the public. For print publications, that issue is compounded by the question of what to publish in their physical products after a story has already appeared on their websites.

This case focuses on the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch* newspaper, which faced such a scenario in February 2008 after a gunman opened fire at a local City Council meeting. Luckily for the paper, freelance writer Janet McNichols was present, effectively handing the *Post-Dispatch* a scoop. Although shaken, her information sounded credible. But was it? After all, she might be in shock, the scene had been chaotic, and she had seen only two people hit although many shots had been fired. The paper had to decide how much to rely on McNichols' testimony in the absence of corroboration from other reporters, news outlets or the police. It struggled in particular with how to report fatalities.

Students follow editors and reporters as they scramble to cover the story, both online and in print. How should they best deploy resources, gather credible details, and relay the evolving drama to their newspaper and Web readers?

Teaching Objectives

The Internet's rise has created a complex relationship between print and online versions of the same publication, which must seek to complement, rather than cannibalize, one another. How can a news organization give value to readers who buy a newspaper the next morning, if the breaking story has already appeared online and—as in this case—been picked up by rival news outlets?

Students should discuss how breaking news online, and Web journalism in general, has affected the paper news product, and the trade-offs and compromises involved.

Then there is the question of how best to handle breaking news stories online. A breaking story poses challenges for any news outlet, whose reporters must try to establish basic facts while working under time pressure to get the facts out. The *Post-Dispatch* editors believe that breaking news belongs on the Web, but are unsure how to tell the story, especially given an abundance of sensitive yet unconfirmed information. What is the most effective and responsible way to handle information that is only partially verified?

Similarly, the case touches on the use of emerging technologies, including Twitter and blogs, to convey news. In the past, news outlets operated in a single medium, whether print or broadcast. Today, they operate in several—including audio podcasts and video. What kind of information should run in each of these formats, and to what extent should it vary from medium to medium? In other words, what relation, if any, should blogs, Web stories, and print articles have to one another?

A related issue concerns the range of what the audience knows. Today's diverse news delivery systems, including portable devices like Blackberries and iPhones, allow some people to learn about events almost immediately, while others—especially those who do not get their news online—take longer to find out. How should journalists deal with these varied consumer experiences?

How reliable is eyewitness testimony? The St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*, at least in journalistic terms, is fortunate that one of its stringers was present at the City Council meeting and can provide an eyewitness account. Still, Janet McNichols' testimony is potentially undermined by the fact that she is understandably shaken by what she has seen, and identifies the shooter by voice rather than by sight. Should editors trust her information or wait for official police corroboration—which may be more reliable but could lose them their competitive advantage? Even if rattled by the shooting, is her account as a stringer more reliable than that of a random stranger? What are some of the risks of relying on eyewitnesses, particularly those who are participants in the drama? Think of other news stories that have been based on eyewitness accounts.

The paper must weigh whether to be the first to name those they have confirmed as the City Council shooting victims, as well as the gunman, even before their relatives are notified or the police issue a confirmation. Do journalists owe the public as much accurate information as they can provide, even if it means stepping ahead of the police in confirming the names of the dead, meaning that victims' relatives may learn the news from the media? If so, what public interest is served in naming the victims?

The case also raises the issue of the relationship between news organizations and stringers (or freelancers). None of the metro editors has met McNichols, even though she has written hundreds of stories for the *Post-Dispatch*. This arguably weakens their ability to judge her state of mind in the

aftermath of the shooting, including whether she may be in shock. As cash-crunched newsrooms becoming increasingly reliant on non-staff members for content, what are the implications for their operations, and the news in general, of drawing on an army of journalists who may be relative strangers?

Class Plan

Use this case in a course or class on reporting breaking news; digital media for newspapers; or local news organizations.

Pre-class. Help students prepare for class by assigning the following question:

- 1) What information should go in the next day's *Post-Dispatch* paper? What should the headline be?

We found it useful to engage students ahead of class by asking them to post brief responses (no more than 250 words) in an online forum. Writing short comments challenges students to distill their thoughts and express them succinctly. The posts also highlight talking points ahead of the class, and identify specific students to call upon during the discussion.

In-class questions. The online blog posts are a useful starting point for preliminary discussion, after which the instructor could pose any of the following questions to promote an 8090 minute discussion. The choice of questions will be determined by what the instructor would like the students to learn from the class discussion. In general, choosing to discuss three or four questions in some depth is preferable to trying to cover them all.

- a) Janet McNichols has contributed hundreds of articles to the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*. However, the shooting has clearly stunned her. Given her relative lack of experience in trauma reporting, is she a reliable source? Take a vote. As an editor, how would you handle the information she gives you, and what kind of attribution does it require, if any?
- b) Editors are unsure what form the Kirkwood story should take. Night general assignment reporter Greg Jonsson decides to approach the story much as a wire service would: by inserting new information into a narrative that would grow in depth and complexity as fresh details emerged. Is this the best decision, or should he have utilized the blog format: a string of relatively short, breaking posts that appear one detail at a time rather than woven together as a story?
- c) Metro Editor Adam Goodman considers assigning another reporter to write the print story as Jonsson writes the Web story. But Jonsson decides to write the Web story and rework a final version for the print product himself. Should he have shared the workload? What are the advantages and disadvantages of a single writer vs. several?

- d) Should STLtoday.com have identified Charles Lee Thornton as the shooter before the police confirmed his identity and his family had been notified? Take a vote. What was there to gain or lose?
- e) The *Post-Dispatch* is a local paper. What particular challenges does it face in breaking crime news? Consider in the context of a tight-knit community where victims are likely to be friends and neighbors, and getting information wrong could reverberate for some time.
- f) What about naming the victims ahead of police confirmation? Should the *Post-Dispatch* have done that on its website? McNichols had seen Yost and Ballman shot, but had learned the names of other victims second-hand from witnesses. Was that enough to go on?
- g) What is the *Post-Dispatch's* responsibility to the public as the only large news organization with access to the crime scene? What does it need to tell the public, and why? Consider the newspaper's various motivations, including competitive, business, and journalistic considerations, and weigh their relative validity.
- h) Reporter Stephen Deere wants to go to Thornton's house to see if he can learn more. Editor Patrick Gauen is unsure, not least because it is not clear if any of Thornton's family members knows what has happened. As Deere's editor, what would you advise?
- i) Managing Editor Pam Maples and Editor Adam Goodman are unsure how best to utilize McNichols once she arrives in the newsroom. One option is to ask her to write a first person account of the shooting. Another is for her to be interviewed on camera for STLtoday.com, which would give readers an eyewitness account, and the *PostDispatch* a video to distribute to national media. Maples and Goodman decide against asking Maples to write the story herself. Was this the right decision? Was the video a good idea?
- j) Fox affiliate KTVI reports six dead from the attack, including Kirkwood's mayor, before the police make any official announcement. Goodman and Jonsson decide not to repeat the claim. Were they right, especially given that in January 2007 the paper had been scooped by TV news after opting not to move on exclusive reporting related to a kidnapping? Why not report the information, citing Fox? Discuss when it is acceptable for news organizations to cite each other as sources, and when they should verify information independently.
- k) Pam Maples had for several years been eager to start a breaking news blog but had yet to find the right story. The previous year, when construction partially closed a major interstate, she did break the news via Twitter—messages of no more than 140 characters sent via cellular phone or Blackberry. Ultimately the Kirkwood shooting was reported as a constantly updated Web story, using neither Twitter nor a blog. Was this a lost opportunity?

- l) Reporter David Hunn went to the hospital where he tried to interview visitors, but met with little success. Was he right to go, or was that insensitive to the victims' families?
- m) As the newspaper's first print edition nears deadline, editors must decide how to handle the story. What would you do? Consider that some readers will be coming to the story for the first time, while others will already be familiar with it. How important is it for the newspaper to serve both markets?

Suggested Readings

Tom Goldstein, *Journalism and Truth: Strange Bedfellows*, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007.

SYNOPSIS: This book aims to "outline many of the traditional ways that journalists attempt to arrive at truth and then analyze how some of these time-honored conventions may actually work against finding truth." Goldstein—a lawyer and journalist—notes the influence that changing technology, such as blogging and the Internet, has had on notions of "truth" ("for bloggers, truth is created collectively, not through a hierarchy of fact seekers and verifiers"), and suggests that journalists could benefit from adopting legal techniques and concepts, such as the hearsay and exclusionary rule. Also relevant to McNichols' testimony is the "Eyewitness to History" chapter, which highlights the unreliability of eyewitness accounts dating back to the 18th century. Goldstein ultimately warns journalists against believing that there is a single truth, while urging them to provide audiences "with as much of the information needed to make a judgment as possible."

Don Heider, Maxwell McCombs, and Paula M. Poindexter, "What the Public Expects of Local News: Views on Public and Traditional Journalism," *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, December 1, 2005, Vol. 82, Issue 4, 952-967.

SYNOPSIS: This article looks at public expectations of journalism and finds significant gaps between what the community values in local news and what journalists try to deliver. Based on a Pew survey that was used as market research by an NPR affiliate in the Midwest, the study found that while an overwhelming majority of the public prizes accuracy (94 percent) and unbiased reporting (84 percent), two other tenets of traditional journalism—being a watchdog (49 percent) and rapid reporting (35 percent)—do not receive strong endorsement. The article also highlights a discrepancy that is directly relevant to the *Post-Dispatch's* concerns about getting the story out fast: Journalists tend to see rapid reporting as far more important than the broader public. Indeed, rather than being fast, most people surveyed expect local news outlets like the *PostDispatch* to be a "good neighbor": care about the community, highlight interesting people and groups, and offer solutions to community problems.

http://www.aejmc.org/scholarship/research_use/jmcq/05wint/heider.pdf

Amy Reynolds and Brooke Barnett, "This Just In... How National TV News Handled the Breaking 'Live' Coverage of September 11," *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, Autumn 2003, Vol. 80, Issue 3, 689.

SYNOPSIS: This article, which explores breaking television news coverage of the September 11 terror attacks, provides context and findings relevant to McNichols' experience as a journalist thrown into the task of reporting breaking news. The study finds that "the content of breaking news reported live is fundamentally different from the news stories that are produced with more time to check for violations of journalistic conventions," and that the "role of the journalist is less clear in breaking news." Reporters not only assume multiple roles, including those of expert and social commentators; they also report rumors, use anonymous sources, and include personal references in reporting. The article also notes that people watch television news during a crisis for emotional support, and asks whether journalists should therefore "reconsider their function beyond simple conduits of news" — a question that is also relevant to the case.

http://www.aejmc.org/scholarship/research_use/jmcq/03fall/reynolds.pdf

Craig Silverman, "Reliable News: Errors Aren't Part of the Equation," *Nieman Reports*, Spring 2009.

SYNOPSIS: This article, relevant to the *Post-Dispatch's* concerns about the accuracy of information that it posts online as the Kirkwood shooting develops, argues that "in the transition to digital journalism, accuracy — as an indicator of quality — must maintain its place at the top of the list of essential ingredients." Silverman's article is one of several in the Harvard publication's edition devoted to "Voyages of Discovery Into New Media," which includes a number of other pieces that instructors may find useful, including "The New Front Page: The Digital Revolution" and "Watchdog Analysis: Providing Context and Perspective Online."

<http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reportsitem.aspx?id=100948>

Other Resources

"Journalism and Trauma," Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma

SYNOPSIS: The center provides a range of material about both journalists and subjects who have experienced trauma. This self-study module includes information about traumatic stress, self-care, and how to interview people who have experienced a traumatic event.

<http://dartcenter.org/content/self-study-unit-1-journalism-trauma>

Houston *Chronicle*, Hurricane Ike coverage

SYNOPSIS: Nominated together with the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch* for the 2009 Pulitzer Prize for breaking news, the Houston *Chronicle* provides an alternative example of how a newsroom handled a fast-moving story, and—as the Pulitzer committee commented—took “full advantage of online technology and its newsroom expertise to become a lifeline to the city.” Evolving weather patterns meant that, unlike the *Post-Dispatch* which faced unexpected developments, the *Chronicle* was able to plan its coverage for several days in advance. It eventually produced a site that combined service pieces on storm preparation with traditional news stories about Ike’s approach, as well as blogs and live daily chats by Eric Berger, the paper’s “SciGuy.”

<http://www.chron.com/hurricane/ike/>