The Journalism School
Knight Case Studies Initiative
Columbia University

Terror or Accident?
Newsday and the Crash of American Airlines Flight 587
Teaching Note

Case Summary

The role of journalism is to tell people about events beyond their direct experience. But reporters and editors are sometimes in the dark themselves, especially when news is breaking and details remain murky. Ideally, news organizations publish only what they have determined is true. Yet in a world of 24-hour online news and intense competition, media outlets must often make almost instantaneous decisions about what to publish. Verifying information takes time. As a result, being right often takes a back seat to being first.

This case focuses on *Newsday* newspaper as it tackled one such story in November 2001: the crash of American Airlines Flight 587 in Queens, New York. Tensions were high following the September 11 terrorist attacks two months earlier, and Queens-based NewYorkNewsday.com—the online wing of the paper—was the obvious place for people to go for information about the disaster. Amid the chaos, however, *Newsday*'s web team was itself looking for answers, and was wary of misinforming an already panicked city. The vexing question: Is the crash terrorism, or an accident? How precisely should the website describe the possible causes? What is the lede?

The case takes place in real time. Students read background to the case before class. They then watch video clips in which key members of the web team discuss personal decisions—and dilemmas—regarding what to report, and when to report it, given incomplete information and still-raw fears about terrorism.

Teaching Objectives

This case highlights the special challenges of reporting developing news—particularly disasters—without triggering unnecessary public fear. Use the case as a vehicle for discussing the responsibility of news organizations during an emergency, the impact of newsroom culture on editorial decisions, and what happens when editors disagree. Also use the case as a platform for discussing the competitive pressures (from citizen journalists and new technologies like Twitter) facing 21st century online newsrooms, and the advantages and disadvantages of tackling breaking

news on the Web. Additionally, the case can prompt discussion about the practical, ethical, and semantic minefields that exist for journalists who cover terrorism.

Accurate reporting has long been an essential element of media credibility. However, today's round-the-clock news environment requires journalists to juggle the pressure to publish with the need for careful research. That is particularly difficult when the story is a developing disaster or emergency situation, when anxiety is running high and public safety threatened. Fearing they will only fuel local and national panic, some *Newsday* editors are initially cautious about raising the specter of terrorism even though they know it is on people's minds. Discuss the tension that exists between the need to provide comprehensive coverage and avoiding spurring unnecessary public concern. Consider this in the context of journalistic standards of verification, and whether they can, and should, change according to circumstances.

Both Amanda Barrett, Newsday.com's Internet news manager, and Diane Goldie, the website's deputy online editor, refer to different models of newsroom culture. Goldie, for example, finds *Newsday*'s "conservative culture" overly cautious, particularly compared to her previous experience at New York's *Daily News*. Meanwhile Barrett believes that Goldie's "hard-charging" approach is too aggressive. Culture clashes exist not only between newsrooms, but within them too: Barrett and Jonathan McCarthy, executive producer for Newsday.com, for example, allude to a gulf between print and online editions of the paper. Think about the way that newsrooms, and even different sections of the same newsroom, may approach the same event depending on the prevailing culture and journalistic ethos.

Newsday editors disagree about how to handle the evolving situation. Barrett, for example, is reluctant to mention that the crash could be due to terrorism while there is still doubt. Goldie favors acknowledging it as a possible cause. Meanwhile Diane Davis, Deputy Metropolitan Editor for the print edition, believes that *Newsday* does not lose anything by waiting "a couple of minutes" to announce that terrorists may have downed the plane. Consider the best way to handle the situation as part of a broader discussion about resolving editorial conflicts of judgment.

In 2001, the Internet's role in journalism was still evolving. Many print reporters doubted its value as a new platform, and questioned its relevance to their work. Newsday.com journalists often felt like second-class citizens and resented the lack of cooperation from print counterparts. September 11 began a new era of cooperation between the two sides, although difficulties remained. Discuss the challenges of fusing traditional and multimedia journalism, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of Web journalism, especially when it comes to breaking news.

The September 11 attacks on New York and Washington elevated terrorism to the forefront of American public consciousness. It also presented new challenges for journalists, more familiar with reporting on the subject overseas than in their own backyard. What particular challenges, if any, does covering terrorism pose for media?

Class Plan

Use this case in a class about breaking news or disaster reporting. Also use it in a class about online journalism, and the relationship of Web departments to other sections of the same media organization.

Pre-class: Assign students the background text to read before class. Instructors can also help students prepare for discussion by assigning the following question in advance:

1) If a choice has to be made, is it more important for an online news service to be fast or accurate?

Ask class members to post brief responses (no more than 250 words) to the question in an online forum. Writing short comments challenges students to distill their thoughts and express them succinctly. The instructor can use the students' work to craft talking points ahead of class, and to identify particular students to call upon during the discussion. Instructors may find it beneficial to ask students to recapitulate their online arguments and responses—rather than simply reading the homework aloud—in order to keep the discussion spontaneous and lively.

Using the Video Package

In-class. The case takes place in real time in the classroom via video clips.

The package comprises brief video segments (generally less than one minute long) in which members of *Newsday*'s news team discuss elements of the American Airlines crash. Class should start with a viewing of the "mini-documentary" about the crash, which leads the list of clips (the Intro). This clip sets the scene, and introduces members of *Newsday*'s Web and print editions as they recall their initial thoughts and actions on hearing about the crash. It also establishes Web editor Amanda Barrett as the "protagonist" of the case, the person who must decide what information to put on the website, and what to hold back.

The following menu of video segments provides a guide for instructors. Clips are ordered by theme. After the introduction, instructors can play the video clips in a linear or random sequence, depending on the priorities of class discussion. Use segments to introduce a new point, shift direction or re-enforce issues that have already been raised in class.

1. A Morning Explodes
Intro (open class with this)
Key characters discuss hearing about a plane crash, and recall their reactions.

2. Probably Terrorism
It's Happened Again (McCarthy)
Just two months after September 11, there are concerns that terrorists have struck again.

How Hard to Fire a Missile? (McCarthy)
McCarthy recalls a pre-existing theory that a missile could down planes coming from nearby airports.

Schumer: "They Got Us" (Lefkowitz)
New York Senator Chuck Schumer is overheard saying he thinks the crash is due to terrorism.

3. Probably an Accident
Accident Waiting to Happen (Holland)
Home to John F. Kennedy and La Guardia Airports, Queens is a likely site for a crash.

4. Report Terrorism Now
Acknowledge Terrorism Possible (Goldie)
Terrorism has to be acknowledged as a possible cause for the crash because it is on everybody's mind.

Newsday's Conservative Culture (Goldie)
The newspaper has a conservative culture, which influences some reporters.

The 800-lb. Gorilla (Goldie)
The possibility of terrorism looms too large to not be acknowledged.

Public Needs to Know (Goldie)
The closing of tunnels, bridges, and buildings must be explained within the context of terrorism concerns.

5. Report Terrorism Soon
Boss Going Too Fast (Barrett)
Disagreements arise about whether or not to mention the possibility of terrorism. Barrett is against doing so while there is still so much doubt.

Hard-charging Newsperson (Barrett)
Barrett highlights the difference between her own attitude to reporting terrorism and that of Goldie, who she says is more "anxious" to have something out there and is "caught up in the moment," partly because she lives near the World Trade Center and is "on edge."

Wait a Couple Minutes (Davis)
Davis believes that holding back a couple of minutes before declaring the crash could be due to terrorism is preferable to being wrong, and will not "hurt anything."

6. Making the Call
Who Makes the Call? (Davis)
Who prevails when it comes to deciding what to publish: the editor in charge of the website or the person in charge of the next day's print edition? A once multi-layered process is now reduced to a quick, sometimes unilateral, decision.

7. Challenges of Online
Pressure to Update (Barrett)
Web staff face pressure to update stories quickly. But there is a need to be cautious because mistakes can create a lingering perception of incompetence.

We Had to be Perfect (Barrett)
Treated at the time like "second-class citizens" compared to their print counterparts, Web journalists need to be "stronger," "perfect," and "creative" to win people over to online journalism.

8. Advantages of Online
Write Over It (Goldie)
Unlike print publications, the Web is "like a wire service," where information can be updated and mistakes corrected. It can also reflect the wider public conversation, such as whether the crash is due to terrorism.

9. Competition Pressures
Public to be Getting This From Us (McCarthy)
Websites must be turn-to destinations for readers and first with news; otherwise "we're not doing our job."

Pressure of the Timestamp (Barrett)
Online timestamps create "intense pressure" to update stories every five to 10 minutes or people may think the story is "old."

Readers' Trust (Davis)
There is a need to be "first and fast" with stories, especially when they are in "your own back yard." Otherwise, the publication's connection with news consumers may be compromised.

10. What's Press Responsibility?
Haunting Mistake (Barrett)
During 9/11, Newsday reported false information that firefighters had been found alive. The experience "stuck with us," contributing to Barrett's caution with the American Airline crash.

Don't Panic Public (Goldie)
The post 9/11 atmosphere increases the need for caution when using the term "terrorism."

Be Useful (McCarthy)
The job of Web journalists covering the story is to ensure that content is useful.

The homework assignment is a useful starting point for preliminary discussion, after which the instructor could pose any of the following questions in order to promote an 80-90 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)   With the events of September 11 still fresh in peoples' minds, Goldie wants to quickly acknowledge terrorism as a possible cause for the American Airlines crash. Barrett prefers holding off until there is more information. With whom do you agree, and how would you tailor your coverage accordingly?

b)   Amanda Barrett has to update the website at 10-minute intervals. What should she write at 9:17 a.m., when she receives an alert from local TV station NY1 that a plane has crashed? At

9:30 a.m., when the Empire State building is closed? At 9:42 a.m., when the Federal Aviation Authority grounds all flights at JFK and La Guardia? And at 9:52 a.m., when the Port Authority closes bridges and tunnels surrounding Manhattan? Record suggestions on the board.

c)   *Newsday* editors disagree over how to proceed with the story. As Davis says, a once multilayered editorial process has been stripped down to a few "front line" journalists who must make snap decisions about what to publish and when. Who should have the final say—the Web editor, the print editor or someone else?

d)   Accuracy is one of the pillars of journalism, as is keeping one's audience informed. Breaking news situations pit these two ideals against one another. The tension between the two is heightened in crises and periods of fear like that following September 11. Should journalism be more flexible during extraordinary circumstances? For example, can verification standards be relaxed in the interest of getting out as much information as possible?

e)   Senator Chuck Schumer (D-NY) is heard saying that he thinks the crash is due to terrorism. How should the *Newsday* team handle this overheard information? Discuss as part of a broader conversation about reporting information that is not necessarily intended for public consumption.

f)   In the immediate aftermath of the crash, different members of the *Newsday* team suggest why the crash is either probably terrorism or probably an accident. McCarthy, for example, mentions that a missile may have downed the plane. Holland, assistant editor for the Kew Gardens Bureau, counters that the crash is probably an accident since there are two busy airports in the area. Whose reasoning do you find more persuasive? Which perspective, if either, would you incorporate into the story? Would you use both? How would you weave them into the narrative?

g)   Goldie argues that the possibility of terrorism needs to be raised because it is an issue on everyone's mind. Do you agree with her reasoning? Should journalism serve as a mirror to public anxieties, concerns, and opinions? Or are there circumstances when journalists should lead the discussion in a different direction because some views, while public, are too extreme, marginal or unfounded?

h)   Before 9/11, covering terrorism was alien to most journalists. The subject continues to challenge media. Assuming that *Newsday*'s reporters should acknowledge the possibility of terrorism, how should they do so? What risks are involved?

i)   Inaccuracies can permanently tarnish a media organization's reputation, according to Barrett, who mentions that *Newsday*'s website followed CNN's lead in reporting an untrue story that missing firefighters had been found alive on September 11. One way that journalists work around the problem of confirming stories for themselves is by attributing the information to other media outlets and sources. Is this an acceptable practice? Or should it be incumbent on journalists to establish the credibility of information for themselves?

j)   McCarthy says that online journalism should be "useful." What does that mean in this circumstance? Does stepping beyond the facts to offer advice or make recommendations violate journalistic boundaries?

Suggested Readings

Jane B. Singer, "More than Ink-Stained Wretches: The Re-socialization of Print Journalists in Converged Newsrooms," *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, Winter 2004, Vol. 81, Issue 4, 838.

SYNOPSIS: This article helps explain the tensions between print and online staff at *Newsday* by placing them within the industry-wide context of newsroom convergence. It examines four newsrooms where once-distinct print and online staffs have converged, causing the print journalists not only to change the way they work, but also to re-examine what it means to be a journalist.

"Lessons From A Newsroom's Digital Frontline," *Nieman Reports*, Spring 2006.

SYNOPSIS: This article explores the relationship between print and online operations at the *Roanoke Times*, a medium-sized newspaper in Virginia that provides an analogous example to *Newsday*. While the piece concedes that this "former railroad town is not at the hub of the digital universe," it points out that "a news organization doesn't have to be in Silicon Valley to make things happen" online. The result is an "up-close look" at practical steps the paper has taken to "enable us to join the digital dance."

http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reportsitem.aspx?id=100494

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 study focuses on breaking news in broadcast journalism, highlighting several issues raised in the case, including what happens when traditional reporting routines break down. It finds that the journalists who covered September 11 acted alternately as terrorism experts and social commentators. They passed along rumors, used anonymous sources, and frequently included personal references in their reporting. It concludes that "perhaps the speed required to deliver breaking news creates a new routine for journalists that allows for lapses in the traditional, objective approach to gathering news," and that, much like *Newsday*'s journalists found, "the constant need to fill endless hours of (air) time to keep people informed, especially in national crisis situations, puts pressure on individual journalists to deliver any information as quickly as possible…"