



Ethics and Credibility of Breaking News Online

An APME Online Journalism Credibility Project

Mitch Pugh / Sioux City Journal / January 2010

Topic: Ethics and credibility of breaking news online

I. Summary findings

The emergence and continued importance of reporting breaking news online has presented many challenges for traditional print media outlets. While striving to be the first and best in local news, we must confront issues of credibility and ethics. Yet, based on our research, most traditional print media companies have been slow to craft and adopt clear standards and policies for reporting news online. Meanwhile, the gulf between the standards readers hold news organizations to and the standards news editors value will likely continue to grow.

Moving forward, news organizations must clearly define standards and policies for reporting breaking news online. Furthermore, these policies should represent an understanding of how digital delivery impacts traditional news standards and values, and what modern readers want and expect from breaking news sources. These new policies should be transparent; readers want to know how we are going to report the news so they can hold us accountable to these standards.

II. Project description

The Sioux City Journal, in conjunction with the Associated Press Managing Editors and the Ethics and Excellence in Journalism Foundation, launched this project in the fall of 2009. We held two separate focus groups: One with readers, and one with news sources and community opinion shapers. These community roundtables were facilitated by David Stoeffler, president of Touchstone News Consulting and former Vice President-News for Lee Enterprises. We presented each focus group with a real-world breaking news scenario involving a local school. We asked several specific questions about the scenario as well as more general questions related to the credibility of online breaking news.

We also surveyed the APME membership using the same breaking news scenario as well as more general questions related to credibility and ethics. Many of those new organizations shared their online breaking news “policies,” though few had specific policies addressing specific online breaking news issues.

Finally, we spent some time examining past research and writings on the subject. Included in that research was the 2008 APME/Reynolds Journalism Institute online credibility study, training documents prepared by Steve Buttry for the American Press Institute and other writings from prominent journalists, including those with the Poynter Institute.

III. Reader expectations

- A. Our roundtables indicate that readers are adapting quickly to new technologies, more quickly than journalists and news organizations. Those who consume breaking news, especially, have sophisticated expectations and views on the changing nature of news, technology and online ethics. The majority of readers we talked with view a breaking news update as “information,” not necessarily a news story. As the situation develops and more “information” is gathered, a “news story” begins to develop. But readers want that “information.” Their view of what is newsworthy is more liberal than that of most news organizations. If the community is interested in something, then that “something” is newsworthy. (“News is anything a lot of people want to know.”) Of course, it’s never quite that simple. However, these are the key takeaways from our community roundtables:
1. Readers and sources expect news organizations to have standards that can be explained and defended. This was especially important to those readers who fell into our sources/community leaders group. However, it is clear all readers want transparent standards and policies. Of course, these standards will differ from community to community. “Not in this community” was a response to one of our scenario questions. The relevance of the news to each individual reader influences his or her judgment about the ethics of publishing information – suggesting that you need to understand your community and readers in order to know what will be relevant to a large number of readers. Finally, readers recognize the standards for the online product might be different than for your print products.
 2. Readers and officials recognize the media world is competitive and increasingly diverse – but they expect more of the newspaper in both print and online. They expect this news organization to be more responsible. (One reader said: “YouTube is not a news source.”)
 3. An organization’s reputation is built over time based on many stories, but can be ruined with individual readers and officials by the way the entity handles just one story. Readers seemed especially sensitive to breaking news that appears to be “sensational.” One reader said, “It’s a very fine line between what becomes sensationalizing.” Another said, “The more often the report sensationalizes, the less credibility you will have.”

4. Readers and officials are willing to forgive honest mistakes of fact – but not mistakes of judgment. They understand breaking news develops and changes quickly. However, if organizations quickly acknowledge factual mistakes they will enhance their credibility. One reader said that if you just reported what you knew and attributed it to a source, “I don’t think it was a mistake.” Instead, readers want us to report the new information quickly while acknowledging earlier reporting was incomplete or now known to be inaccurate.
5. Sophisticated media users perceive different standards of quality depending on the medium used for reporting. In particular, they recognize that content on Twitter and Facebook are works in progress. Readers said, for instance, that Twitter users are “a little more forgiving, a little more laid back.” Some readers even suggested that we begin building breaking news updates for the Web site through Twitter, sharing “information” on Twitter and reporting “the news” on our Web sites.
6. They want transparency on sources, but they expect the news organization to be discriminating in standards of what makes a credible source. They are willing to accept a single source if it’s “official” or authoritative (clearly someone who knows). Each group accepted the police scanner as a credible source. A reliable witness – like a police officer or a school official – would be deemed a credible source. One key reader comment: “News is not news unless it is sourced.”

B. Outside reader research also indicates something of a gap between reader expectations and newsroom expectations. According to the Reynolds Journalism Institute/APME Credibility study, readers find simple concepts such as “verifying information” and “getting the facts right” as important attributes of “good journalism” online but not as stridently as newsroom editors. They also don’t value as highly the differentiation between straight news reporting and opinion. When it comes to reader comments on news stories, readers are much more likely to view anonymity as a positive than newsroom editors. Yet, 70 percent of those surveyed still viewed accuracy of “their site’s breaking news content” as excellent or good.

IV. Newsroom values

Newsrooms are clearly more conservative than readers. They place more of an emphasis on baseline values like “getting the facts right” and “verifying information.” They place great value on clearly separating straight news reporting and opinion, and they believe strongly in clear differentiation between news and advertising content. Newsroom leaders, more specifically, are more likely to be cautious when it comes to reporting breaking news online. The majority don’t view breaking news posts much differently than traditional print newspaper stories. “Good journalism” online to most editors looks a lot like traditional print journalism. Here are more key findings from our survey of APME members:

- A. Journalists are more cautious than the public-at-large when it comes to posting breaking news updates online. Readers and the public were inclined to publish sooner than the journalists. In response to our breaking news scenario, Professor Edward Wasserman of Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Va., wrote: “Since when is a school fight news? If there is a worthwhile story to report, it's one that should be gathered over a period of days, widely sourced and carefully written. Not a breaking news item.”
- B. Journalists and the public agreed they should be transparent and report that some elements have not been verified by official sources. The definition of acceptable sources seems to be consistent among journalists and readers. Multiple sources strengthen the report as do more traditional sources confirming details obtained elsewhere.
- C. There was near unanimous consensus among journalists that pressure from competition should not/would not impact decision-making. “We would not be bullied into running a story because of competition,” wrote Jana Collier of the Dayton (Ohio) Daily News.
- D. Journalists are more skeptical of Facebook and social media in general as a news source than the public-at-large.
- E. Many journalists believe our Web sites give us the power and ability to report incrementally – as long as we use that ability responsibly. One editor wrote: “Anything that is a fact helps our readers understand what’s happening. Just because we do not know EVERYTHING does not mean that we don’t know SOME THINGS. The web allows us to publish things in installments, updating the story as we know more. Print does not truly allow us to do that and therefore requires a different threshold of totality — the whole story, or at least a big hunk of it, versus an installment.” Yet, most of the journalists surveyed don’t believe the standards for credibility of sources is different online than in print. Still, while the standards for the credibility of print and online stories may not be technically different, the nature of the medium does have an impact. Douglas Ray of the Tuscaloosa (Ala.) News wrote: “News is more incremental online, obviously, and the tools are different, but we work to maintain the same set of standards for credibility in the work we do across platforms.” Jana Collier from Dayton wrote: “There is not a different standard for factuality or credibility. But there is an opportunity to do as I described earlier -- offer installments. What if news outlets had waited until they had ‘the whole story’ to report 9/11? You must report what you know as you know it. Isn't that our responsibility to readers?” This notion of incremental reporting appears to be a journalist’s way of handling readers’ dilemma over how to handle “information” versus a “news story.” By reporting incrementally, based on sound standards,

journalists can give readers the “information” they crave while incrementally crafting a more traditional news story.

- F. Most newsrooms surveyed do not have clear and defined online breaking news policies and standards. Most rely on standards for print or on decision making by editors on the job at the time.
- G. Twitter and other social media tools are still an emerging form of communication and information sharing for most journalists surveyed. Their usefulness of as a source varies by organization. There are no clear rules or attitudes.

V. Establishing ethical/credibility standards online

- A. Too many news organizations do not have clearly defined and transparent policies for reporting breaking news online. The absence of such a policy exposes news organizations to unnecessary risk, leading to newsrooms that rely more often than not on the disparate judgments of their leaders. Such a void increases the likelihood that newsrooms will make the kind of mistake that can undermine years of earned credibility.
- B. Example A is from Milford Fryer, managing editor of The Advocate in Baton Rouge, La.: “Our policy
 - i. ... is that breaking news for online must pass through a line editor before being posted. We feel that our reputation is as much at stake with online copy as with our dead tree copy and deserves that much attention. We feel our editors have the judgment as well as editing talent to make news decisions. When we have reporters working, we usually have editors working. The editing step only slows the process minimally, and provides cleaner copy that meets our standards. Our goal is to get breaking news online as quickly as possible, sometimes just a headline, then a graph or two, and continue updating the story as information becomes available.”
 - ii. Example B is from William Barth, Beloit (Wis.) Daily News: “We know we need one. But we're small enough that the subject doesn't come up that often. When it does, editors put their heads together and make the best decisions they can given the facts of the situation. Which, come to think of it, is probably what a policy would mandate anyway.”
- C. Online breaking news policies must reflect the news organization’s community. Standards of “right” and “wrong” and “accurate” and “inaccurate” will have common threads, but will also vary by community. There will also likely be differences based on how “wired” a community is; the more sophisticated the community is in terms of online news and information consumption the more likely that community is to have shifting

standards in terms of ethics and credibility. So where do you begin? Based on our research, here are a few key questions any news organization must answer before establishing a policy:

- i. How do you define breaking news?
- ii. What is an acceptable source for breaking news online?
- iii. How many sources are acceptable to verify information published in a breaking news report?
- iv. Are social media sites like Facebook, MySpace and Twitter acceptable sources of information to be used in a breaking news setting?
- v. Who will approve and/or post breaking news?
- vi. Will you post breaking news only on your organization's Web site or will you also allow staff to post news and information on social media sites like Twitter?
- vii. Are the standards for reporting breaking news different on your Web site than on social media sites like Twitter?
- viii. How will you handle user-submitted content (information, photos, video) in a breaking news setting? Who will approve the use of such material?
- ix. How will you handle real-time corrections and/or breaking news stories in which the facts are quickly changing?
- x. How will you communicate your standards/policy to readers and the community-at-large?

VI. Sioux City Journal online breaking news policy

Introduction

The Sioux City Journal will be the first and best in reporting local news online. Being “first” means reporting factual information as quickly as possible, even if all the facts of the news event are not yet fully known and even if it does not always go through the same rigorous editing process we utilize for print. Being “best” means reporting quality breaking news that is consistent with our organization’s ethics and reinforces our reputation as the most credible source of news in our community. We will be transparent with our readers, posting this policy in a prominent spot on our Web site and providing a link to the policy with every breaking news post.

Organizational ethics

We subscribe to the belief that ethical reporting is paramount as well as the Society of Professional Journalists’ Code of Ethics (<http://www.spj.org/ethicscode>) and Poynter Institute director of ethics Bob Steele’s “Guiding Principles for the Journalist” (<http://www.poynter.org/column.asp?id=36&aid=4349>). Newsroom staff will familiarize itself with these documents.

Defining breaking news

Breaking news is any new information that a large number of people want or need to know as long as such reports do not violate our organizational ethics (see description above).

Posting breaking news

Breaking news can be created and posted by anyone in the newsroom. Sensitive breaking news should be reviewed by at least one newsroom manager before it is posted. Journalists should seek guidance on any breaking news that requires the approval of a supervising editor or the Journal editor. (See below.)

Acceptable sources

A breaking news story cannot be posted without the presence of at least one clearly identified official source, unless otherwise approved by the Journal editor, city editor or online editor. Acceptable sources include anyone with authoritative, firsthand knowledge of the situation or public officials and/or other traditional print media sources who have been given authority to communicate with the media on the subject.

Anonymous sources will not be used unless they pass traditional print criteria AND are approved by the Journal editor, city editor or online editor.

Scanner traffic will not be used as the only source for a breaking news update unless outstanding circumstances are present. The use of scanner traffic as a single source must be approved by the Journal editor, city editor or online editor.

We will consider using information gathered from readers including video and photos of breaking news events. We will strive to independently verify such information, including information gathered via social media sites, before posting, especially information that is sensitive in nature. The Journal editor, city editor or online editor must approve any content before it is posted.

Social media

Newsroom staff will post breaking news updates in a variety of settings, including social media sites like Facebook, MySpace and Twitter. The standards for posting news in these settings will be the same as the standards for posting news to our organization's Web site(s). We will use social media to responsibly gather information (see guidelines above).

Corrections/clarifications

We will correct or clarify information in breaking news stories as quickly as possible. (Consult with an editor immediately if we suspect a post has inaccurate information.) We will be transparent about those corrections or clarifications. If we got something wrong, we will let our readers know. If the facts change, we will tell our readers what has happened and how these facts differ from our original reporting. We will be vigilant about making those corrections and/or clarifications, even if the facts change hours or days after the original report. Readers can report errors of fact or requests for clarifications by sending an e-mail to frontdoor@siouxcityjournal.com or by calling 712-293-4222.

Breaking news checklist

Here is a quick publishing checklist for journalists in a breaking new situation. When in doubt, always check with the Editor, City Editor or Online Editor. However, you must check with an editor if:

- My story has an anonymous source.
- My story is a follow-up to a previous breaking news post and requires a real-time correction.
- My story doesn't have an "official" source.
- My story has an eyewitness whose credibility is uncertain.
- My story relies on scanner chatter.
- My story will be posted with user-submitted photos/video.
- My story relies on unverified information obtained from a personal social media site.