Second Servings: Online publication and its impact on second-day leads in newspapers

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Abstract
A content analysis comparing contemporary newspaper leads to ones from 15 years earlier, before Internet publication became commonplace, determined that use of “first day” (direct/summary) leads has declined over that time. The findings support an argument that newspapers’ print editions have become a permanent second-day publication concurrent with the rise of the 24-hour news cycle and the phenomenon of newspapers using their online editions to break news.

Disciplines
Communication

Comments
Presentation at Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication Conference, August 2005, San Antonio, TX.
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on second-day leads in newspapers

Prepared for
AEJMC Conference Presentation
Newspaper Division
San Antonio, TX
August 2005

**Word count**
Abstract: 67
Text: c. 3,000

**Note:**
Please consider both for the general competition and Industry-Research competition. It addresses the following two items off the Earl Wilkinson list:

104. What is the printed newspaper's relationship with its own on-line information? After 10+ years of Internet presence, does it have a negative effect on the core printed product currently? And, what kind of future should our readers and advertisers expect?

118. The impact of a newspaper company's web site on its core product.
Abstract

A content analysis comparing contemporary newspaper leads to ones from 15 years earlier, before Internet publication became commonplace, determined that use of “first day” (direct/summary) leads has declined over that time. The findings support an argument that newspapers’ print editions have become a permanent second-day publication concurrent with the rise of the 24-hour news cycle and the phenomenon of newspapers using their online editions to break news.
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**Introduction**

Newspapers began to establish online presences in the mid-1990s and by now most U.S. dailies have some sort of Web edition; Greer and Mensing put the number at 1,279 in 2003.¹ Internet usage for news still lags newspapers and television for most people, but nonetheless its use as a news source is expanding.² As Web news has grown, researchers have assessed its impact on journalism with inquiries focused largely on the emergent Web operations themselves, including studies of site characteristics, audience responses, and content differences -- especially writing and presentation styles.

A topic that has not received attention from researchers is whether creating Web editions of newspapers has in turn affected the print version. Such research could focus on topics such as news judgments and writing style for what has become, in effect, a permanent second-day publication for many news operations. The “scoop” has always been a part of newspaper lore and legend, which may be why it was seen as a landmark in journalistic history when the Dallas Morning News “scooped” itself in 1997 by putting news of Timothy McVeigh’s jailhouse confession about the Oklahoma City bombing on its Web site rather than waiting to break the news in the print edition.³

What was seen as ground-breaking then is routine now, as newspapers update breaking news on their Web sites throughout the day. But does the practice change the characteristics of the print edition? To help assess this, an exploratory study involving one medium-sized metro newspaper was conducted, looking specifically at content and construction of news leads from two time periods 15 years apart to evaluate differences between the contemporary approach and the pre-Internet environment.
Literature Review

Early investigations into online newspapers tended to focus on audience reactions to the new delivery format or to investigate site characteristics, especially use of interactive elements. Current research continues to explore these themes. This is useful because continual updating is necessary for understanding an environment that continues to change, even though the pace of change has settled down somewhat.

Form and content

As online presentation expanded, the issues of what form journalism would take mostly concerned handling of material presented on the Web site. Suggestions for “repurposing” printed content online included writing in small, standalone components and summary segments (what one author called “chunks”), writing concisely and conversationally, and using the power of links and interactivity to present the news in ways that would transcend what could be done with ink-on-paper. One commonly expressed view was that journalism’s newest delivery platform could make effective use of one of its most thoroughly institutionalized writing devices, the inverted pyramid, which summarizes the story and puts key details near the beginning, leaving lower-priority information for later. Online writing could inspire a style involving “multiple inverted pyramids, with each element of the story its own pyramid [linked] in ever more far-flung connections.”

News cycles and news judgments

When, and whether, to post a breaking-news story to the Web was another consideration. The Internet accelerated what by the mid-1990s already had become a 24-hour news cycle. “News is no longer reported once in the evening, on television, and
again, in the morning, in newspapers. CNN and its around-the-clock cable successors, MSNBC and Fox News Channel, along with the Internet are dramatically recasting how journalists do their jobs by shortening news cycles down from daily to hourly to sometimes 10-minute cycles.” An editor of The New York Times said this compressed news cycle was responsible for changing daily newspaper journalism more than any other factor she had encountered in her career and further noted that the Times already had altered its focus to provide more news analysis. Another Times official, who was editor of the paper’s Web edition at the time, was quoted as saying “The nature of the beast is that these people [who look at a Web site several times a day] expect news as it happens, not several hours later.”

The sense of how much journalism could be affected by using the Internet to deliver urgent information became especially apparent in September 1998, with the release of the text of special prosecutor Kenneth Starr’s report on the Bill Clinton-Monica Lewinsky affair. Nearly 25 million people were reported to have looked at the report online within 48 hours of its posting, and newspapers that posted the report saw dramatic increases in traffic to their sites. “If television news was legitimized by the Kennedy assassination and the [first] Persian Gulf war cemented the relevance of cable, then the Starr report ‘ratified the Internet as America’s premiere means of rapidly disseminating critical civic information.’” [Online media critic Jon] Katz wrote in his online column.

Leading off

For this research, leads were selected as an indicator of this shift to the Internet as a source of breaking news. Leads are an appropriate place to focus such an investigation because of their importance in establishing the news value of a story. A lead is “a
promise to the reader of what is to come”\textsuperscript{18} that “should tell the reader the central point of the story.”\textsuperscript{19} Newswriting texts tend to make a distinction between leads that present the news directly vs. ones that do not, using terminology such as “direct” and “delayed,”\textsuperscript{20} “summary” and “alternate,”\textsuperscript{21} and “hard” or “soft.”\textsuperscript{22} Direct or summary approaches also are known as “first day leads” when used with breaking news stories because they are a device for presenting the news to readers who haven’t heard it before.\textsuperscript{23}

The distinguishing characteristic for summary or first-day leads is the presence of the classic five W’s of who, what, when, where and why/how. First-day leads tend to include the answers to several of the W’s, while alternate forms of leads often do not. Alternate, delayed or “second-day” leads will emphasize one characteristic (e.g. “who” or “what”) in a particular way, or will offer a description, anecdote, or short bit of narrative about the subject to introduce the story to the reader. Alternate or delayed leads tend to focus more on the how or why, or to contain analysis and background, with the news provided in a “nut graph” that follows later.\textsuperscript{24}

Despite their ubiquity – every story has a lead – and significance, leads also are an under-researched area within journalism scholarship. They are a relatively common topic in the trade literature\textsuperscript{25} but not in academic inquiry. More than 50 years ago, Swanson and Schramm (separately) investigated the importance of leads in attracting readers to stories. Stapler documented that leads in 12 prominent metropolitan newspapers were so long that they became difficult to read; Catalano replicated that work for wire-service stories and reached the same conclusion.\textsuperscript{26} Building off their work, Gillman used readability testing such as the indexes developed by Robert Gunning and Rudolph Flesch to document that many of the leads in 11 medium-sized newspapers were
composed of sentences that exceeded the lengths recommended by those readability experts. Sports leads were a little shorter and fell within the readability guidelines more frequently.\textsuperscript{27}

While length and readability are significant characteristics related to a lead’s effectiveness, so is its general style or approach. First-day leads tend to be associated more with the inverted pyramid style of presentation. Within the field, editors and writing coaches have urged a move away from the inverted pyramid toward more narrative writing styles – which would mean fewer summary leads. “The inverted pyramid has a deadly assumption built in,” according to writing coach Don Fry: “The pyramid assumes the reader knows the background.” But frequently this is not the case, “So the reader reads the top half of the pyramid without the background to understand it.”\textsuperscript{28}

These anecdotal observations were supported by a study done by the American Society of Newspaper Editors, which found the inverted pyramid was the least popular style of news presentation among readers. The ASNE experiment used live news copy prepared four different ways for four zoned editions of the \textit{St. Petersburg ( Fla.) Times}. Random telephone surveys of readers then were conducted to see which styles readers found most effective, and the narrative form scored best.\textsuperscript{29} In a later study that sought to control for story subject matter, readers still preferred stories that used a narrative approach to straight news styles.\textsuperscript{30} The move toward narrative journalism was perhaps part of a trend among print journalists to alter their presentation styles. By studying the five W’s across decades of copy in three newspapers, Barnhurst and Mutz documented a long-running shift “to de-emphasize events in favor of news analysis.”\textsuperscript{31}
Research hypothesis

The essential research question here is whether the process of de-emphasizing event coverage, as described by Barnhurst and Mutz, and the edging away from traditional inverted pyramid presentation modes has been reinforced or accelerated by impact of the 24-hour news cycle and the introduction of Internet operations by daily newspapers. This was done by evaluating whether use of first-day leads has changed since the introduction of online news in the mid-1990s. If newspapers are putting breaking news on the Web as soon as possible, and following up in the print edition, the result could be a decline in the number of summary leads appearing in the print edition. This especially could be the case if the journalists are using online-edition leads with summary, inverted pyramid styles as some have proposed. 32

Methodology

A sample of leads was drawn from 14 issues of a medium-sized (approximately 170,000 daily circulation) metropolitan newspaper in a northeastern city. The sample included seven editions from 2005 and seven comparable ones from 15 years earlier, well before the introduction of Internet news (and even before the first Gulf War that boosted the presence and prominence of cable news, which began the rise of the 24-hour news cycle). The days selected for review were determined according to a “constructed week” sample, which Riffe, Aust and Lacy described as most effective for collecting newspaper content information to control for both the impact of cyclical variations in news throughout the week (weekends are slow news days in the traditional sense but heavy on sports, for example) and also control for the impact of a big news event (which could skew results if a consecutive week were selected). 33 The days were randomly selected
during February 2005; the constructed week consisted of: Wednesday Feb. 2, Tuesday Feb. 8, Thursday Feb. 10, Saturday Feb. 12, Friday Feb. 18, Monday Feb. 21 and Sunday Feb. 27. The same dates were used to construct a week from February 1990 to collect the pre-Internet sample.

The first two sections of each newspaper edition -- containing world, national, local and state news -- were used in the analysis. The features and sports sections were excluded because few stories in these sections employ summary leads. This is because the content of these sections -- including entertainment, personality, lifestyle and human-interest stories -- is of a type that does not lend itself as well to summary leads. Within the news sections, certain material was excluded as well; leads from editorials, opinion columns and letters to the editor were not included in the sample. Nor were teasers, promos or leads on news briefs that were shorter than 3 column inches, or approximately 100 words. What was left was a selection of approximately 30 fully developed news stories each day on local and non-local issues. A total of 455 leads were evaluated – 228 from 1990 and 227 from 2005.

For each lead, an index was created by coding it for presence of each of the five W’s, as well as for presence of background and/or analytic information. The index score was calculated by adding 1 point for each of the basic informational characteristics associated with first-day leads (who, what, when, where) but subtracting a point for presence of “how/why” and for analysis or background – both of which tend to be associated with second-day leads. Using this procedure, higher indices are associated with summary, first-day leads. A lead that contained all five of the W’s would have an index of 3, scoring plus-4 points for who, what, when and where and a minus-1 for
stating how or why. Many summary leads, however, leave out the how or why until later in the story, creating the potential for summary leads to score a maximum of 4 on the scale. For example, the following leads were coded as a “4” and a “3” respectively:

People concerned about the state’s parole policies (who) can air their feelings at a public hearing (what) in Metropolis (where) next month (when). (Score = 4.)

When a roadside bomb (what) in Iraq (where) exploded on Feb. 9 (when), Army Sgt. Jessica Housby (who) became the 21st female soldier killed in action since the war began nearly two years ago (background).
(Score = 3, with plus-4 for the first four Ws and a minus-1 for the background.)

On the other hand, a typical second-day lead that told what the news was and who made it -- but left out elements such as where and when in order to emphasize why the news was significant or include some of its background -- might score a 1, earning 2 points for who and what, with minus-1 for the why or background. Take this example:

Arthur Miller (who), the Pulitzer-winning playwright whose most famous creation, Willy Loman in Death of a Salesman, came to symbolize the American dream gone awry, (background) has died (what). He was 89. (more background)
(Score = 1, with plus-2 for who and what, and minus-1 for the background.)

This example was literally a second-day lead since it appeared on Saturday Feb. 12, 2005 -- two days after Miller’s death on Thursday Feb. 10. That time reference actually appeared in the second paragraph, as did the “where” element -- at his home in Roxbury, Mass.

Findings

The analysis showed that leads appearing in 2005 appeared to be more second-day oriented than the ones from 15 years earlier, with a lower overall mean score on the index. (See Table 1.) For both years, the mean score on the index was well below what could be considered a true summary lead (3, if all of the Ws are present or 4 if the
why/how or background are left out). The mean index was calculated at 2.228 in 1990 and had declined to 2.035 in 2005. This may be interpreted as evidence supporting Barnhart and Mutz’s conclusion about a long-term trend away from event coverage toward more analytical coverage being well under way by 1990 and being even more prevalent 15 years later.

Because the scores were not distributed normally, they could not be subjected to the typical tests for variance of means (z-score or t-score test) to see whether this difference was statistically significant. However, using a nonparametric Mann-Whitney test that approximates the t-test for values that are not normally distributed, the difference in these means was found to be significant at \( p = .0133 \) (Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Overall Mean Scores</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean score</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard Dev.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N =</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mann-Whitney test (one tailed) ( p = .0133 )</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Another way of analyzing the differences in the leads was to use the criterion that a “true summary” lead is one that scored either a “3” or a “4” on the index. The 1990 newspapers used summary leads 42.5 percent of the time (97 leads out of 228 scored either 3 or 4) while the 2005 papers had such summaries only 30 percent of the time (68 leads out of 227). This, too, was a statistically significant difference. (Table 2.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2: Chi-squared analysis of first-day vs. second-day categories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Type/Score</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-day ( \geq 3 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second-day ( &lt; 3 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chi-squared = 7.263, 1 d.f.; \( p = .0070 \).
Discussion

The results of the content analysis provide support for the hypothesis that differences in writing, specifically more use of second-day leads, would be found in newspaper editions published in 2005 compared to ones from 1990. Both comparison of the index means and categorical analysis of summary vs. alternate leads are consistent indicators that direct or summary leads were used less frequently in 2005.

These results must be interpreted within the context of certain limitations, however, especially the fact that only one newspaper was studied, which limits the study’s generalizability. In that sense the research might best be viewed as an exploratory study and a test of the methodology, and that more conclusive results could come from replicating it across a broader sample of newspapers. Looking at more points on a timeline to better establish the trends would also be beneficial.

Another limitation is that, aside from the time frame, no specific controls were used that would attribute the change in writing style specifically to the influence of the Internet. The qualitative evidence in the literature states that journalists are coming to see the print product as a permanent second-day publication because news can be broken in the online edition; the quantitative evidence measured here is consistent with that. But it is impossible to rule out other factors that could have led to the change, such as writers and editors reacting to information such as the ASNE study and other suggestions from experts in the field to use more narrative writing because it is more attractive to readers.

Conclusion

Much of the research into the impact of the Internet on journalism has focused on the online presentation itself. But as online and print presentations become more closely
integrated, it is only logical to assume a “backflow” from the development of the online component that causes an impact on the print side. This study, although it is limited, attempts to measure one such point of impact with an evaluation of changes in writing style in the print edition. It is intended to demonstrate that this can be a worthwhile and productive avenue of research and provide a starting point for further inquiries of this nature.
End notes


8 Greer and Mensing, “Analysis of Online Sites.”


Melvin Mencher p. 131

Fedler, Reporting for the Media, 161

Rich, Reporting and Writing the News, 155

Rich, Reporting and Writing the News, 160,

Rich, Reporting and Writing the News, 165; Fedler, Reporting for the Media, 162.


Debra Gersh, “Inverted Pyramid Turned Upside Down,” Editor & Publisher 126 no. 18 (May 1, 1993): 22-23.


Rich “Writing for the Web;” Bukota, “Writing for the Internet.”


Rich, Reporting and Writing the News 155.

A pseudonym for the city name.