

DRAFT CURRICULUM – Elements of Journalism
FALL, 2016
©Walter C. Dean

Class 1 – What is journalism, what makes it special, and why is it important?

What is the purpose of journalism? Who does it serve? What does it look like? What makes it unique?

Large group discussion:

Record answers on flip charts and then ask students to identify common patterns or themes.

- What are the purposes of journalism?
- What is the purpose of a news organization?
- What is the purpose of an independent or unaffiliated journalist?

- Is journalism important or in any way special? Why?

- What are the strengths of journalism?
- What are the challenges (or weaknesses)?

- What does the public think about what journalists do?

What other journalists have told us: **the purpose of journalism is to give people the information they need to make the best possible decisions about their lives, communities, and government.**

The new media landscape: A day in the life of the news

Small group exercise:

Divide the class into groups of approx. 5-7. One group does newspapers, another on-line web sites, and another TV/radio.

Each group is asked to determine:

- What does the news look like on this platform?
- What are the characteristics of news on this platform?
- What topics are covered?
- What are the stories like?
- Who is the audience?

Small groups report out:

Record answers on flip charts and then ask students to identify common patterns or themes.

Large group discussion:

How typical was the coverage?

Compare and contrast content from different news organizations.
Compare and contrast content from different platforms.
What are the strengths and weaknesses of each?

Lecture: **Latest statistics about news consumption and media trends.**

Large group discussion:

How do people consume the news?
How are new media technologies affecting the way people get information?
What kinds of information do people need?
What kinds of information do people want?

What are the characteristics of journalism in Portugal? What are its strengths and weaknesses?

Class 2 – Understanding analytics – ratings, metrics, and content analysis.

Large group discussion

Small group exercise:

You work for a large media company that includes radio, TV, print and on-line journalism. The chief executive has appointed you to a committee to examine the metrics – the data – the company uses to manage its newsrooms and to sell the “news product” they produce to advertisers. You should answer the following questions:

1) In terms of content, the editorial process, and the stories produced:

- How are judgments made about productivity, quality, and effectiveness of reporting? What metrics, if any, are used?
- Are there additional metrics that could help managers make better decisions about productivity and journalists better decisions about the content they produce?

2) In terms of audience measurement and sales:

- What metrics are used to measure the size and composition of audiences?
- Are there other metrics that might better measure the news organization’s audience or impact?

Small groups report out

To an extent never before possible, news organizations now have the ability to collect metrics. Stories – and the journalists who produce them – live and die with the results.

But are the right things being measured? And if not, what are the implications?

Tom Rosenstiel, the director of the American Press Institute, recently wrote that,

Analytics—another word for audience data or metrics—was supposed to offer the promise that journalists would be able to understand consumers at a deeper level. Journalism would be more connected and relevant as news people could see what audiences really wanted.

But a generation into the digital age, most web analytics are a mess. Designed for other purposes, the metrics used to understand publishing today offer too little information that is useful to journalists or to publishers on the business side. They mostly measure the wrong things. They also to a large extent measure things that are false or illusory.

What do you make of this statement?

The problem with most analytics is that they measure what happened but not why. We know a story was seen and perhaps even shared, but we are left to guess what it was about that story that set it apart from all other stories. Sometimes the answer is obvious – it was important news or an unusually compelling tale.

But what about the rest of the time? What is it that makes some stories – or news organizations - better than others? And if we could identify any of these factors, could we put them to work on a regular basis and ideally even create systems or approaches to help us more effectively assess, report, and present the news?

Finding better analytics is about making decisions. The biggest challenge, adding up all the data, has already been solved. We have plenty of computational power and the spreadsheet software to crunch as much data as we can gather. The challenge is to decide *what* to count.

And this is where content analysis becomes important. We already know that counting unique visitors or newscast viewers or listeners is not enough. To better understand why they pick one story over another we need to look at the composition, the characteristics, of individual stories.

And to do that, we need to identify the elements of individual stories, decide which are worth counting, and then start looking for patterns.

Several years ago, the Project for Excellence in Journalism launched an ambitious project to try to understand local TV news in the U-S. For five years, researchers recorded and then transcribed and coded the content of 34,000 stories from 2,500 newscasts on 150 stations in 50 cities. It was a million dollar project – the most extensive content analysis of broadcast news ever - that produced a million pieces of data which we spent three years testing and analyzing before publishing it in a book titled *We Interrupt This Newscast*.

The research question was twofold:

Does the content of news actually make a difference in audience response?
If so, does the audience prefer quality content – however you define it – or something else?

To make the decisions about what elements to count, a design team of news professionals was created and asked to brainstorm the criteria for what a newscast *should* provide its community. And from the answers, the following code was created.

Show slides of the criteria and the corresponding code

Links for readings and sample content analysis project papers from previous class

Class 3 – An Element of Journalism: The Discipline of Verification

Slides: Smoke from the Capitol

Large group questions/activities:

- How might a journalist handle unsubstantiated stories that are being “reported” by other media outlets with varying standards?
- What characteristics separate a more credible story from a story that has less credibility?
- How should anonymous sources be handled?

Case studies: “Roberts resignation” and “Mac users are smarter.” Students work in small groups to decide how to cover each.

Lecture: the Discipline of Verification and the concepts of transparency, humility, and originality. The discipline of verification – processes that journalists use to find, gather, and assess information – is what separates journalism from everything else in the media universe.

Discuss the use of **concentric circles in verification**.

Review of information sources on the Web, from Wikipedia to databases to special interest sites.

- What makes a news organization (or on-line site) more or less trustworthy?
- What are the characteristics of information that is verified and information that is not?
- What responsibilities does the journalist have to his reader, viewer, or listener when he uses information from a “third” source?

Present case studies involving digital/visual manipulation.

Identify the characteristics that separate verified information from everything else – including spin, opinion, advertising, propaganda, and rumor – in the information marketplace.

Exercise: Each student will create a personal code to cover his/her own rules about verification/ethics. Note that having a personal code is more important than ever because

so many journalists work independently, without the safety net of a newsroom or editorial oversight.

Class 4 – An Element of Journalism: Proportionality

A key task of journalism is to make the important interesting. But what *is* important? A newscast stacking exercise will reveal what journalists think the audience wants.

Small group activity – Newscast stacking exercise:

Students are divided into groups of 5-7 and given a list of nine stories with brief descriptions of the content and visuals for each. The group must decide which stories will be short “readers” or longer reporter packages and then where in the newscast line-up to place each story.

Small groups report out and newscast lineups are listed on flip charts side-by-side so the line-ups can be compared.

Large group discussion:

- Do you see any patterns in the choice of stories and their placement in the broadcast?
- What journalistic reflexes drive decision-making about the coverage and story placement?
- How appropriate are these reflexes to the audiences in terms of the news organization’s core purposes?
- How did your choices serve the community?

Myths about the audience

Large group discussion:

The small group lineups are compared to a composite lineup from the same exercise completed by hundreds of professional mid-career journalists in the U-S and abroad.

The lineups demonstrate that many journalistic decisions are reflexive and based on assumptions about the audience, what people will and will not watch, and its definition of what is and is not important.

Present several assumptions about the audience and have students decide whether they are true or not. Get their reasoning.

Present the data on each assumption. Example: Does reporting live from the scene improve viewership?

Lecture:

Many of the assumptions about the audience are false, based on “*We Interrupt This Newscast*” research of 34,000 TV news stories, the more extensive study of news content ever conducted. Among the findings: well-told stories about important

issues and events get the most viewership; the topic of a story is less important than how it is reported; breaking news is popular but only if it's about something important; crime news and crime scene pictures do not build audience unless the report demonstrates how the incident is relevant to the viewer.

Journalists often struggle with the question: **Should I give the audience what it needs or what it wants?**

This is a false dichotomy. The most effective journalism presents important news in a way that engages the audience.

Class 5 – An Element of Journalism: Establishing Relevance

What's important or interesting and how does the journalist find it?

Lecture:

In recent years, news organizations have used research to monitor what stories the audience is consuming or to ask: ***“What do you want to hear about?”***

The problem with asking people “What do you want” is that it's a marketing question. Rather than use a marketing question, what if we used a journalistic approach?

Observe what people are doing.

Find out what they are talking (and worrying) about.

Determine how and when people are accessing the news and understanding the ways they are using information.

Organize our reporting process to make this observation and reporting possible.

The audience will be interested in your story if they think it is relevant.

What is relevance, why is it important, and how can a journalist establish the relevance of a story?

Large group discussion

- What are the elements of relevance? Geography, interest, emotion, need, shared experience, etc.
- What techniques or approaches can a journalist use to prove to the reader/viewer that a story is worth their time and attention?

Present examples of how the same story was introduced on three different news broadcasts and discuss the role of data in proving relevance.

What is a community?

- Characteristics of a geographical community
- Characteristics of a virtual community of interest or belief
- For each of these communities,
 - How does a journalist know what's going on?
 - Where can a journalist or news organization go to get the news?

Large group discussion questions:

- Who are the people journalists talk to most often?
- Who do journalists talk to less often or not at all?
- Who are the experts about life in a community?
- How can a journalist find them?
- What is an expert? Is there a difference between a credentialed expert and an authoritative source?

Identify different communities and audiences and advance the notion that all are important. Introduce the idea that different sources bring different kinds of knowledge to stories and that the choices made about who is interviewed will determine the kind of knowledge a story provides. The more knowledge usually means a more complete story but all stories will require decision-making about what is the most appropriate kind of knowledge.

Case study: Redevelopment: How people view the issue differently based on relevance and geography.

Civic and issue mapping

Discuss the concept of the “3rd place” and how a journalist can use 3rd places to find cross sections of people who can bring different kinds of knowledge to a story.

Individual exercise:

Each participant chooses an issue, a reporting topic, that is important to their community. Next, they identify the kinds of sources who might best inform their reporting. They must think about where those sources can be found and how a reporter might approach them. Then they identify those places on a map.

Large group discussion:

Compare maps and look for common patterns or themes, identify roadblocks, and brainstorm ways to circumvent them. Ask: Where didn't you go and why didn't you go somewhere else?

Can 3rd places be found on-line? If so, where? Can a journalist tap into them?

Processes such as civic mapping that can help the reporter institutionalize the search for authoritative and diverse voices.

Using examples of stories about health, security, education, and finance from previous class, brainstorm ways to prove the relevance of these stories.

Interviewing: How to get people to tell you what they really think

Deconstruct examples of typical interviews to identify what works and what does not. Consider how questions are framed, worded, and asked.

Demonstrate the difference between a “closed” and an “open-ended” question.

Show what happens when a reporter asks, “What do you make of that?”

Discuss the difference between interviewing a public official and someone who is not used to being interviewed by a reporter.

Students practice asking open-ended questions using the “speed-dating” or “dinner table conversation” exercise.

FB post: links to Steve Hartman “Everybody Has a Story” examples/

Class 6 – An Element of Journalism: Engaging the Audience

Ask students to identify the characteristics, or elements, of a good story. Make a list.

Show “*Before and After*” story examples. The “Before” example is poorly reported and will get low viewership. The “After” version is reported in ways that will get higher viewership.

The challenge for a reporter is how to find and then capture these effective elements.

Discuss concept: Finding a Focus – using four questions to make important news engaging. Discuss how best practice stories handled these questions.

- What are these stories really about?
- What information do readers need?
- Who has that information?
- What are the best ways to tell the story?

The most popular stories are well told tales about interesting or important issues. Treatment – how a story is reported and produced – is far more important than its topic. This means anything can be news if it’s delivered in a good story.

Identify important topics using notes from the first day “purpose” discussion. Will likely be economics, health, education, security, etc.

Focus on economics/money/personal finance. Brainstorm story ideas and coverage in small groups. Use the Finding a Focus questions as guide to find central point, central characters, central place, etc.

Discuss how changing the name of a beat can change the framing and focus of coverage. Example: police beat becomes criminal justice beat, economics beat becomes personal finance beat. Make a list for each beat of central place, typical characters, kinds of information, and relevance to audience.

Class 7 – Engaging the On-line and Social Media Audience

Story-telling on different platforms.

The New Journalism: Digital Tools, Social Media

Examine the use of on-line and social media in the information universe. How are people using it? How are journalists using it? Examples?

How does “news” on line and social media differ from “news” from the legacy/mainstream media?

Introduce the question: Is journalism special or unique? If so, what is it that makes journalism different from everything else in the media universe?

American Press Institute content analysis project – creating better analytics for on-line journalism

Major enterprise pays - The single biggest change publishers can make in general is to produce more high-value major enterprise journalism.

Stories triggered by newsroom initiative pay off - Initiative also drives engagement. Initiative stories are those that the newsroom dreams up. They answer a question journalists think audiences might be wondering, explore some new unexplored angle to a running story, or were triggered by something the journalist uncovered.

People like long stories - This more granular approach defining and measuring engagement also reveals something about attention spans and story length. People consuming journalism digitally like long stories. Even on their mobile phones.

Traditional news style works for some topics, opinion works for others – Stories that were written in a traditional news voice, whether they were straight news stories or feature pieces but still written a conventional reportorial voice, score 21 percent higher on our basic engagement index. They generated 52 percent more views, and 71 percent more shares than stories written with a more subjective voice. But this finding about voice doesn't hold true for all topics. A more analytic, more personal and subjective style or presentation works far better for sports, food and dining and, at some publications but not all, for lifestyle generally.

The power of photos, audio, and video - Stories presented with a photo score 19 percent higher in engagement than stories without photos. Stories with multiple photos score 43 percent higher. And here, too, topic makes a difference. Stories about government that have a photo with them score 75 percent higher than those that do not (more on this later). That is even higher than sports stories, which get a 43 percent boost. Food and dining stories, interestingly, do not benefit.

The elements of visual story telling – gathering images

Discuss the principles of visual story telling and photography, still and video

- Visual storytelling
- Still photography

- Video photography
- Writing to visuals
- Discuss audio and lighting

Show examples of effective and less effective visual story telling and identify the various elements and techniques. Then illustrate how the reporter and photographer actually did it.

Discuss how people in the audience process visual information, including the difference between video and audio and still and moving pictures. Share relevant NewsLab research into how the brain works.

Introduce the idea that to be effective, visual elements must work with the human brain, not against it.

Post to FB group: What newspaper editors can learn from television

Class 8 – Covering typical beats

Reimagining beats – large group discussion

Make list of typical beats by name. Then for each list location, sources, and kinds of information found. Then re-name beat (police to justice) and repeat exercise.

Consider beats by broad topic areas.

Small group exercise: groups each assigned a beat and will brainstorm coverage of a local (Portuguese) story from each beat.

API study results:

Government - In government, initiative—again, this means telling stories no one else has—is the single biggest driver of engagement. Stories that journalists conceived, that answered a new question or explored a new angle—generated 52 percent more engagement than government stories that were produced in reaction to an event. Major enterprise stories were almost as effective. Going deep generated 46 percent more engagement. Watchdog stories also helped—performing 25 percent higher in engagement—than government coverage in general, though the data made clear that you don’t have to have an exposé of wrongdoing to engage people here. This 25 percent boost, by the way, is the same boost watchdog coverage gets on most topics. Government stories that had a photo scored 75 percent higher in engagement than government stories that did not.

Business and economy - What has proven effective in coverage of business and economics, the data suggest, is a little different than for government. Initiative still helps; it boosted overall engagement by a third (33 percent). But there was a practical, news-you-can use dimension to business and economic coverage that we don’t see in most other topics. Across all topics, stories that help people solve problems, save them money, or help them figure how to spend their time, tend to perform a little worse than average. In business and economic stories they help, including locally helping people find out about job fairs

and openings. These kinds of “things to do” stories boosted engagement 20 percent. Watchdog coverage also helped, but a good deal less than in general. They scored 15 percent higher in engagement than the average business story, while they score 27 percent higher in engagement in general.

Crime and public safety - Overall, across the more than 50 papers studied, crime ranks with food and dining as the topic audiences engaged with most. But in a digital world, what works best is somewhat different than it may have been previously. Online, crime briefs—the classic police blotter of small incidents—do not perform well, particularly by an engagement index that takes into account sharing and depth of interest rather than just number of eyeballs. Crime briefs, indeed, perform 36 percent less well than crime coverage in general. But it’s not just time. Crime briefs online also generate fewer page views than other crime coverage. The police blotter, in other words, does not translate well to digital by any metric. What helps audiences engage with crime and public safety news is covering a more proactive and enterprising approach that helps put crime and public safety in context. Crime stories triggered by newsroom initiative perform 54 percent better than those that were not. Crime stories that involved major enterprise over many days perform 34 percent better than other stories. Crime stories that are explanatory in nature perform 33 percent better. And stories tagged as watchdog, in the sense that they exposed wrongdoing or some problem, performed 26 percent better. Interestingly, crime is one of the few topics where light enterprise, turning a daily into something just a bit more or something of a light feature, does help. These stories generate 23 percent more engagement than crime on average.

Sports - To a large degree, straight news game stories flop online. Writing with a strong subjective or analytic voice and demonstrating initiative and enterprise pays off. Stories with a strong analytic voice perform 34 percent better than other sports stories. Major enterprise sports pieces do 90 percent better. Initiative helps some, but less than elsewhere. It provides a boost of 23 percent. But stories that mark things just for the record perform eight percent less well than other sports. Dailies score six percent below average. Briefs perform 35 percent less well than other sports content. Fully half the sports stories analyzed were dailies, and half were for the record. Sports also benefits less than other topics from photos, interestingly (a boost of 26 percent). That may be because so much has already been seen. Sports is the topic that gets the most coverage among our local news partners. It’s not the most read topic overall, but it attracts a highly loyal audience. In fact, it’s the third most popular topic among the most loyal readers (and mobile readers), behind crime and food and dining. Nearly 60 percent of all the views to sports content come from those who visit the site at least three times a month. And, about 45 percent of all views are done on mobile devices.

Food and Dining - Restaurant openings, reviews and, interestingly, also health inspections do really well, along with simple things like school menus and school lunches. Food and dining works online, in part, because stories also have a long shelf life, something that wasn’t relevant in the days when journalism was limited to print, radio, or television and vanished either instantly or the next day. Food and dining stories are twice as likely to be viewed a week after publication than content overall. Photos don’t make a huge difference in food and dining coverage, which contradicts the days when newspapers had

elaborate photo studios for their dining sections. You get about the same amount of engagement whether you include a photo or not.

Class 9 – An Element of Journalism: Watchdog and Investigative Reporting

Lecture - investigative journalism is as old as journalism itself.

- Is investigative journalism different than other kinds of reporting?
- What makes investigative journalism special?

Discussion questions/activities:

- Can routine, daily journalism be investigative?
- What is the difference between a journalist who is skeptical and a journalist who is cynical? In what ways are these views reflected in stories?

Small group exercise: From a list of stories, identify which are investigative and which not.

Investigative journalism is the highest level of watchdog reporting and as such carries with it certain responsibilities. Help the student distinguish between the different levels of watchdog journalism.

The journalist as watchdog of the community

Most watchdog reporting is local. And local watchdog reporting has the greatest impact on the daily lives of the audience.

- How is local watchdog work different from national watchdog work?
- What are the elements of watchdog reporting – the practices or techniques?
- What does a good investigative story look like? What are its characteristics?
- Where do investigative/watchdog story ideas come from?
- Is a beat reporter a watchdog?
- Small town watchdog techniques.

Purpose: To the degree that the tools and techniques of investigative/watchdog reporting are applied to EVERY story, that story will be better. Most watchdog stories evolve from process and are the result of the reporter just asking questions.

The role of your “little voice” - Using visual cues to find questions.

CLASS 10 – An Element of Journalism: Covering political issues, candidates, campaigns, and elections

Why journalists cover government and politics and why the audience cares.

- What is the purpose of political coverage?
- Who is the audience for political reporting?

- What are the characteristics of stories in which the audience is treated as a spectator?
- What are the characteristics of stories in which the audience is treated as a participant or even decision-maker?
- Can policy be reported as a character issue? Can “character” ever be systematically reported?

Show examples of government coverage. Include newspaper issue grids, personality profiles, and candidate “applying” for an office.

Prompt the students to think of government coverage from the citizen’s point of view rather than the politicians or government’s perspective, which is the way most political and government news is reported.

If the citizen is the “decider,” what kinds of information does he or she need to make the best possible decision?

Small group exercise: From a list of local issues decide:

- What’s decision is the citizen making?
- What information does the citizen need?
- Where can the information be found?
- What opinions might help “inform the facts?”
- How can this material be presented in an engaging story?

Small group exercise: From an election campaign:

- Who are the candidates?
- What decisions must the citizen make about the candidate?
- What information can inform those decisions?
- Where can the information be found?
- What opinions might help “inform the facts?”
- How can this material be presented in an engaging story?

FB post: links to “Primary Questions” features and candidate issue grids.

Class 11 – An Element of Journalism – Independence, Conscience, and the Role of Journalists in a Time of Crisis, War or National emergency

At a time of war or national crisis, should a journalist be more a patriot or more a journalist?

- Journalists have told us that being a good journalist *is* being a patriot
- During a time of uncertainty, being transparent in explaining your motives and methods is more important than ever.
- The notion of the journalist as committed observer.
- Wikileaks has added a further dimension to this issue.

What is the appropriate role of a news organization that supports a revolution or change in government?

Does that role change after the revolution? If so, in what ways?

The meaning of journalistic independence.

- Is being apart from a community or a belief the most appropriate vantage point?
- To whom do journalists owe allegiance?
- Consensus: the best way to build a business is to serve the public. And the best way to know what the public wants and needs is to be a part of it. One's ethnicity, economic status, educational background and ideology can make journalism better without distorting it.
- The notion of the journalist as committed observer

Conscience and communication in the newsroom.

- Because journalism is an act of conscience, creating an environment that encourages people to speak up is important.
- A collaborative newsroom encourages diversity of thought, reality-checks assumptions and catches mistakes.
- How people communicate in the newsroom reflect the values of the news organization.

Purpose: Explore the motives of the individual journalist and raise the notion of the need for a personal code of ethics, especially at a time when more journalists work independently, without the safety net of a newsroom or practices imposed by a news organization.

Class 12 – Journalistic Independence in Action - the HIS in Gaza during the 2014 Humanitarian Emergency and War.

Case study of the Humanitarian Information Service, established during the 2014 war with Israel to provide information to Gaza's 1.8 million residents during the humanitarian emergency and provide feedback to the international aid community about aid needs and effectiveness.

Class 13 – An Element of Journalism – Understanding Bias

The journalist cannot and probably should not be unbiased, but his methods should be.

Large group discussion questions/activities:

- What is bias?
- How do biases influence reporting (in both positive and negative ways)?
- Examples of print, broadcast, and web stories that exhibit bias. Are these biases appropriate? If not, how might the stories be changed?
- If bias is appropriate, should the journalist do anything else?
- Should a journalist attempt to stamp out bias?
- Or does bias provide strength and meaning to a journalist's work?

Lecture:

Introduce the notion that a journalist cannot – and should not - be truly objective but that his *methods* can be. Examine the discipline of verification and its components – transparency, humility and originality. Instead of stamping out bias, the journalist should manage it. And to do that, the journalist must recognize biases and decide which are appropriate and which are not.

Small group exercise:

Deconstruct a story that contains bias and have the small groups identify the biases they find inappropriate and re-write the story to better manage the bias.

Case studies: McCain and Elian

Class 14 – Project/Papers Due – Presentations

Class 15 – Project presentations

Class 16 – An Element of Journalism – The Journalist in the New Media Age

What journalism's changing landscape means to the journalist and the news organization.

- How changing patterns of news consumption affect news organization business models
- The rise and role of the citizen journalist
- The impact of new technologies on news coverage and distribution
- What skills might a journalist need to prosper in the Next Newsroom?

Small group exercise: Design a media organization for the 21st Century that would cover your university (or community)

- Who would be the audience?
- What news would be covered?
- What beats would you have?
- How would it be presented and distributed?
- What would be the business model?
- What would you not do?

Small groups report out and large group discusses common patterns or themes.

Purpose: Encourage students to think about the future roles of journalism and how they as individuals might have some impact.

The future of the journalist

Audiences are receiving and using information differently and journalism must adapt or risk becoming irrelevant.

- Why is change so difficult?
- Are there successful techniques to manage change?

Discussion questions/activities:

- What best ideas or practices have you identified this semester?
- How might you put them to use?
- How can they be passed on to your friends, colleagues, and audiences?

What roadblocks will be encountered? How might these roadblocks be circumvented?