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## Editing's Rubik's cube: Online, the shape of the story changes

Basic journalistic principles remain the same, but the approach is different

By Sue Burzynski Bullard | 5:43 pm May 3, 2011

When a blogger reported that University of Nebraska quarterback Taylor Martinez was quitting the team, editors at the Lincoln Journal Star had to decide quickly whether to publish the report.

They were hearing the same buzz. Although social media networks like Twitter and Facebook were exploding with the Martinez story, none of it had been confirmed.

The Journal Star did not publish the rumor. And, as it turned out, Martinez did not quit the Cornhuskers.

But the Martinez incident is an example of how the Internet has changed editing, particularly breaking news.

Basic journalistic principles remain the same, especially a commitment to accuracy. Yet, online editing is different too. The need for speed is one major difference.

“With Martinez, the story was based on a blog written by someone we had never heard of,” said Patrick Smith, assistant online editor/sports at the Lincoln Journal Star and a longtime ACES member. “You have to show some restraint. We would have looked really stupid. An anonymous blogger doesn’t take a hit from publishing a rumor, but we would.”

But editors must be aware of the need for immediacy online. In print, editors face deadlines based on editions or times set by editors for particular stories. Online, “everything is now,” Smith said. “You have to have some standard, but at the same time, it’s like a race against the clock and the sooner the better.

“There’s something to be said for being first when you know the facts,” he said. “You establish yourself as a place to get information. The next time, something breaks, people will think of you first.”

And that adds up to another big change in editing breaking news online. The shape of an online story is often different than a traditional print story.

Emily Ingram, an overnight producer at The Washington Post, said constant deadlines make a difference in how editors approach copy.

“You’re getting three graphs to start with and then you’re getting a little more,” Ingram said. “At times you’ll have people firing things at you on Blackberries.”

Still, Ingram said she looks for many of the same things online as she did when she worked as a copy editor in print.

“You’re looking for holes in the story. You’re looking for inconsistencies in names. All the red flags you’re looking for when you’re editing in print carry over into online.”

But online editors often post bits of news as it develops.

Andrea Panciera, editor of [projo.com](http://projo.com), said print editors often think in terms of publishing one complete story. Online, she said, “We might put up one paragraph or two paragraphs. You’re working in that developing story mode where you’re blending in new information, you’re changing your lede.” [Projo.com](http://Projo.com) is the website of the Providence Journal in Rhode Island.

Steve Buttry, director of community engagement at [tbd.com](http://tbd.com), said online editors need to think of editing breaking news as editing “takes,” not one complete piece. It’s similar to the way a wire service files breaking news. But instead of filing a write-through, online editors may treat a story like a live blog with the latest update on the top of the story. [Tbd.com](http://Tbd.com) is a TV station and website that delivers local news about metropolitan Washington D.C.

“It never reads like a story from top to bottom,” he said. “Some people may only read the top, others may go to the bottom and read it all.”

Editors may repeat first references to people with each post because they don’t know where a reader is coming into the story.

When [tbd.com](http://tbd.com) reported on the condition of escalators in the Washington, D.C., Metro system, the story was told in a live blog and on a map.

“The story is written in chunks,” Buttry said. “That’s a different structure, a different reader experience ... and that’s something you have to keep in mind. At any point, someone is coming in fresh.”

By contrast, print reporters are traditionally taught to write complete stories with a beginning, middle and end.

Panciera said online editing requires different thinking.

“You’re really thinking about ‘I’ve got an opportunity, but the window is small in terms of the time (a reader will spend), the window is pretty small in terms of what I can show on a screen. And the window of time is also pretty small in terms of what I can produce quickly.’”

Editors should assure reader questions get answered quickly and high in a story.

The structure of a Web page is different than a printed page. At the Lincoln Journal Star, Smith compares decisions online editors make to completing a puzzle. “You have x number of spots to put things in and you have different ways to stack them, but you have to make the puzzle fit.

“It’s almost like a Rubik’s cube,” he said. “You’re flipping it around and seeing what works.”

Tags: online editing

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