



## CHAPTER 1:

# BASICS OF ONLINE JOURNALISM

Student journalists are the professional journalists of the future. And the world of journalism is changing dramatically, as it is pushed and prodded by technology. Rapidly changing, too, are the technical skills journalists must have. Journalists increasingly need to know how to operate broadcast equipment—video cameras, editing equipment for sound and video—and how to transmit material over the Internet.

Some need a detailed understanding of Web page design, coding, perhaps even of videophones like the ones used during the second U.S.-Iraq war. But while the delivery system for getting content into the hands of the consumer is continually changing, the fundamentals of what a journalist is, what the job involves, what factors go into determining what is news and how reporters and editors do their craft remain the same.

A decade ago, most high school journalists gathered news about things happening on and around campus. At best, a lucky reporter might have traveled with the team to cover an out-of-town game, ventured into the neighborhood around the school or received permission to make a phone call—a local phone call, that is. Today, journalism students can go online and

venture to places around the globe. This “real-world” connection gives wings to student journalists. They have at their fingertips unlimited resources, unlimited sources of information.

There’s a downside to this virtual freedom—it can make what’s happening on campus seem mundane, boring, uninteresting. Why cover the recital of the girls’ chorus when you can be reviewing a Brittany Spears concert from the school’s desktop computer? There’s a lot to be said for allowing student journalists to search for stories anywhere in the world, with the same access as reporters from The Times of London. But most advisers agree that there’s no place like home turf when it comes to learning the nuts and bolts of newsgathering.

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While most teachers and journalism advisers have developed their own courses for training young reporters, here is a review of some of the basic elements they'll need and some valuable online resources for developing training classes.

## Newsgathering

Journalists gather information in three main ways—by interviewing people, by examining the written record and by observation. The better a researcher you are, the more accurate and the more

## New Skills for the Journalist of the Future

Aspiring journalists will need to know how and where to find stories and how to produce and present them for newspapers, magazines, radio, television and the Internet. They will have to be knowledgeable, multiskilled generalists who can do it all—research; write; record; edit; handle modern video, sound and lighting equipment; and produce information that can be used across a range of outlets.

A glimpse at the future of the news industry can be found at Columbia University, where engineers have developed a mobile journalist workstation, which straps onto a reporter's back and enables him or her to return from a news event with multiple types of content ([www.futureprint.kent.edu/articles/pavlik01.htm](http://www.futureprint.kent.edu/articles/pavlik01.htm)).

A few of these multidimensional reporters already are working. They use a video camera as their reporter's notebook. They put together multimedia stories with video, audio and still photos captured by their video cam and they write text. Some even pull together simple Web pages. Others design graphics or provide the graphic materials a Web designer will use. The reporters have these skills in addition to the basic newsgathering techniques of reporting, interviewing, and writing for print, broadcast or the Web.

While the equipment of a "backpack journalist" may be bulky and cumbersome at the moment, some reporters are already using similar tools. Preston Mendenhall of MSNBC.com spent two weeks traveling around Afghanistan and sent back written articles, still photos, audio and video ([www.msnbc.com/news/afghan\\_front.asp](http://www.msnbc.com/news/afghan_front.asp)).

Because officials would grant only one visa, Mendenhall went to Afghanistan alone. He was his own reporter, cameraman and soundman—a one-man video crew. Mendenhall went in early in 2001, lugging all his equipment on his back. A few months later, when the tragedy of September 11 occurred, it was Mendenhall's reporting that stood out for its detailed and thorough look at Afghanistan, one of the few in-depth looks from inside that country.

Mendenhall was sent to Afghanistan by the Web site MSNBC.com. He produced a series of editorial packages about life there, and after Sept. 11, that work was revived and updated for Web publication as well as being used by MSNBC's cable news operation.

For more on the journalist of the future and backpack journalism, see the series of articles in [Online Journalism Review](#).

**In favor of it:** [www.ojr.org/ojr/workplace/1017771575.php](http://www.ojr.org/ojr/workplace/1017771575.php)

**Against it:** [www.ojr.org/ojr/workplace/1017771634.php](http://www.ojr.org/ojr/workplace/1017771634.php).

factual your stories will be. Research is the bedrock that underlies all news reporting and writing.

Assuming that you are well organized, the more information you gather, the better your story will be. The more people you talk to who are directly involved in the story, the closer you will get to telling the story with precision and detail. As a journalist, your goal is to find out what's really going on—using whatever legal and ethical means you can to get the information.

But you also need a healthy dose of skepticism (not cynicism) in assessing what people tell you or what information you gather. If someone gives you a press release, for example, you must realize that it contains the information he or she sees as valuable, not necessarily what you might find useful. While it can be straightforward—for example, the renovation of your local high school, slated for four years in the future, has been moved up to next year—the good journalist would naturally ask what prompted the change. Good reporters question what they are told. They check and double check the information they are given. They also try to improve on that information by talking to others who might have additional information and those who might be affected by a decision. A good reporter will check many available sources and, if possible, use first-hand information.

Taking the information you are given and supplementing it with other written material; talking with people affected by that information and with the people making the decisions; these allow you to shed what writer Lincoln Steffens called “air and light” on the subject. Let's call it basic reporting.

Let's say you were sent to cover the school principal's announcement of the National Merit Scholarship winners. If all you did was write what the principal said, you would have gathered the basic facts. But by talking with student winners and those who were semi-finalists, their parents, their teachers and even past winners about what winning the scholarship meant to their lives, you would have added important depth and perspective and emerged with a considerably better story.

Whenever possible, if you can find out why things are the way they are and why they work or don't work, you will be able to add causes and consequences to the issue and that often provides you with an even better story.

## What Is News?

News is the conglomeration of new facts and events that have an impact on our lives. Most people rely on journalists to provide them with up-to-date information about the world, making it the journalists' responsibility to determine what is news. Then the news media must help the audience comprehend the data and, as Tribune Publishing's President Jack Fuller says, “master it intellectually and emotionally by putting it in a context, a mosaic that help[s] make it seem somewhat less gratuitous and unpredictable, somewhat less frightening.”<sup>7</sup>

News can be more loosely defined as anything that interests a large portion of your community that has never been brought to its attention. It usually means a change in the status quo. But change alone doesn't make something newsworthy. Let's say you are supposed to be home by 6

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p.m. for dinner with your family, but you don't show up until 8 p.m. That may be a change in the status quo, but isn't news. However if the reason you were late involves your being the victim of a crime, it might be news.

For many years, news was what newspaper editors and network television anchors said it was. The media were the gatekeepers for the reading, viewing and listening public and in a large sense were the primary filter

for the news consumer. The Internet's easy access has changed that equation somewhat, forcing people to take responsibility for determining which "news" or "information" has greater weight or importance over others. Still, the media remain the primary gatekeepers in determining whether an event is news.

So how do professional news people select the factors that are important in evaluating newsworthiness?

## Sources for News and Information

There are many excellent news sites. Some are very obvious—the TV networks like CNN, ABC, CBS and NBC all have excellent Web sites. Most local television stations also have sites. The same goes for newspapers like The New York Times, Washington Post, USA Today, LA Times, etc. Magazines like Time and Newsweek have excellent sites as well. If you are looking for a copy of a story already published or broadcast, often the original publication's Web site is a good place to start. Search engines like Google and Yahoo also offer news compilation sites that are useful for getting the latest breaking news stories.

The Internet's weakness when it comes to news is that the leading free resources tend to offer no more than two weeks' worth of coverage. If you want more depth, many news sites offer their archives for a fee, or you can go to one of the leading commercial online news databases like Factiva ([www.factiva.com](http://www.factiva.com)), Thomson's Dialog ([www.dialog.com](http://www.dialog.com)) or LexisNexis ([www.lexisnexis.com](http://www.lexisnexis.com)), all of which offer coverage back into the 1970s. All of them are available on a per-transaction basis.

One excellent resource could be your local public library, which may subscribe to fee-based services that provide deep news resources. Libraries also usually keep CD-ROMs of certain local newspapers, so you can search them without charge. Many public librarians also now offer free or inexpensive searching of their subscription-based databases remotely via the Internet. Libraries can be an incredibly useful cost-saving resource.

There are also some very useful news-focused search tools, which can help you narrow down and find resources for news-related stories. In addition to Google and Yahoo, there are many others that help you track and filter stories you've already seen once and bring you the freshest information.

Other sites like NewsNow ([newsnow.co.uk](http://newsnow.co.uk)), a British-based collection of news resources, Moreover ([www.moreover.com](http://www.moreover.com)), News Index ([www.newsindex.com](http://www.newsindex.com)) and RocketNews ([www.rocketnews.com](http://www.rocketnews.com)) also are searchable and useful ways to track the latest developments on specific subjects. An outstanding site is Topix.net ([www.topix.net](http://www.topix.net)), launched in 2004, which has an especially large selection of news resources.

Gerald Lanson and Mitchell Stephens, authors of “Writing and Reporting the News,” emphasize 11 judgments that students and professionals should make when evaluating whether something is news:

1. **Impact**—The facts and events that have the greatest effect on the audience are the most newsworthy.
2. **Weight**—The significance of a particular fact or event lies in its value with respect to other facts or events.
3. **Controversy**—Arguments, debates, charges, countercharges and fights increase the value of news.
4. **Emotion**—Take into account human interests that touch our emotions.
5. **The Unusual**—When a dog bites a man it’s not news. But when a man bites a dog, it is news.
6. **Prominence**—More prominent individuals are given more attention.
7. **Proximity**—Concentrate on news that

In addition, many journalists have pulled together excellent collections of news resources. These journalism collection sites offer hundreds of valuable news resources and point you to other links worth looking at. Among the better ones—from journalists, for journalists—are:

- **AssignmentEditor.com** [www.assignmenteditor.com](http://www.assignmenteditor.com) This site offers paid and free resources for news professionals. It is a great starting point.
- **CyberJournalist.net** [cyberjournalist.net](http://cyberjournalist.net) MSNBC’s Jonathan Dube’s excellent site loaded with newsgathering links and resources.
- **Deadline Online** [www.deadlineonline.com](http://www.deadlineonline.com) “Find It Online” author Alan Schlein’s collection of journalism resources.
- **Journalism.org** [www.journalism.org](http://www.journalism.org) The Project for Excellence in Journalism has pulled together this useful site of reports and tools for journalists and educators.
- **Journalists’ Guide to the Internet** [www.reporter.umd.edu](http://www.reporter.umd.edu) Another excellent starting point for journalists by Christopher Callahan of the University of Maryland, author of “A Journalist’s Guide to the Internet.”
- **Journalists’ Toolbox** [www.journaliststoolbox.com](http://www.journaliststoolbox.com) Another deep collection of journalism resources pulled together by Mike Reilley and now managed by the American Press Institute.
- **National Press Club** [npc.press.org/library/reporter.cfm](http://npc.press.org/library/reporter.cfm) The National Press Club’s collection of useful resources for journalists.
- **News Center** [www.freepint.com/gary/newscenter.htm](http://www.freepint.com/gary/newscenter.htm) Librarian Gary Price has an outstanding collection of news resources that is constantly being updated.
- **PowerReporting** [www.powerreporting.com](http://www.powerreporting.com) Pulitzer Prize winner Bill Dedman’s excellent collection of news tools.
- **Poynter Institute’s Research Center** [www.poynter.org/research/](http://www.poynter.org/research/) This is a terrific site, with valuable resources for journalists. This page of links is a wonderful collection of resources: [www.poynter.org/content/content\\_view.asp?id=896](http://www.poynter.org/content/content_view.asp?id=896) and the main Poynter page, [www.poynter.org](http://www.poynter.org), offers everything you need to be a better journalist.

is of local interest; the closer to home the better.

8. Timeliness—Emphasize what is new.
9. Currency—Take into account what is on people’s minds.
10. Usefulness—Help the audience answer questions and solve problems in their daily lives.
11. Educational Value—Make readers more knowledgeable rather than merely informed.<sup>8</sup>

The following are a few Web sites for helping define what is news:

- An Interesting perspective on what is news [www.asne.org/index.cfm?ID=4868](http://www.asne.org/index.cfm?ID=4868)
- Changing definition of news [www.journalism.org/resources/research/reports/definitions/default.asp](http://www.journalism.org/resources/research/reports/definitions/default.asp)
- Good lesson for teaching what is news [www.highschooljournalism.org/teachers/LessonPlan\\_Display.cfm?Type=L&LessonplanId=149&AuthorId=77](http://www.highschooljournalism.org/teachers/LessonPlan_Display.cfm?Type=L&LessonplanId=149&AuthorId=77)
- The Lessons Plans page of the High School Journalism site of the American Society of Newspaper Editors [www.highschooljournalism.org/index.teachers.cfm](http://www.highschooljournalism.org/index.teachers.cfm). ■