

# **Like Reaching for the Pen: Towards a Greater Place for Digital News Video in Newsrooms and Journalism Curricula**

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## **Introduction**

This study is inspired by the results of an experimental approach to reporting live in a student newsroom. On 16 November 2012, two fourth-year undergraduate students at Ryerson University's School of Journalism ventured to the University of Toronto to cover a men's rights activist's speech. There they would produce, by some measures, the most successful editorial content published by ryersonian.ca (Lagerquist 2013) to date.

The reporters arrived at the scene with notebooks but also with smartphones. They were reporting in a live blog, a relatively new platform that digital newsrooms have used for breaking news events (Buttry 2014). It allowed the journalism students to post their choice from a variety of media, including text, photos, video, audio, and third-party social media, moments after they reported or captured it. The blog was embedded in the newsroom's website at the time (<http://archive.ryersonian.ca/article/27899>).

At the event, protesters chanted, engaged the Toronto police, and charged the doors of the lecture hall building. The police rebuffed them, and several skirmishes flared up. The reporters shot video and interviewed several protesters and eyewitnesses. The article page was shared via social media, as were some of the posts in the live blog.

Within forty-eight hours, the comments section below the live blog was busy with more than forty comment posts, which is about forty times more than the average *Ryersonian* article page attracted at the time. The platform's audience analytics reporting page showed that the reporter's thirty-seven posts, several of which were video posts, had been popular with viewers. The three pages of the live blog had been viewed 5,801 times, at an average length of about 30.5 minutes each, for a total of 202,900 engagement minutes, a tally that included the time viewers spent engaging with comments at the bottom of the article page. Average article pages on ryersonian.ca during the same period were viewed for ten seconds, by comparison. For a corpus

of about 223 other live blogs produced in the same eighteen-month period to 2 December 2013, the average numbers for those same analytics, respectively, were 129 page views, 22 minutes, about 3,400 engagement minutes. What are we to make of these numbers?

An initial goal of this research was to account quantitatively for the appeal of video in live blogs generally. Ultimately the data available, including the exceptional audience numbers above, did not establish a general correlation between greater audience engagement and the use of videos on the article page. Still, the research review below supports the argument that online news video production should be increasingly integrated into journalism curricula and newsroom practice on platforms such as live blogs.

The argument is supported in part by qualitative evidence of audience interest in live blogs, and especially by mounting evidence about the growth in online video watching on many platforms where news is distributed. Given the competitive and financial landscape for the journalism industry globally, audience interest is more important than ever when assessing potential editorial approaches to coverage.

Bergland and colleagues (2013) suggest that audience expectations and curricular choices in journalism schools may both have an impact on what kind of multimedia appear in the news industry. So the findings can be instructive both for journalism schools trying to anticipate what to teach, and for the industry making the ongoing transition to digital news. This paper concludes with some ways of integrating mobile video with core journalism training about news judgment and best technical practices for audio and video capture for news.

### **Literature Review: Online Video in Newsrooms Today**

It is almost a cliché to describe how quickly the digital news ecosystem shifts, but the subject is too relevant to resist, especially where video is concerned. Most recently the *Wall Street Journal* changed direction on its video strategy, ending a three-year investment in live studio online broadcasts. It will continue to invest in producing videos viewable on-demand by the audience, according to news executives (Wang 2015; Welsh 2015). Over a relatively longer term, consider that when Amy O’Leary announced in 2015 that she was joining *Upworthy*, the digital video platform, leaving her position at the *New York Times*, she joked that she had been hired by the *Times* to train staff to create audio slide shows in 2006, when that seemed to be the future of news multimedia (O’Donovan 2015). Indeed, according to a report, in 2013 there seemed to be “no consensus on how to produce news videos or how to profit from them” (Tu 2014). In 2013, Abbey Adkison and Duy Linh Tu crossed the United States to describe what kind of video was being produced in a project called *VideoNow* for the Tow Centre, and their report describes the

industry in this experimentation mode. The report, more “qualitative than quantitative,” relied on interviews with forty producers of video in newsrooms, none of them traditional broadcasters. In the related book, Tu described six “flavors” (2015) of Web video that have emerged in the industry: (1) traditional, broadcast-style videos: newsrooms repurpose traditional broadcasters’ reports and repost these packages on the Web; (2) raw videos: Shot and uploaded by print reporters using smartphones; (3) explainer videos: for difficult subjects such as personal finance and political machinations; (4) interactive features: short clips that complement text in so-called immersive multimedia projects; (5) feature videos: deeper looks into subjects or themes, although not necessarily told in traditional documentary style; and (6) Documentary and long-form narratives: time-intensive, planned and produced longer videos. It is fair to say that generally the list, although not comprehensive by Tu’s admission, reflected the state of video in Canada as well. The study was echoed by a content analysis of two hundred Web videos posted by both television and newspaper newsrooms by Bock (2014). The aim of the study was to capture the change in storytelling style between 2011 and 2013. It showed that generally, even at broadcasters, the narrative “telling” voice of journalists was heard less frequently by the end of 2013. However, Bock notes that given the relatively small sample size, it was difficult to capture precisely all the variations and experiments in production and story-telling style. She concluded that it is impossible to know which sorts of news video will compete with cat videos. She called for studies that ask which formats best serve audience needs, and that is what the industry has been doing on its own. In 2015, journalists and developers for newsrooms gathered in New York to “hack” – and conceive of new platforms and formats for online video that the audience would appreciate (Ellis 2015) – and on it goes.

### **Finding an Audience Is Important, But ...**

While audience has always been a concern for newsrooms, researchers have remarked recently how audience Web analytics are driving changes in news-making processes. News organizations of all types have been loading content onto websites. As described above in the student newsroom example, the distribution of links via social media is an integral part of reaching the audience. Schlesinger and Doyle (2015) note that newsroom managers describe this as “discoverability.” This practice drives traffic to the website, generating homepage visits by readers. Some news organizations have been tracking website analytics for several years (Anderson 2011). Beckett (2010) described the range of possible analytics and calculations in conversation with a data analyst at *Philly.com*. The newsroom watched page views, duration of visits, return visitors, and frequency of visits. It also monitored the numbers of visitors who commented on stories or

brought their own media – photos, videos – to the site. Lee, Lewis, and Powers (2014) found that monitoring those data for audience “engagement” through Web analytics was a top concern among journalism professionals. Mersey, Malthouse, and Calder (2012, 698) described “engagement” as an umbrella term for “the collective experiences that readers or viewers have with a media brand.” Napoli wrote that a growing body of research suggests a meaningful relationship between how the audience views editorial content and advertiser satisfaction (2011, 96). Recently, Anderson, Bell, and Shirky have observed that understanding the audience is “critical” in today’s newsrooms, adding with some incredulity that some newsrooms are still not attempting to do so (2014, 37–38).

Some researchers have written that the monitoring of audience represents a troubling commingling of financial and editorial concerns (on this point, see Paul Benedetti’s essay in this volume). Describing the newsroom as a sociological field that is being encroached upon by business concerns, Tandoc (2014a, 2014b) discussed how newsrooms insert Web analytics into the editorial process. In describing the practice, Tandoc resorted to the word “twerking” – a “low, squatting stance.” Previous research has underlined concerns about newsrooms’ hunt for page views and the commodification of audience (Robinson 2011). Summarizing the basic argument, Vujnovic (2011) suggests that in a for-profit, market-based industry, analytics can be used in an “exploitative” way. The connection between higher page views and audience engagement on the one hand, and ads served and revenue on the other, is undeniable. But as Boczkowski and Peer (2011) have described, we can also conceive of newsroom audience analytics as a healthy way to understand what the audience wants, by examining the connections between editorial choices and the most-shared and most-read lists that news websites have developed as a means to both reflect and drive traffic.

### **Online News Video and Audience**

A growing body of evidence suggests that online audiences interested in news are consuming more video. In 2014, Pew reported that almost two-thirds of American adults now watch videos online and that more than half of them (36%) watch news videos. This was up from 40 per cent of adults who watched online videos in 2007, and 26 per cent who watched or downloaded news videos. Facebook, notably, announced that in 2014, video posting on its platform increased almost fourfold. By June of that year, users were watching 1 billion videos a day. “Whether you’re a journalist in the field or a public figure sharing a part of your life, post raw videos that are compelling, shareable, clips that no one else will have,” Facebook urged on its user blog. Its audience figures did not distinguish between news brands, ads, and personal posts. In Canada,

AOL announced it was investing more in video production for its websites, including *Huffington Post Canada*, after a more than 50 per cent growth in year-over-year audience (Jeeva 2015).

Surprisingly little peer-reviewed academic research has been done related to online news video and audience. In her research described above, Tu (2014) noted that, leaving aside the occasional viral video, audiences did not view content produced by newsrooms more than a couple of thousand times, and many reached fewer people than that. Peer and Ksiazek (2011) wrote of online video in general that “from the standpoint of traditional news organizations ... a majority of these videos are not viewed on their websites, but on video-sharing websites such as YouTube” (2011). The same would be true of some of the video that newsrooms share to Facebook and Twitter, which began to support video in 2015.

Television still dominates print and digital cousins as a source of news (Papathanassopoulos et al. 2013), but at least some migration from that medium to online has been described as a demographic shift. As early as 2012, the Pew Research Center reported that scarcely more than one-third of US audiences twenty-nine years and younger said they watched television news. More recently, Pew found that national broadcast and local TV news saw viewership growth in 2014 while the cable news audience slipped (Pew Research Center 2015). The general picture for cable television in Canada is the same: a small percentage of cable TV customers are dropping services, but that percentage is growing sharply. One industry analyst has said that the trend is likely to continue; he bases this partly on low TV viewership trends among younger adults (Friend 2015). According to Nielsen, viewership of broadcast television in the United States was down 25 per cent among eighteen- to forty-nine-year-olds in the year to September 2015. A spring 2015 poll of 1,100 undergraduate students in Toronto found that less than 18 per cent watched cable television; the rest consumed online and other formats (Hutchinson 2015). Meanwhile, Nielsen has reported that YouTube reached more American adults aged eighteen to thirty-four than any cable company (YouTube 2014). In a keynote address, Robert Picard has warned that a “tipping point” will be arriving for TV news, as it did for its print cousin, as advertisers migrate away from local TV affiliates to the Internet, following the audience (Picard 2015).

Peer-reviewed discussions about the variety of digital platforms are also elusive. Peer and Ksiazek restated Christensen’s view in the *Innovators Dilemma* (1997) that viewers of online news video appear “willing to accept non-traditional production elements in exchange for the convenience of on-demand access to news content” (2011). Thurman and Lupton noted that when editors changed the placement of videos within news sites, it made some difference as to audience interaction. On the BBC news website, a video placed in the stand-alone player, accessed via a

link next to the related text story, had an average take-up rate of 2 per cent. However, when an embedded video was placed at the top of the text story, the conversion rate leapt to between 25 and 40 per cent (2008). The researchers also suggested that the preferred format for online video is forty seconds and “shareable” (2008). In Canada in late 2015, television news producers such as CBC, CTV News, and Global News are in the habit of transferring broadcast video to the online environment and sharing some of it socially. Overwhelmingly, digital distribution is the second window for their content, but newsrooms are also experimenting with a wider variety of news video. Global News occasionally predistributes video packages online, and the CBC’s Community page uses mobile video in some of its online coverage.

One academic paper worth firmly underlining asked the audience about its motivation for watching online video. The online news audience said that “timely learning” drove its viewing habits, while television news watchers scored entertainment more highly. The survey of online news viewers found high agreement scores for substatements such as “Because I am interested in current events,” “To find constantly updated event information,” and “To find breaking news events.” In their discussion, the researchers write that “it seems that online video platforms are better than television at satisfying consumers’ learning motives in a timely manner” (Cha and Chan-Olmsted 2012).

### **The Journalism Case for Lightly Produced Mobile News Video**

Online video, no matter the source, often has news value. In the week after the 2011 earthquake in Japan, the twenty most viewed news videos on the YouTube platform were viewed more than 96 million times (Pew Research Center 2012). Lee (2012) describes the myriad ways that popular citizen-source videos are aggregated and reposted by news organizations in Hong Kong, and again, it is fair to say that some elements of the case study apply to Canada. Newsrooms recognize the impact that documentary mobile video can have from a public accountability perspective as well. Consider the video of Toronto police repeatedly shooting and tasing a man, who was in some mental distress, to his death on a streetcar. A nearby resident witnessed the incident, recorded it on his phone, and uploaded it to YouTube before sharing the link with newsrooms. The evidentiary documentary video had immediate news value, and Ontario’s Special Investigations Unit eventually laid criminal charges (Alamenciak 2013). As the victim’s family’s lawyer stated, the “Sammy Yatim case,” named after the victim, might never have advanced to court had it not been for the compelling video (Andrew-Gee 2014). When *Toronto Star* reporters viewed video that allegedly showed the mayor of Toronto smoking crack cocaine, its immediate news value was not in doubt, nor was its importance as a political accountability

tool. Researchers have documented many other instances of so-called guard-dog citizen journalism involving video recording (Antony and Thomas 2010). Arguably the most important news video of 2014 – it is notable that it was not taken by a reporter from a broadcast news outlet – was captured by a newspaper reporter on his mobile phone on 22 October when a gunman stormed Parliament Hill in Canada’s capital city, Ottawa (Wingrove 2014). The indisputable eyewitness video was distributed almost immediately online and replayed on news broadcasts and news websites in Canada for several days. It was the best media available related to the news event, giving a sense of what it was like inside the building as events unfolded. The clear news value of digital video in the instances above is one reason for suggesting that journalists of all stripes should be capturing it regularly.

### **Convergence Reluctance**

While researchers have described resistance to convergence in newsrooms, they have also described the desire of newsroom leaders for more multiplatform recruits. A large portion of the research into online news video has concentrated on the processes, anxieties, struggles, and sometimes failures related to the converged newsroom (Tameling and Broersma 2013; Thurman and Lupton 2008; Boczkowski 2004). Bock (2011) wrote that even as researchers describe multimedia integration pains, they speculate that the economic environment “is likely to foster a reliance on video journalists who can multitask.” She later described (2014) the two main, related categories of concern: (1) technical considerations about how the news gets produced for a changing distribution network, and (2) newsroom politics and cultural conflicts relating to which people and processes are privileged over others as the textual and visual approaches are merged. (The part that analytics play in newsroom processes is related to these concerns.)

Thurman and Lupton (2008) captured the range of rhetoric about the conflict in newsrooms in two interviews. The attitude shifted from this sort of statement: “being an exemplary journalist in both print and multimedia probably wasn’t feasible,” or, “I don’t think they’re a necessarily complementary set of skills,” to this: “I think papers have certainly got an opportunity,” said the *Mirror*’s Steve Purcell:

If we can break stories in a video format then we’ve got a distinct advantage. We’re not weighed down by the mentality of thinking we can only do this with five men and two cameras. We can just go along with a mobile phone and take footage. We can also get users to send in their experiences and not be too concerned about the quality.

Tensions have not been not resolved, but recent research also suggests that newsrooms have been aware for some time of the unrealized potential of mobile news video. In a study about the introduction of videographers at British broadcasters ITV and BBC, Wallace concluded that newer video technologies can have beneficial or compromising effects on journalistic standards, depending on how they are used (2009). Ketterer, McGuire, and Murray (2013) found that video and multimedia skills were both among the top five most important, according to both print newsrooms and broadcasters with websites (writing and editing were the top two for each). Broadcast producers valued the ability to deliver a good standup, but from a production and shooting perspective, this delivery can be practised just as effectively in a digital medium, including live blogs.

### **Live Blogs Including Video**

Research into live blogging may be useful to traditional broadcast and textual journalists and educators because the platform breaks down the constituent elements of journalism into their raw forms without privileging any one of them. Reporters in the field can load lightly edited text, photos, video, or audio to the live blog nearly immediately, where it can be further edited. Assuming a reporter is equipped with a mobile device, there is no structural reason to choose text over video, or vice versa. A reporter who made a choice for text, in theory, would do so because of a judgment about the limited visual appeal of the subject, not because the platform could not receive the content in a networked environment. Any textual and visual media content can be loaded synchronously to the live blog. For context, all of the elements can be captioned immediately in the platform. The audience views the content as a vertical timeline, organized in the same way as a social platform, with older posts at the bottom and newer ones at the top.

At around the same time as the Canadian journalism school mentioned above was experimenting with live blogging in its newsroom, a team analysing live blogs at the guardian.co.uk was conducting some early research into the medium. Live blogging for *The Guardian's* news website was “increasingly the default format for covering major breaking news stories, sports events, and scheduled entertainment news” (Thurman and Walters 2013). The British study took a qualitative approach to analysing what editors and reporters prefer and dislike about the medium and conducted a survey of audience preferences. Researchers found that during a twenty-four-hour period, readers visited live blogs three times more than article pages, and these received more than four times the page views, as unique visitors often returned to the same page for updates. They were second only to photo galleries in popularity. Video was not a coded



element in this study, presumably because it was not a common enough element in the live blogs at the time. A survey of live blog readers visiting the *Guardian* website found that nearly 60 per cent visited the platform on guardian.co.uk each day. A follow-up study on *Scribblelive*, a live blogging platform that newsrooms can license, showed that 11 per cent of US and UK news readers had read live blogs in the preceding week, with Japanese news readers reporting consumption at the rate of 35 per cent. Respondents indicated they preferred the platform for “breaking news” and “unfolding political stories” (Thurman and Newman 2014).

Part of the appeal of live blogging depends on this platform providing a simple, efficient, and affordable way to capture and post video for a newsroom. Newsrooms could build their own live blog platforms, as *The Guardian* has. *Scribblelive*, which is the most frequently used third-party provider of live blog interfaces, provides its platform free to journalism schools but not to industry. At the time of writing, some of its efficacy could arguably be replaced by Twitter’s video service. Notably, Twitter Inc., which owns the eponymous micro-blogging platform, has also bought Periscope, which allows users to micro-broadcast live video to a limited number of viewers. Many digital newsrooms have begun experimenting with this free service as well (Flynn, 2015).

## **Discussion**

Instilling in young digital journalists the value of capturing digital video as part of their daily information gathering is prudent considering demographic audience trends, new technology, and needs in the job market.

The first step for newsrooms and journalism schools to take is to recognize the potential for delivering digital video that has news value to the audience on this platform. For volume, reporters across any country will not be able to match the number of citizen journalists who, by happenstance, produce newsworthy video content. Sites like Facebook and YouTube will always aggregate video from their millions of users, some of whom occasionally shoot video with high news value. Nevertheless, newsrooms have the advantage that they are trained to recognize news. They should establish their websites as places where audiences can expect to see more immediate, lightly produced online news video, shot by professionals.

Next, some of the evidence presented above indicates that journalism schools need to engage with the industry’s approach to distributing video. Concerning audience appeal, “discoverability” is important, as noted above. Newsrooms and journalism schools alike need to consider placement on the website homepage or article page as well. Newsrooms already have

learned they need a place in the social media news ecosystem, and video is increasingly playing a part in those media.

Journalism schools are already teaching students to make judgments about what is newsworthy and have been doing this for a long time. They are also training students about visual storytelling in the broadcast setting, which they should continue to do, considering the strength of that industry. While there are arguments about convergence in journalism schools, more video capturing should only sharpen student's news judgments and skills in aid of news delivery on any platform.

Many students use recording devices for their interviews. About 90 per cent of the 2015 incoming undergraduate class at Ryerson University's School of Journalism owned a mobile device that would let them record multimedia. (Fortunately, the school has been able to accommodate those who do not.) The next step is to ask students to make more deliberate choices about which moments audiences want to see and hear for themselves.

In time, journalists and newsrooms will make better judgments about what to post online. It helps that they can receive feedback about audience response to the video they are capturing and their news judgments via analytics platforms. If newsrooms are grappling with the integration of website analytics with their traditional news-gathering and gatekeeping roles, then journalism schools should be addressing these questions, too.

It's worth exploring, for a moment, how digital news video could integrate into current curricula. As described above, broadcast producers and digital editors emphasize convergence in the skills and traits they are looking for from young journalists. In addition to consistently and constantly making judgments about the news value of what they are seeing, hearing and witnessing, journalism students can practise other important technical and reporting skills:

- Video interviewing in time-sensitive situations
- Capturing complementary and contextual information for captions and cutlines
- Efficient, clear standups that deliver updates on any news subject from the scene of a news event, breaking or not
- The development of visual storytelling, including photo and video composition basics
- Shooting b-roll that may be useful for further sequence construction
- Panning, tilting, and zooming techniques
- Avoidance of technical hindrances such as background distractions, and lighting and audio problems

Mobile phones can now be mounted to lightweight tripod systems. Native and third-party apps allow for simple editing on either end of a media clip. The raw news content can be reported in a timely manner almost instantaneously on the digital live blog platform, but it can also be assembled for longer pieces that merit the coverage in traditional broadcast packages, such as the traditional ninety-second news piece. Similarly, students will develop skills and techniques for that distribution form as well.

Live blog platforms can also provide a safe environment for unpublished material. That's a quality that might be desired for the purposes of education, especially in early years of a journalism program, when mistakes are guaranteed and indeed are important to learning. Such platforms are an alternative to Twitter and Facebook, for example, which are always live.

**Disclosure:**

*Scribblelive has donated its platform to the Ryerson School of Journalism for its use for more than four years.*

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