

## The Fate of Two Stories How U.S. Journalism Is Forgetting the People\*

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Most serious U.S. news, meant to inform citizens and sustain democracy, comes from newspapers. But cuts in the face of shrinking circulation and advertising are eroding that base. Recent research suggests that news content is bifurcating. Larger, wealthier outlets continue the trends toward long, analytical stories quoting officials and groups and referring to other times and places. The pattern is clearest in political coverage, the core of public-spirited journalism. But smaller, less profitable organizations may be moving toward shorter, less analytical coverage of current, local events. Accident stories typify the new, emergent content. The internet adds reactions and opinions to both patterns. Two stories can illustrate.

### *What-a-Story*

In late June 2008, Loyola University Chicago security pursued a graduate student named Andrew, 28, took him into custody July 2, and turned him over to Lake Shore Hospital. The psychiatric facility kept him without food or a bed for 20 hours, including five hours in isolation, and then transferred him to the state mental hospital, Chicago-Read, under maximum security with patients known to be violent.

Loyola acted after Andrew sent fantasy poetry to his advisor and to a staff psychologist who complained. Under a new Illinois law, citizens no longer must present real and imminent danger for the state to hospitalize them. A complaint alone is sufficient to mandate 72 hours of involuntary commitment.

Andrew had gone to the campus Wellness Center earlier that year, after getting married and then leaving a job to study math and statistics full time. He was having second thoughts and considered dropping his courses, but his advisor persuaded him to stay.

After the long Independence Day weekend, plus the three-day mandated observation, staff at Chicago-Read concluded that Andrew presented no threat, and so the state dropped the case and released him July 10. But he had lost his new job and his sense of safety in the world. In the aftermath, he and his wife lost their apartment and had to move in with family in New Hampshire. Hospital collection notices

soon followed.

He needed one Loyola course to finish his degree, and his advisor offered to do it long-distance. Then the campus created a Behavioral Concerns Team (BCT), which blocked his registration, even though the dean of students knew Loyola lost the case. Andrew filed an appeal, which Loyola denied in two days, upholding the original complaint.

The incident was *what-a-story* for an editor at the Chicago *Sun-Times*. To help others avoid his fate, Andrew talked to the higher education reporter, who spent three days interviewing the family, getting releases and documents, and collaring Loyola students and staff.

The 600-word story, 'Getting students to ID troubled students,' appeared September 8. Pointing first to campus shootings at Virginia Tech and Northern Illinois, it uses a military frame — 'an army' of students as 'the front lines' — to laud Loyola's BCT initiative. Ten of the 15 paragraphs cite officials and experts, including the National Center for Higher Education Risk Management and a mental health organization.

The story also quotes a lone voice of dissent: "It's getting kids to rat each other out," said Andrew Barnhurst, a graduate student who believes the school overreacted to some "strange" emails he sent over the summer. "Because some people thought I was strange, they got scared."

The article tells an institutional story, not his story. It is silent on his detention, mistreatment, exoneration, and consequences. The reporter instead turns him into an instance. Those two sentences make Andrew sound like, as one reader wrote, 'a punk' who deserved what he got.

The report typifies what U.S. news became over the past century: long, analytical, full of officialdom, temporally complex, and distant. Citizens are absent except to illustrate journalists' ideas. Readers care little about this sort of news. They have been abandoning it for decades. What is the alternative?

### *Spot News*

In June 2008, the manager of Antrim Village, a subsidized complex for seniors, began posting new rules: residents could no longer plant in the gardens, install bird feeders, or keep barbecue grills, things a resident named Neil, 79, had encouraged. He also had painted the benches and did repairs, all with approval at his own expense.

But the manager issued letters accusing him of digging on the grounds, among other complaints she solicited from residents, and

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\* *Journalism Theory Practice Criticism*, forthcoming.

threatening him with eviction and loss of Federal housing eligibility. So he gave notice as required and moved in with family in Stoddard, NH.

Neil, retired from a long career in ship building and architecture, had relocated from Florida three years earlier, to see his eldest son through terminal cancer in New Hampshire and then settle affairs after his death.

In August 2008, Neil flew back to live in his old Fort Myers apartment, shipping his belongings but leaving behind his friend Pauline in Antrim Village. Over email, he described the poor conditions for pedestrians, especially the bus stop opposite the VA Hospital, without a crosswalk nearby. He also said he felt lonely and regretted not staying on with his younger son.

One Thursday morning Neil headed to the hospital for an appointment. Later the local *News-Press* published the following item online:

*Fort Myers man in critical condition after being struck by car*

News-Press.com, September 11, 2008. A Fort Myers man is in Lee Memorial Hospital in critical condition after being hit by a car this morning.

According to Fort Myers police:

Neil Doherty, 80, was hit by a car after getting off the bus at Winkler Avenue and Metro Parkway.

The bus and car were heading east, the bus in the curb lane and the car in the middle lane.

Traffic officers investigating the crash say Doherty was primarily at fault.

The 75-word report is *spot news* for journalists, but generated three web pages of reader comments, under the heading In Your Voice. An early post from Ghostsniper imagined Neil wearing an iPod (he didn't own), like other 'idiots walking around': 'Good riddance I say.' He just didn't want 'these nitwits' 'wrapped around my bumper.' Others joined in without facts, until a post by Wingio, the only driver who stopped for 'this old man' bleeding 'on the hot concrete.' Wingio started CPR while the 19-year-old driver 'was pouring tears on the hood of her car.' The reader comments then turned to other issues: defensive driving and 'punks speeding around Lee County.'

After that day, only two posts appeared: Neil's children wrote to thank Wingio and defend their 'with-it, capable' dad, and Neil's ex-wife wrote to scold Ghostsniper.

Neil died on September 15, after lingering on life support. His sur-

vivors packed his things before returning home. The newspaper website published no notice. Within weeks, *News-Press.com* lost the story while updating its archives.

But the published item is a police story, not Neil's story. It remains silent on what drove him to Florida and his death. The text, an edited police report, instead turns him into a crime statistic, all facts and fault. The readers then take sides, polarizing young from old. This 'citizen journalism' ignores socio-political conditions, pointing to errors by and remedies for individuals. And family responds late, after others have moved on.

The report may be typical of emerging U.S. news: Reversing century-long trends, the coverage is brief, objective, and local. But the online comments are reactive and opinionated, especially when the story first breaks. Will readers care about news of this sort?

Two kinds of mainstream journalism now address the American public. The long-winded news advances the status of journalism in public discussions, in part by doing good things like citing more sources and past events. The short news gets emotional reactions but its meaning comes later, recorded only online. Where the old news seems professional and safe, the new seems discordant and clumsy. Both focus on opinion, and both tend to side with institutions.

The stories I witnessed — only because they happened in my family — could be merely personal. Or they could be accounts of life under weakening civil liberties, poor infrastructures, elite fear-mongering, and vulgar nattering. The stories could be of human interest or of public interest, but the news reports were neither. The American news business will prosper only if, like Studs Turkel, journalists can do both: showing the big picture by letting the people tell their stories.