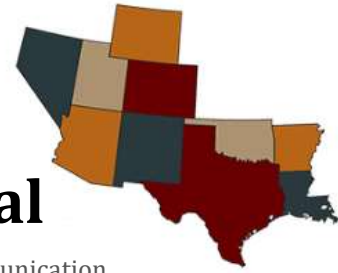


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The Problem of Subjectivity in High School Reporters' News Writing

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Through a qualitative textual analysis of writing samples from 10 high school journalism programs, this research explores the types of subjectivity found in student journalists' reported news stories. Results are categorized into three problem areas: 1) problems common to most novice writers; 2) problems of nuance, which are more complicated and can require years of experience to fully grasp, and 3) problems specific to young writers who have grown up in a digital media landscape that allows them to shape the content they consume to their specifications. Recommendations relevant to scholastic journalism instruction follow analysis.

Keywords: scholastic journalism; journalism education; journalism; news reporting; subjectivity

In today's competitive information environment, news producers and consumers both face an excess of complex issues. One of the most complex issues, perhaps, is the problem of misinformation. The problem of misinformation goes beyond the realm of propaganda, and algorithmic decision making, especially when it comes to dealing with misinformation in a journalistic capacity. Mitchell, Gottfried, Barthel, and Sumida (2018) suggest the problem of misinformation could be due to the practice of rapid-fire judgement of the consumers as they internalize news-related statements. Mitchell et. al. (2018) studied just over 5,000 U.S. adults to examine whether they can differentiate between news statements as something objectively verifiable or as something that reflects the beliefs and values of the media maker. The study suggests that the majority of those people could not differentiate between news and opinion.

Furthermore, those who were able to differentiate between the two had more than average political awareness, they were digitally savvy, and they had high trust in the news media. While younger generations may be more savvy in navigating some parts of the digital realm, some

research suggests they are no better than their adult counterparts at distinguishing fact from opinion (Wineburg, McGrew, Breakstone, & Ortega, 2016).

Based on the aforementioned premise, this study looks at the complex issue of differentiating between news and opinion from journalists in the making. Mitchell et. al.'s (2018) study inspired the researchers to investigate the topic within the realm of the student journalism work using news writing samples from students at 10 high schools located in a state in the U.S. heartland. Both researchers have extensive experience working with scholastic journalism and have worked closely with many other individuals who serve as judges for scholastic journalism contests. A problem noted consistently when judging high school journalism work is an inability to keep tactics of news writing and opinion writing separate. Knowing that scholastic journalism judges frequently see subjective writing in news writing categories, combined with research indicating that the general population is not skilled as deciphering fact from opinion, and with knowledge of the current problem of misinformation, the following research questions developed:

1. What types of subjectivity are present in scholastic journalists' news stories?
2. What other elements are present in scholastic journalists' new stories that may be problematic with standard journalism news reporting practices?

This research is guided by the understanding that high school journalism students are likely to be future professionals in journalism or other areas of the media, (Becker, Han, Wilcox & Vlad, 2014; Bobkowski, Goodman & Bowen, 2012). Issues involving scholastic journalism potentially affect professional journalism and therefore journalism's normative role in a functioning democracy: one aspect of this normative role being that journalism strengthens a society's democratic functions (Siebert, Peterson & Schramm, 1963). From a journalism education perspective, understanding student journalists' abilities to produce news reports following the standard journalistic practice to avoid misinformation and separate clearly between fact and opinion could be helpful in guiding the next generation of journalists. Knowing the difference between facts and opinion would also make them less vulnerable to misinformation and improve their media literacy. The findings in this study are divided into three types of problems that can be understood from the data analysis of the high school students' news writing: 1) problems of the learning curve, which deal with more common issues in young reporters' writing and for which journalism teachers likely already have the knowledge and tools to help students improve; 2) problems of nuance, which are more complicated than the learning curve problems and require years of experience for most journalists to fully grasp, and 3) problems of "the daily me," (Wiesinger & Beliveau, 2016) which refers to teenagers and young adults who have grown up in a digital media landscape that allows them to heavily shape the content they consume to their individual specifications. Understanding the different types of subjectivity most present in these young journalists' work is helpful in making suggestions for scholastic and collegiate journalism educators approaches to teaching this next generation of news makers, which the researchers offer in the discussion section of this work.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The problem of differentiating news and opinion is not a new one, although the problem has been heightened by the emergence of new channels of diffusion. "Fake News" is probably one of the most common words in the vernacular these days, and the emergence of "Fake News" can be attributed to news consumers not understanding the distinction between news and opinion (Rini, 2018). Habermas (1984) suggested, the truth is a product of consensus, and thus disinformation could

very well be considered as truth for some people while false for others. The media ecosystem today is a combination of human minds and algorithms (Guo & Vargo, 2018; Harambam, Helberger, & Hoboken, 2018). Facebook, with its complex and advertising-friendly algorithm, promotes ideas and information that may not have any truth to them. But just because the platform pushes them up, people tend to think those are factual statements albeit they could be anything from propaganda to innocent opinion. However, in order to have an informed populace, it is important for the public to be able to distinguish between factual statements, opinions, and propaganda.

The Media Insight Project by the American Press Institute published a report in 2017 shedding light on why it is important for the public to be able to distinguish between factual statements and opinion. The report says that blurring lines between opinion and news content is somewhat responsible for the overall decline in trust in the media. The report talks about a survey that probed the degree to which Americans believed they could distinguish between opinion and news reporting in the media. The survey results indicated that 21% said they find it very easy, 33% answered somewhat easy, and 25% said they found it very difficult to differentiate between news and opinion. It is important to mention here that 14% said that the distinction does not matter for them.

A 2018 Pew Research study suggests that overall Americans can identify more factual statements correctly than incorrectly, but a sizable portion got most statements wrong (Mitchell et al.). The same report suggests that the ability to differentiate between factual statements and opinion varies widely based on political awareness, digital savviness, and trust in the media. Americans who have high political awareness and consume political news regularly have a better understanding of factual statement and opinion. Those who are digital savvy and can utilize the digital affordances to retrieve news are also better able to differentiate between news/ factual statement and opinion. Americans who have more trust in a national news organization also seem to be able to differentiate between factual statement and opinion quite accurately. Also, as Hoyt (2008) points out, current mainstream newspapers do not always keep news and opinion in two separate places as they did in the past, rather these two factors are intertwined as news, columns, analysis and so forth. This, coupled with the fact that people pay little attention to labeling, creates additional problems in distinguishing between news and opinion.

Specific to younger media consumers, Wineburg et al. (2016) described students' "ability to reason about information in the internet" as "bleak" (p. 4). This study included more than 7,000 students, ranging from middle school to college, who were asked to assess news and other information, appropriate for their age groups, circulating on social media for accuracy and sourcing; researchers concluded that "when it comes to evaluating information that flows through social media channels, they are easily duped," (Wineburg et al., 2016, p. 4).

Furthermore, teenagers and traditionally-aged college students operate within a system referred to as "the daily me" (Wiesinger & Beliveau, 2016), which impacts everything involving their media habits. "The daily me," includes living part or most of one's life in a digital space, a large portion of communication being asynchronous, and the news and information delivered to you is mostly the content you already want on your own schedule (Wiesinger & Beliveau, 2016). Scenarios like filter bubble and the perimeters of "the daily me" can make it even more difficult for certain groups of consumers to consume beyond their own interests and biases.

Nearly every problem in the journalism profession or larger media landscape can translate to a needed study in scholastic journalism programs. Because scholastic journalism programs,

along with collegiate journalism programs, are where the next generation of media professionals are fostered, studies involving our younger counterparts yield results that can potentially be helpful in both learning from these students as future professionals as well as helping those who educate them to train them better for their future challenges.

METHODS

Research Setting and Data Description

The data was taken from contest entries in the “news story” category for both print and online high school news publications that enter the state’s scholastic journalism monthly contest supported by the state scholastic journalism organization hosted at a Research I state university. The data includes news stories from 10 high schools, four with enrollments over 2,000, two with enrollments between 700-1,999 and four with enrollments of 699 or under. Data was collected from entries submitted between August 2017 through December of 2018. Initially all submissions to the online or print “new story” category from the 10 schools were considered for use in the study. However, 17 submissions were cut either due to broken links or because researchers found no discernable reporter opinion included in the story after first reading. This resulted in 50 usable news story submissions remaining in the data set.

Data Analysis

The excerpts from the students’ news stories was analyzed using an approach first outlined by Lamnek (2005) and expanded on in Kuckartz’s (2014) description of qualitative text analysis, which is one style of qualitative *content* analysis. Specifically, qualitative *text* analysis places a high level of importance on understanding and interpreting the text being analyzed (Kuckartz, 2014), making it useful for analysis of individuals’ written work. The steps of this qualitative text analysis include: careful reading and rereading of data, developing case summaries, constructing categories, coding data by assigning it to categories, developing sub-categories, secondary coding to solidify themes within the findings, analysis of findings, and presentation of findings (Kuckartz, 2014). Researchers began the analytic process by reading each news story and writing notes of interest and memos concerning opinionated statements and phrases, starting with simple analytical descriptions such “lack of attribution” or “judgment call” or “making an assumption,” and working toward case summaries. After several read-throughs and the initial notes of interest, categories started emerging inductively, but we also decided on certain thematic categories deductively based on previous literature and the researchers’ professional journalism experiences. The four initial categories included: addressing the audience, making assumptions, writer’s opinion, and lack of attribution.

With an established set of initial thematic categories, researchers then coded statements and phrases from the students’ news writing data into these categories using Excel as a sorting mechanism. Information that fell outside the scope of these categories was labeled as “other.” We then read through the “other” data several times to determine if excerpts did belong in one of the categories, or if another category needed to be established. At this point, approximately 180 excerpts from the 50 stories had been coded into the four broad categories. After the initial round of coding researchers looked at all data again within each established category and worked toward potential sub categories. The process of creating sub categories allowed for differentiation of the data within the broader, original categories. We then completed a second round of focused coding data into subcategories, establishing narrowed, more meaningful themes to emerge from the data.

FINDINGS

We have arranged the findings into three problem areas: starting with what we categorize as the easier problems to fix, or, 1) the learning curve problems, followed by the more complicated arenas of 2) the nuance problems and 3) “the daily me” problems.

The Learning Curve Problems

To begin, the findings in the area of learning curve problems produced the following themes: subjective words and phrases, second person over third person, lack of simple attribution, and writing to the wrong genre. The problems in this arena are issues that are likely common to novice and young writers and are easier fixes than the problems discussed later in the findings section. Journalism educators likely have strategies in place to help students overcome these common learning curve issues.

For the first theme in this section, the use of subjective words and phrases, these examples include one-word or short phrase uses of subjectivity that detract from the overall objectivity of a sentence or the full news story, but are mixed in with efforts to stay objective. These are often examples that could be fixed with a minor revision such as deletion of the subjective word. For example, the following excerpts from the data would be objective if the underlined word or phrase was removed: “along with a few serious scientists”; “to highlight the beauty of such an event”; “as the long-anticipated event draws ever near”; “where the terrible earthquake destroyed.” This also included issues of using attributive verbs other than “said,” which can imply opinion or judgment--we found use of the words admit, believe, feel and exclaimed where “said” would be the better objective choice.

The second issue in the learning curve problems stems from students writing in second person rather than the objective third person. A common correction marked by journalism and English teachers alike, the reliance on the second person use of “you” or the understood you often stems from writers thinking in more casual terms, such as how people speak to one another, rather than writing in the more formal style of a news story or a research paper. Like the subjective wording in the previous paragraph, corrections of second person to third person are somewhat simple, as are the lessons to help students remember when and why to use third person language. The most frequently occurring use of second person in this data came from students directing their readers to information relevant to their stories, such as: “mark your calendars for . . .” or “save the date for . . .” instead of just listing a date.

A third issue, and a likely easy fix to the students’ work, were facts or opinions within their stories that they likely had attribution for, but left out of the story. In some instances, this could be that they attributed something earlier in a story, and don’t realize they need to clearly offer that same attribution again later in a story. For example, a student wrote about the band at his school revamping its program. He gave attribution early in the story to the band director discussing how band members would set goals for themselves, but later in the story this sentence appeared without attribution: “The goals the band has set for itself this year include to work hard and perform its best.” This sentence was likely paraphrased from either the band director or a band member, and requires attribution. More complicated issues of missing attribution are presented in later two sections of the findings.

To wrap up the “learning curve” segment of problems, the fourth theme involved writing to the wrong genre or category and was a fairly frequent occurrence in the data. For example, a student who entered a story about the upcoming eclipse in the “news writing” category was actually writing what would likely be considered a how-to style feature article. This student instructed his audience, often

talking directly to them, of how best to enjoy the upcoming event with phrases like, “. . . some of the things you need to know in order to see either a partial or total solar eclipse . . .” or, “If you are lucky enough to be in the path of totality . . .” The judge of this particular entry noted that the student’s writing was solid and entertaining, but the story would fare better in a feature category. Another example involved a student writing about a play about to open at her school that turned into a critique column of the movie the play was based upon. Essentially there were two ideas in the same story: the news story about the play opening and a movie critique better suited for the entertainment section.

The Nuance Problems

Moving on to the more challenging problems in the findings, the next set of themes falls into the problems of nuance, which we found produced four themes including making inferences, making assumptions, in depth subjectivity, and blurring endorsement and reporting. These problems are perhaps not as simple for journalism educators to correct with traditional lessons, because they are either problems indicative to unique challenges in the current media landscape, or they are problems that require years of work in the field to fully grasp. These are not problems we would expect scholastic journalism teachers to fully solve with their teaching strategies, but it could still be helpful for scholastic and collegiate educators to be aware of these issues to inform their practices and their understanding of their students.

Inferences and assumptions. To start with the first two themes of making inferences and making assumptions, it is first helpful to clarify between these two terms. For the purpose of this data, to make an inference is to make a judgment or form an opinion on the unknown, based on the known. But, it is also important to understand that inferences can be based in information that is accurate or inaccurate, logical or illogical. However, making an assumption is slightly different. People make assumptions when they presuppose information and do not question information they have previously learned.

Concerning inferences, student writers would sometimes take one or two statements from sources and use that to indicate that all or the majority of people in a certain group felt the same way. For example, one student reporter writing about fellow students rehearsing for an upcoming play inferred that all cast members had similar feelings about the approaching opening night, writing: “The students are all in agreement, anxious and thrilled to be preparing and performing [name of play] for the public.” This style of inference was common to students’ writing. Another student reporter wrote of a change to the band’s leadership: “Many members agree rehearsals are going strong and that the change in administration hasn’t stopped them from picking up where they left off.” A third wrote, “Despite the situation being explained to them, students are generally not content with the decision to close the Media Center after classes. Upperclassmen, who have gotten used to being able to use the room, are upset by the news.”

However, assumptions often come from personal experiences and the cultural norms that individuals may come to think of as universal experiences. An example of an assumption in a student’s writing came from a story in an early fall semester issue about different summer camps students had attended. The student began a piece writing, “Although during the school year the students and teachers are flooded with work and grading, the summer gives everyone time to relax and spend time with others away from the dread of homework in the back of your mind. Summer is usually seen as time to lay around and do nothing . . .” While there is nothing inherently wrong with beginning a news-style piece with a creative tactic, this student is likely assuming that most students spend summers either lounging or engaging in fun activities. While this may be her experience, it is an assumption that

her peers do the same. A journalism teacher can certainly introduce the idea of considering other people's perspectives and voices in students' reporting, but this is a nuanced lesson that takes years of listening to other people's stories to perfect.

In depth subjectivity. The excerpts in this section are subjective statements that included more than just one subjective word or short phrase (as in the problems of the learning curve section). These examples of subjectivity span a full sentence or multiple sentences and would take more effort to correct than the more minor errors of subjectivity. The subjectivity involved in these statements was more ingrained in the stories the students wrote. For example, one student writing about an event that helps middle school students transition to the high school suggested that everything about the event was "beneficial to students." The tone of the story sung the praises of the event, but did not use much quoted or paraphrased source information. Therefore, the majority of the praise came from the writer's point of view.

Another student wrote a piece that included information about a teacher's educational trip to Canada. The writing included phrases like "in the barren wilderness of Canada," and ". . . who braved the Canadian wilderness." Although the topic of the report was not specific to rural or unpopulated areas of Canada, the writer's bias of what she thought Canada came across clearly. These examples would require deeper lessons of what it means for a reporter to stay objective than the lighter mistakes of subjectivity from the previous section.

Blurring endorsement and reporting. An additional concern in the problems of nuance deals with the issue of endorsement. Two sentences from a piece about an organization-sponsored aviation curriculum show how some student writing borders on advertorial style, straying into the realm of endorsement instead of objective reporting. "The course will also serve as an aviation awareness program that offers many opportunities to students . . . and unique learning experiences that cover various aspects of STEM areas such as 3-D printing and drone certification. The students will also be afforded the opportunity to delve into the world of aeronautics with hands on activities such as modeling jet engines and creating hot air balloons." This story and two others in the data crossed over from providing a report on a product or event to endorsing the product or event.

"The Daily Me" Problems

The final themes in the findings fall into what we are calling the problems of "the daily me." According to research on digital literacy, the current group of traditionally-aged college and high school students operate within a system referred to as "the daily me" (Wiesinger & Beliveau, 2016). "The daily me," includes living part or most of one's life in a digital space, a large portion of communication being asynchronous, and the news and information delivered to you is mostly the content you already want on your own schedule (Wiesinger & Beliveau, 2016). All of these aspects turn focus inward, potentially making people more self-involved or appearing that way. Use of and validation through social media are also part of living "the daily me," and having a platform for one's own opinions and beliefs is important to many people, but especially to younger generations. Therefore the problems in this section are referred to as "The Daily Me" problems. The first theme of the four in this section involves writing inclusively.

Inclusive Writing. Examples of inclusive writing included phrases like "luckily for us," and "below, we will examine . . ." This type of pronoun usage likely stems from not separating one's self as writer from the audience, like in the phrase, "In celebration of student accomplishments that make our school . . ." Although these examples of inclusive writing could seem as simple as use of inclusive pronouns such as "we, us, and our," and might seem to align more with the use of second person in the

earlier learning curve problems, it might be indicative of a deeper issue that requires correcting pronouns. It requires an understanding that a reporters take steps to separate themselves from the events they are covering as well as from the people they are writing for.

This separation, however, is not total, as reporters also needs an understanding of the communities they cover. This is a hard lesson and something professionals of many years still struggle to balance.

Editorializing their own work. The next theme in this section of issues in the students' work is when they move beyond simple self inclusion in their stories and toward editorializing their own writing. Student reporters can often waiver back and forth between sentences that belong in news stories and sentences that sound like they belong in opinion columns. For example, after writing a news story that localized a mass shooting in another state by interviewing a member of the school's community who had been traveling and was directly affected by the shooting that day, the student writer switched over to commentary at the end of her article, writing, "When so many people come together to help lessen the blow of such a terrible event, it shows that sometimes it takes the worst of America to reveal the best of America."

We found this frequently in the stories we analyzed--student writers would stay on track with objective news writing tactics until near the end of the story, but in the final paragraph or two, would switch tactics to include an opinionated wrap up or take away for their piece. In another example a student wrote objectively for the majority of piece on construction at his school, but concluded with a personal declaration: "While [the school's] construction work has caused a number of hardships for teachers and [is] currently suffering from delays, its completion is projected to bring great perks in the future." A third student bounced back and forth between commentary and reporting in her piece concerning additional Hollywood elite coming forward with stories of assault and harassment in the #metoo movement. Her conclusion read, "With 2018 just beginning, the future for women in the working world and the social status they hold is as promising as ever due to the backing of prominent female role models and the emergence of social reform movements."

Posing as experts. It can be easy to fake or allude to expertise after completing even the most basic Google search. Also in the category of the problems of nuance, another issue present in the student journalists' work is that of presenting themselves as experts on a topic or issue when they are likely limited to the research they did for the specific piece.

For example, the student who wrote about the eclipse wrote near the end of his story, "When the moon is fully covering the sun it is safe to remove any protective glasses," but he did not include attribution of an expert source to confirm this advice. In a piece on the sensitive topic of the group of undocumented students and youths known as DREAMers, a student reporter wrote, "This decision left childhood immigrants to the United States uncertain about their futures, with many of them fearing deportation." While the problem here could be one of not citing a source, since several sources were credited for information earlier in the story, with this particular passage seemingly coming from the writer, it reads as if she is making an authoritative statement on the state of mind of the DREAMers, a concept for which a teenage reporter does not likely have enough experience to explain with authority.

Far-reaching assumptions. The final theme to this final section of "the daily me" problems culminates into students suggesting far-reaching assumptions or implications in their news reporting. These examples are closer related to misinformation than the assumptions in the problems of nuance or problems of the learning curve sections. In the sample of 50 news stories, researchers found one

example that we categorize as not just fully subjective statements or editorializing, but that crossed into a far-reaching assumption that can be categorized as misinformation.

In this example, a student reporter wrote about the mass shooting in Las Vegas. In the beginning of the story, the student stayed mostly in news style and cited credible sources for statistics. However, as the story continued, he moved away from sourced information and into commentary, but also beyond commentary into what could be categorized as conspiracy theory. To end this piece, he wrote: "The fact that Paddock had what seemed like a completely normal life prior to this incident also leaves people questioning: was Paddock truly the person behind the shooting, or is the government just blaming it on a single person in order to cover up something even bigger?" The misinformation present in this piece of writing could be a difficult subject for a journalism teacher to approach when trying to help a student understand why it does not belong in a news story.

In our findings we first presented the problems of the learning curve, followed by problems of nuance and finally, problems of "the daily me." The findings were organized in segments that we believed moved from the more simple issues of subjectivity present in the students' writing, and the issues that are easier for journalism educators to address, to the more complicated issues of subjectivity. In the next section we offer a discussion for scholastic journalism educators as well as suggestions for future research.

DISCUSSION

Lack of understanding in fact and opinion from both a news consumption and news provider standpoint can contribute to the problem of misinformation (Mitchell et. al., 2018). Nearly all issues present in the current media landscape are relevant to lessons in scholastic media and journalism, as many of these students will go on to be the next round of professionals. Students who learn early in their journalism education how to distinguish between fact and opinion as well as when and how to write both factual reports and commentary will be ahead of the curve going into college or the first years of their profession. Additionally, understanding the different ways that students mix up or blur the lines between opinion and fact can give journalism educators an upper hand in how to better instruct students on these matters.

Recommendations for Practice

In looking at our original broad categories for coding: addressing the audience, making assumptions, writer's opinion, and lack of attribution, the problems of writers' inserting their own opinionated language and statements and not providing source attribution for information were the most common issues, with about twice as many excerpts coded into these initial categories compared to the other two. It appears that most of the students' mistakes of subjectivity involved minor issues of subjective language and not citing a source. In many cases it seemed like the student had consulted a source, but just did not give written attribution.

Both of these issues can be corrected and learned within the scope of basic journalism skills. In a recent study of journalism teachers from Oklahoma, these teachers noted that in a challenging financial education landscape, teaching key journalism basics does not come with a high cost (like teaching some lessons of digital or new media), and is therefore doable, accessible, and encouraged in their current educational practices (Wilderman, Nasrin, & Davis, 2018). Therefore, a focus on the basics of journalism education makes sense both from a financial standpoint as well as from the results of this study. As a second recommendation, we suggest that teachers become familiar with the concepts surrounding "the daily me" and shape potential journalism lessons around the culture that has evolved

for digital living. And for a third recommendation that stems from the “problems of nuance” findings, we suggest that journalism teachers who may not have extensive professional journalism experience themselves seek professional journalists to speak to their classes. These professionals could help students understand solutions, that often come from years in the field, to the nuanced problems of subjectivity.

Recommendations for Future Studies

This study is limited in scope to 50 news stories from students at 10 high schools in one state. A similar study of broader scope would be beneficial to compare results. Another limitation is that we focused on one type of data--the students’ written news stories. A beneficial follow up to this study would be to conduct focus group or individual interviews with some of the student writers from these or similar stories and ask them questions concerning the issues this study has drawn attention to. By following up with the students and asking them to reflect on their own writing, we would have a more complete picture of the issue of why certain types of subjectivity are prevalent in students’ news writing as well as how the students themselves interpret the issue of distinguishing fact from opinion.

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