

The Humble News Release (II)

by Tim Dunne

Arguably, technology's most profound impact on the newspaper since the invention of Guttenberg's printing press was Samuel Morse's successful integration of the electromagnet into Joseph Henry's invention of the early telegraph. Morse invented a new telegraph system that was a practical and commercial success.

Morse was a professor of art and design at New York University in 1835 when he demonstrated that signals could be transmitted by wire, followed by the invention of his system of dots and dashes that became *Morse Code*.

On 1 May 1844, Morse demonstrated that his invention and his code would reduce the time between an event and its reporting in a newspaper. The Whig (later to become the U.S. Democratic Party) convention met in Baltimore to select the presidential ticket as crowds gathered at the train station in Washington D.C. to learn of the convention's decision.

Railroad stations were the news organs of the day, somewhat like today's radio stations, for those who were too impatient to wait for the next day's newspaper.

The train left Baltimore and made an interim stop at Annapolis Junction, where Morse's partner, Alfred Vail, telegraphed the convention's choice of Henry Clay and Theodore Frelinghuysen. Morse announced the result to assembled Washingtonians before the train arrived.

Within a month, newspapers began to use Morse's telegraph to carry reports to newspapers.

THE U.S. CIVIL WAR'S IMPACT ON JOURNALISM

The U.S. Civil War (1861-1865) is commonly believed to have provided the impetus for the development of the modern news writing style, replacing the literary prose style of earlier journalists. New reporting techniques emerged from the reports of battles and events transmitted through the new communication technology of the day, Morse's telegraph. But the cost of sending messages, the unreliability of the new medium, and the ever-present possibility that nearby military gun fire or artillery could cut the wires, topple the poles or disable the system created a need to develop a new approach to newswriting.

The now-familiar *summary lead* and *inverted pyramid* style were born. In fact, the two elements were adopted by the journalist community so enthusiastically that when

novelist Theodore Dreiser began his short tenure as a journalist at the Chicago Globe in 1892, his editor pushed him to answer the questions, "who, what, when, where, why and how" in the first paragraph as the basis for a good story.

Journalists now wrote the opening paragraph to summarize the report. Additional details were presented in a descending order of importance in an abbreviated and *telegraphic* format, stripping the literary excesses, editorialized commentary and wordy descriptions from the story. The more important or critical information was at the beginning of the news story, and the journalists of the day began to adopt a more objective approach to the stories they were presenting.

Historian David T.Z. Mindich suggests that Edwin M. Stanton, Abraham Lincoln's Secretary of War and Civil War censor, brought a terse and impersonal style to his *redacting* of reports of conflict between the Union and Confederate forces, further paving the way to modern newswriting.

Marcus Errico, in his essay, *The Evolution of the Summary News Lead* (www.scripps.ohiou.edu/mediahistory/mhmjour1-1.htm), adds that America's Progressive Era (1880s to 1920s) may have served to further entrench those changes to journalism. The surge in scientific discovery and invention led to improved educational standards which, in turn, enhanced the interest of the general public in the news of the day and how journalists presented the results of their research and fact-finding.

THE FIRST NEWS RELEASE

Ivy Lee, accepted as the father of public relations, is believed to have crafted the first news release in 1906. The Pennsylvania Railroad, which was under public scrutiny for refusing to provide information to the newspaper reporters, had a tragic accident. Lee convinced railroad executives to prepare and distribute the first news release to reporters. This allowed the railroad owners to have their information disclosed to the public before speculation, fabrications and suppositions could spread.

He issued the press release and transported journalists and photographers to the accident scene to foster an open communication with the newsmedia.



Ivy Lee

ORGANIZATION OF THE NEWS RELEASE

The consequence of the transformation of the journalist style was that a news release now had taken a standard form and structure. Adopting the journalistic style of the newspaper report, the news release became more easily integrated into the newspaper's system of research, writing and publication. Its principal elements have become:

- **Headline**, to capture the attention of the reviewing editor and encapsulate the news.
- **Dateline**, to place the release date and story's location in the body of the press release.
- **Lead** paragraph, that normally answers the questions *who, what, when, where* and *why* (and often *how much*).
- **Bridge**, the transition between the lead and the body of the news release.
- **Body**, the remaining details, information, background, attribution, quotes and statistical information relevant to the subject.
- **Boilerplate**, a brief section placed at the end to provide objective background on the organization, agency or institution issuing the news release.
- **Close**, traditionally the symbol "-30-" to note the conclusion of the text of the news release, and to show that information below the symbol is contact information and coordinating details, not intended for publication with the news release.
- **Media contact information**, the name, phone

number, email address, mailing address, and/or additional contact information for the representative of the agency issuing the release.

- **Coordinating notes.**
• **"FOR BROADCAST."**

Writing the News Release

THE HEADLINE

Your news release normally starts with a headline to give the editor and the reader the subject of the news release. It should be succinct, direct and easily-understood. If it is well-written, imaginative and descriptive it may be the headline that introduces your news story in the paper.

But a headline can do more than simply capture the editor's attention, it can also communicate your full message to the reader and him/her into the body of the news report.

There are plenty of examples of "cute" headlines that attempt to lure the reader into the text, but this newsletter advocates the direct approach, avoiding embellishments, tricks and puns. Rather, a headline that communicates the meaning of the report will capture the serious reader more quickly than an attempt at humour or a pun.

There are rules to headlines:

- Accuracy is as essential in the headline as in the news story.
- Use strong, active verbs.
- Maintain subject-verb agreement.
- Relate the headline to the person or event of the report.
- Do not repeat words.
- Do not over-use abbreviations and numbers.
- Develop the headline from the lead and bridge paragraphs.
- Avoid misleading headlines.
- Do not editorialize (offer opinions).
- Avoid slang and trite expressions.
- Keep headlines brief (six words maximum).
- Punctuate the headline:
 - Only use periods in abbreviations;
 - Use the dash and colon to replace "says" in headlines in direct and indirect quotes;
 - Use single quotation marks;
 - Replace "and" with a comma or semi-colon.

(to be continued)

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