

*Indiana State University
Office of Student Publications*

Indiana Statesman
2008-2009 Content
Assessment

This report attempts to quantify the front-page content of the Indiana Statesman newspaper and the performance of its student staff for both fall and spring semesters of academic year 2008-2009. The metrics used in the assessment were developed by Student Publications professional staff, based on journalism industry standards. A sample rubric is included, along with an explanation of each metric. *In general, our findings show that the student staff performance and newspaper content improved from fall to spring semester in several key areas, including story sourcing, reduction in the number of factual errors, diversity of story type, and overall front page design.* Some areas that require further improvement include concise writing, writing with greater contextual background, and design innovation. The report also analyzes environmental and other factors that impacted staff performance and news content.

Prepared for Indiana State University Division of Student Affairs

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June 2, 2009

Purpose and background

We undertake this assessment in the hopes of identifying patterns in the performance of the student newspaper staff, and targeting for improvement — through future training and education — areas of news coverage and presentation. To this end, the author and departmental director devised in 2007 a rubric of metrics with which to measure elements of the newspaper that could be tracked objectively and quantitatively over time. For the 2008 assessment, we added a metric to measure type of story – that is, event-oriented story, issue-based article, or human interest feature. Our intention is to use this data to tailor future training sessions, as well as to better target critiques of each issue of the newspaper that advisers disseminate to the Statesman’s news editors, reporters, photographers and designers.

Method

The following is a list of the metrics devised, and a brief explanation of their meaning. A sample rubric is attached for reference.

News Leads – We considered page 1 stories only. Hard news stories that met the criteria below were counted separately from feature news stories. Hard news stories were defined as those that announced timely information in the lead based on events or news developments; feature stories were those that focused primarily on people, entertainment, or enterprise and in-depth reporting of issues. To achieve a (1) score, each type of news lead was required to meet the following criteria:

- Hard News: Active verbs, appropriate focus on news value, explanation of context, conciseness
- Features: Active verbs, named person in the lead, relevant anecdote/storytelling, creativity, conciseness

Therefore, if a hard news lead included an active (not passive) verb, a concise reference to the story’s news value, and some attempt to contextualize the story in a larger way, it was counted. An example of such a lead is:

Comedian Jerry Seinfeld, famous for his “show about nothing,” joked about everyday life, modern technology, and even Terre Haute when he performed at ISU Saturday night.

The lead includes active verbs (joked, performed), news value (at ISU Saturday night), and context (famous for his “show about nothing,” joked about everyday life...). A news lead that would *not* be counted under these criteria is:

“We are your library,” the Cunningham Memorial Library mission statement reads.

The above lead does not succeed at getting the news elements of the story into the lead paragraph, nor does it succeed in introducing a person in a creative, descriptive way, as in

a feature lead. Therefore, it would not be counted in our assessment. A front page consisting of the two stories above would receive a score of $\frac{1}{2}$, or one successful lead out of two. This is the coding scheme represented in the table on page 4.

Page 1 Sourcing – To measure the quality of sourcing (that is, the persons or documents cited as sources of information) in the news content, we used three criteria. The first tallied the total *number of sources* per story against the industry standard of three or more. Even the most basic news stories generally require, in good journalistic practice, a minimum of three named sources. The second examined what *type of source* was cited, with attention to that person’s role in the campus community (administrator, faculty or student). In general, if the story included more than one type of source, we considered it worthy of being counted. We did not count stories that relied exclusively on students or exclusively on administrators, for example. The third sourcing criterion was whether the sources cited were *credible and appropriate*. In almost every instance, students cited sources with direct knowledge of the subject over which they were being interviewed. However, if a source was asked to speculate on matters for which they had no direct knowledge or a Web site was cited that was not a credible source on the subject, we did not count that source.

Coverage – This metric was added for the 2008-09 academic year. We felt that we needed to encourage students to assign and report on issues and human interest stories that did not originate from a press release or an “event.” We want to encourage students not to rely too much on press releases and staged events, so that they also conduct enterprising reporting and investigation of their own. Therefore, we measured three categories of story: event story, issue story and human interest story. Event stories were classified as any story that focused on a public gathering for its news value. Issue stories were classified as any story that had a big-picture focus on a topic that impacts readers, and for which a public gathering or meeting was not the news focus. Human interest stories were classified as those which relied on in-depth interviews and examined some newsworthy aspect of a person’s or organization’s day-to-day life.

Overall Accuracy – To measure accuracy, we counted the number of corrections run in each issue. We also attempted to count any factual errors we noticed that went uncorrected for at least one issue of the newspaper. This was an attempt to measure not only factual accuracy, but also expediency in correcting errors. We did not measure grammatical errors that did not rise to the level of factual errors.

Page 1 Design -- The design portion of the rubric relied on those elements of design that could be objectively quantified. There are nine (9) elements total, including:

- Dominant art/photo: The presence of a larger, more prominent image on the page.
- Secondary art/photo: The presence of additional images, including mug shots.
- White space: The intentional use of open space as a design element to draw the eye.
- Color: The use of color to organize or emphasize aspects of the page.
- Headlines: Story headlines that are proportionate to their news value, accurate, concise and creative.

- Promo: Top-of-the-page story “refers” (or references to inside content) that consist of logical design and concise writing.
- Organization: The grading of news value of stories through design. Choosing to package related stories, to highlight a feature package, to put the most newsworthy story above the fold.
- Breakouts: Additional design elements that supplement the main story, such as Web site refers, inside content refers, event information boxes, etc.
- Innovation: We measured any attempt by the design staff to try new and creative approaches to design, regardless of whether the attempt succeeded.

For the design elements listed above, the coders simply checked a line if the element was present or left it blank if it was not present. The check marks were then tallied for each issue, with nine being the highest possible score for design elements.

Results

The table below shows totals for each category we assessed, along with percentages and percentage-point change from fall to spring semester. For example, the first category of story leads shows that, among hard news leads in fall semester, 63 out of 102 hard news stories (or 62%) had leads that met the journalistic writing standard for quality. In spring semester, 47 out of 92 hard news leads (or 51%) met the quality standard, a decrease of 11 percentage points semester-over-semester.

Category	Fall 2008	Spring 2009	% Change
Story Leads			
Hard News Leads	63/102 (62%)	47/92 (51%)	-11%
Feature Leads	38/52 (73%)	43/63 (68%)	-5%
Leads Total	101/154 (66%)	90/155 (58%)	-8%
Page 1 Sourcing			
Three or more sources	114/154 (74%)	138/155 (89%)	+15%
Balance of types	119/154 (77%)	140/155 (90%)	+13%
Credible/appropriate	149/154 (97%)	151/155 (97%)	0%
Coverage			
Event Story	97/154 (63%)	96/155 (62%)	-1%
Issue Story	21/154 (14%)	30/155 (19%)	+5%
Human Interest Feat.	36/154 (23%)	29/155 (19%)	-4%
Overall Accuracy			
Corrections	34 (77%)	25 (57%)	-20%
Uncorrected error(s)	0	4 (included in above)	N/A
Page 1 Design			
Dominant art/photo	39/44 (87%)	43/44 (97%)	+10%
Secondary art/photo	38/44 (86%)	41/44 (93%)	+7%
White space	4/44 (9%)	2/44 (5%)	-4%
Color	43/44 (97%)	43/43 (97%)	0

Headlines	39/44 (87%)	43/44 (97%)	+10%
Promo	36/44 (82%)	44/44 (100%)	+18%
Organization	33/44 (75%)	43/44 (97%)	+22%
Breakouts	17/44 (39%)	22/44 (50%)	+11%
Innovation	27/44 (61%)	21/44 (48%)	-13%
Design Total	276/396 (70%; 6.2 ave.)	302/3396 (76%; 6.9 ave.)	+6%

Discussion

Leads – The moderate decrease in quality leads from fall semester 2008 to spring semester 2009 (-11%) we consider problematic, but logical. The spring semester staff – particularly the editing staff was young. The writing staff, similarly, were largely new to the staff. More experienced writers left the staff between fall and spring semesters. However, we also suspect some miscommunication and disorganization in the production process – especially between the copy desk and the editors – each issue may also have contributed to the problem.

Page 1 Sourcing – There was a dramatic increase from fall semester to spring semester in the percentage of stories that included three or more sources (+15%, from 74% to 89%). Even more encouraging is the year-over-year trend, which found that the number of well-sourced stories has consistently risen – 55% (fall '07), 63% (spring '08), 74% (fall '08) and 89% (spring '09). The trend constitutes a 34-point jump over two academic years. In spite of this dramatic improvement, we would hope that the percentage of stories including three or more sources should have reached 100% by the spring semester. This suggests that the emphasis on sourcing in the tri-weekly critiques is working, but must continue to be emphasized in the coming academic year. Similarly encouraging is the 13-point jump in the number of stories that balanced types of sources – including a mix of students, faculty, administrators, etc. We hope to see this commitment to diverse reporting continue in the coming year. Finally, nearly all stories included what we deemed “credible and appropriate” sources. The shortfall from a perfect score was due to a couple of instances in which reporters failed to contact a key source for comment.

Coverage – This new metric was added to the assessment this year because we felt it was important to encourage the students to tackle more in-depth enterprise stories, as well as to find quality human interest features in the community. The critiques focused heavily on diversifying story type, as did weekly training sessions. The result is an encouraging balance in the percentage of different types of stories. Event stories, which necessarily constitute about two-thirds of the paper’s coverage, were accompanied by a healthy mix of deeper issue-based stories and human interest features, about 20% each. This seems a good balance, and one that should be maintained. While we don’t have a measure of this aspect of the paper from the previous academic year, anecdotally, we see a great improvement in enterprise reporting.

Overall Accuracy – The total number of corrections dropped significantly – from 77% of issues to 57% of issues, a decline of 20 percentage points – from fall to spring. It is

important to note that we do not consider it desirable to obtain a “perfect” score of zero in the category of corrections. Better newspapers tend to run more corrections, not fewer. The best thinkers in journalism, in fact, believe that correcting errors builds credibility. *The New York Times*, for instance, runs corrections prominently on page 2 of each day’s paper. Such larger and/or progressive newspapers employ ombudspersons or “public” editors whose jobs include setting the record straight. That results in more errors detected and, therefore, corrected. Not all corrections, of course, are the result of staff error. In fact, we feel strongly that we want students to feel compelled to immediately correct errors without fear of penalty. While errors that result from incompetence, dishonesty or recklessness must be addressed as a serious personnel issue by the editing staff and advisers, most errors are the result of human error (on the part of sources, as well as staff) and routine misunderstandings. The latter will always be present over the course of a semester. Our goal should be to minimize the number and severity of corrections, but we will not eliminate them entirely.

Page 1 Design – Design of the front page has made great strides over the academic year. Our editor-in-chief, Robin Wildman, designed the vast majority of front pages. The design was helped a great deal by the addition of a “rail” to the front page – or a permanent vertical column of graphics and brief news items down the left side of the page. Having come into design with little experience, Robin relied a great deal on design principles, with encouraging results. The presence of dominant art jumped from 87% of issues in fall semester to 97% of issues in spring. The presence of secondary art – often an indicator of a greater quantity of photos – also jumped 7 points, from 86% of issues in fall, to 93% of issues in spring.

While the use of color and promotion of inside content is now consistent in every issue, the staff still avoids using white space as a design element. Also problematic is the drop in innovation over the academic year – from 61% of issues having some design innovation, to just 48% in spring. This decline indicates the advising staff needs to continue to encourage – and train – for innovation and creative approaches. However, not reflected in this metric is design innovation in special advertising sections including two housing guides in spring semester. These sections included a great deal of design creativity.

The dramatic increases in the use of design to organize stories on the front page (22-point increase) and in the use of breakout elements (11-point increase) is very encouraging. It is accurate to say that encouraging the use of breakout elements and story packaging has been a big emphasis in the tri-weekly critiques. However, we feel that these design aspects were improved primarily because of the establishment of a Web/multimedia team that regularly provides video and photographic slideshows to accompany newspaper content. The students deserve a great deal of credit for working together to promote both Statesman products – the newspaper and the Web site.

Conclusion

We are pleased with the improvement in sourcing, accuracy, story diversity and design in the Indiana Statesman over the 2008-2009 academic year. The performance of the young, but talented staff was especially admirable considering the demands of a fall

semester of news content which included a historical presidential election and high-profile news events including candidate visits and student involvement in the campaigns. Further, the spring semester staff continued to improve in important ways, in spite of having no election-generated news to fill the paper. What could have been a lagging spring semester was instead a semester of strengthening the skills of young staffers and improving enterprise reporting. We are pleased with their performance.

We expect the writing quality will improve in fall, as the young staff showed significant improvements in writing quality over the course of spring semester. Several of those young writers are working over the summer, so their work should start out strong in fall 2009.

The goal of advisers is to keep a running tally of this data and incorporate it into the routine critiques, so that the student staff may better set and reach performance goals in a timely manner, was not met this year. Training sessions were dictated by staff requests or immediate needs. However, making data-based decisions in training during the semester should remain a goal.