

Are Old News Release Format Rules Valid In an Electronics Era?

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Are Old News Release Format Rules Valid In an Electronics Era?

Abstract

Print on only one side of the page.

Double space.

Use only white paper.

All of my career I have been told that the above three rules for news release format are cardinal. Violate anyone of them and newspaper editors will brand us as amateurs, hacks, or worse.

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All of my career I have been told that the above three rules for news release format are cardinal. Violate any one of them and newspaper editors will brand us as amateurs, hacks, or worse.

Yet, news releases from land-grant college information offices and the U.S. Department of Agriculture violate the cardinal rules.

What led to establishment of the rules? Printing on one side of the page, and double spacing, apparently became the standard because editors could "pencil edit" news releases and submit them to the backshop for setting—without retyping. This saved time and possibly increased the likelihood that a story would be published.

But what about paper color? Some journalism, advertising and public relations texts indicate that editors suspect that colored paper is a cheap trick to attract attention, to make a news release stand out as different from the horde of competition on the editor's desk. No doubt it strikes some editors that way. Typographers may have set the rule. I re-

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member one occasion when a pencil edited "handout" on colored paper came right back from the backshop. They said that dark-hued paper was difficult to read from, and to save arguments over hues they simply refused to set anything printed on colored paper. End of argument.

The electronic revolution in processing copy may influence the application of the cardinal rules. That presumption led to the question, "Has this electronification of news rooms made the three cardinal rules obsolete."

Increasingly, copy is processed by reporters and editors working with computers, optical scanners, video display terminals (VDTs) and other electronic aids. Regardless of whether the original reasons for the cardinal rules, we wanted to know if they are still valid, and editors are unfavorably biased by news releases that violate one or more of the rules.

Methodology

In the fall of 1980 a questionnaire was mailed to 176 daily and weekly newspapers in Washington. We wanted to know editors' attitudes toward the standard news release format rules and to learn the state of technology used by Washington's newspapers. Questionnaires were returned by 55 editors, a 31 percent return.

Eight questions dealt with editors' opinions and attitudes regarding the three cardinal rules stated earlier for the format of news releases. Editors also were asked whether electronics make it easier for public relations and public information practitioners to place stories in their papers, whether editors prefer multi-paged news releases to be stapled, and whether the volume of news releases they receive has increased during the past five years.

Two questions pertained to the state of technology at Washington's newspapers and whether they have concrete plans for major changes in the next two years in the way news copy is processed.

Finally, we asked their evaluation of the relative usefulness of news releases received from eight types of organizations.

This paper deals with those questions and answers pertaining to what we call the mechanics of news releases.

Of the 55 newspapers responding, 55 percent were not using electronics equipment. Of the remainder, 18 percent had reporters working directly on VDTs, 11 percent sent hard copy from reporters to secretaries, paraprofessionals

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or typographers who keyed it into computers via VDTs. Five percent optically scanned hard copy into computers, and the remainder used some other system or combination of systems. (The study did not break out dailies and weeklies, or categorize dailies by size.)

Two papers planned changes in news-processing technology in the coming year, and seven within two years.

Double Spacing

Only four percent—just two editors—believed that double spacing no longer was required. A majority of respondents were editors of weekly newspapers. But interestingly, and perhaps of particular relevance, **The Seattle Times** (Washington's largest-circulation newspaper) said double spacing was no longer necessary. (**The Times** editor identified himself and his paper, although there was no invitation to do so.)

The Times utilized electronic news processing, optical scanners to feed most copy into computers, although a few writers worked directly on VDTs. Virtually all news releases printed by **The Times** were rewritten by reporters who typed on IBM Selectric typewriters.

Broken down by technology, 91 percent of editors with electronics insisted on double spacing, compared to 88 percent of their colleagues who worked with hard copy. Perhaps the difference between the responses is not significant enough to warrant drawing any conclusions, but it is worth noting.

The response of **The Seattle Times** editor poses the possibility that our postulation is correct—that electronication of news room makes our standard rules obsolete, but that many editors are slow to recognize and adapt to changing circumstances.

Print On One Side

Has electronics equipment made it all right to type on both sides of the page of a release? Eighty-five percent of the editors said they have not, and 77 percent hold that view strongly. Nearly 13 percent (6) of the editors said it is all right to print on both sides of the page—including that change-minded editor at **The Seattle Times**.

The majority opinion was overwhelming regardless of technology in use by the responding editors. Ninety percent of responding editors with electronic news processing said news releases should be typed on one side of the page only,

compared with 86 percent of those with hard copy systems.

Colored Paper

Does colored paper make any difference? The survey showed that this rule was not as strongly entrenched as the other two. A slim majority—51 percent—said the rule against colored paper was valid. However, 34 percent were neutral and 15 percent thought colored paper was all right.

Here, we found a major difference in the feelings of editors with electronics and those without. Thirty-eight percent of those who process hard copy felt the rule was still valid and 62 percent of those with electronics said white paper should be used. Breakdown of responses of those who said the rule was still valid showed that editors working with electronics were much more likely to feel strongly about keeping the rule.

Where 29 percent of those who process hard copy felt strongly about keeping the rule for white paper and another 10 percent said they support the rule, 54 percent of the editors with electronics felt strongly that white paper should be used and an additional 8 percent agreed to a lesser degree. (One editor was hostile to the notion that the color of the paper would influence an editor's news judgment.)

Clearly, publicists should observe the rule against colored paper because nearly half of the responding editors believed it was an important one and many of them felt very strongly about it. It is a safe assumption that editors who did not insist on colored paper would not be offended by white.

Are Editors Bothered by Violations?

How are editors influenced when the format rules are violated? It was beyond the scope of this survey to measure whether violation of the rules jeopardizes use of our news releases, or adversely affects how they are used. Editors were asked to agree or disagree with the statement: "I am bothered by news releases that violate one or more of the aforementioned three rules for news releases."

Seventy-two percent said violating one or more of the three rules would bother them, and 52 percent of those responding held that view strongly. Another 20 percent were bothered, but apparently not as much. Twenty-two percent of the editors were not bothered at all and six percent were

neutral.

Collectively, editors were less certain as to whether violating the rules reflected adversely on the professionalism of the news release's writer. A clear majority, 56 percent, believed that it did, and 31 percent felt strongly that it gave editors a poor opinion of the writer's professional standards. Twenty-one percent were neutral on the question and 23 percent did not think the writer's professional image was tarnished by violating the rules. There was no essential difference in the responses of editors based on the technology that they use.

How did violating the rules reflect on the institution or company in whose name the news release was disseminated? A majority of the editors felt that both the institution's and writer's images were tarnished. Neutrality was claimed by 23 percent and 19 percent said the institution's image is not hurt.

Staples

Fifty-one percent of the editors wanted multi-page releases stapled together, 18 percent didn't care, and 31 percent preferred no staples. Obviously, we run the risk of irritating editors no matter which way we jump on staples, but apparently we will irritate fewer editors if we use them.

One editor singled out WSU's College of Agriculture Information Office for criticism on this score: "WSU news releases are hardest to handle. Not only are multiple pages not stapled, they also are folded separately, making it difficult to find page one." (Although he did not state it, it was obvious to us that he was referring to the College of Agriculture news releases, rather than to the University's News Bureau releases.)

Influence of Electronics on Use

Three questions related to the influence of electronic technology on the use of news releases. Have electronics increased the number of news releases published? Have electronics increased the length of stories published from news releases? Will electronics make it easier to place stories in the future?

Only 7 percent (3 editors) believed that electronics increased the use of news releases, 22 percent were neutral and 70 percent rejected the notion. While only three editors said that electronics has increased their use of news releases, it might be a mistake to lightly dismiss the possibility. It seems significant that three editors said that it had. Had

some editors dismissed the notion more as a reflex than as a rationally thought-out response? Long association with reporters and editors tempts me to assume that many editors would react negatively to the notion that such a consideration would influence their judgment, whereas it may have influenced their actions without their being aware that it has.

The thesis that electronification of news rooms may increase news release use was based on the subjective judgment that electronic word processing had shifted some work functions from the back shop to the news room, but that few newspapers had increased news staffs to compensate. The result is less time for reporters to initiate their own stories, which might translate into a subtle, even unconscious, shift towards a greater use of news releases, and possibly even to use somewhat longer stories from news releases.

Only three editors believed that electronification of news rooms had increased the length of stories taken from news releases.

Only a few editors believed that further technological changes in journalism will make it easier for public relations and public information practitioners to place stories in their newspapers. Eight percent said that placement will be easier in the future, 72 percent said it will not. Twenty percent were neutral. There was no significant difference in the response of editors with or without electronic news processing.

Conclusions

Electronification of news rooms is influencing editors' opinions about the format, or mechanics, of news releases, and most editors want publicists to abide by the time-honored, cardinal rules for news releases:

Double space.

Print on one side of the paper only.

Don't use colored paper.

Clearly editors' biases dictate that we play by the rules--regardless of whether we like them. It was beyond the scope of this survey to measure whether violation of these rules jeopardizes use of our news releases, or adversely affects how they are used. Most editors would deny letting such factors influence their news judgment, but editors are subconsciously, and often consciously, influenced by news releases that break the cardinal format rules.

As an editor, I have personally given up trying to pencil

edit news releases that do not follow the rules and have thrown them in the waste basket after first deciding to make a brief story of them. Surely such considerations diminish in importance in direct, inverse, relationship to the news value of "handouts." But just as surely, violating the rules builds ill will and adversely influences editors' decisions regarding their use.

Perhaps this study is especially timely as many of us face growing budget problems and the inevitable onslaught of paper savers. The greatest waste of all is to reduce a two-page news release to one page by single spacing part of it, or printing on the back, and having an editor throw it away instead of using it. Measuring the cost effectiveness against the ill will generated in those editors who will use the story anyway but resent the way we have chosen to save money, is much more difficult, and perhaps impossible to measure.

For those who must reduce the cost of sending news releases, I recommend three alternatives to violating our cardinal rules: Write fewer releases; write briefly enough to save a page; and/or be more selective in the number of publications that we send any given news release to, so they go only to those publications where editors are truly interested and likely to use them.

Table 1. Editor's opinions on double spacing news releases.

Use of VDT's makes obsolete the old rule to double space news releases.*

	Editors with VDTs		Hard copy editors		Total responses	
		Percent of total		Percent of total		Percent of total responses
Strongly disagree	18	38%	22	47%	40	85%
Disagree	2	4%	0	0%	2	4%
Neutral	0	0%	1	2%	1	2%
Agree	2	4%	0	0%	2	4%
Strongly agree	0	0%	2	4%	2	4%
Number Editors Responding	22	47%	25	53%	47	99%

*Questions or statement exactly as it was on the questionnaire.

Table 2. Editor's opinions concerning printing on only one side of the page of a news release.

Use of VDTs makes obsolete the standard rule to type only on one side of the paper.*

	Editors with VDTs		Hard copy editors		Total Responses	
		Percent of total		Percent of total		Percent of total responses
Strongly disagree	14	30%	22	47%	36	77%
Disagree	4	9%	0	0%	4	9%
Neutral	0	0%	1	2%	1	2%
Agree	2	4%	0	0%	2	4%
Strongly agree	2	4%	2	4%	4	9%
Number Editors Responding	20	43%	25	53%	47	101%

*Questions or statement exactly as it was on the questionnaire.

Table 3. Editor's opinions on use of white paper for news releases.

Use of VDTs makes obsolete the traditional rule that news releases never should be printed on colored paper.*

	Editors with VDTs		Hard copy editors		Total responses	
		Percent of total		Percent of total		Percent of total responses
Strongly disagree	14	30%	6	13%	20	43%
Disagree	2	4%	2	4%	4	9%
Neutral	6	13%	10	21%	16	34%
Agree	3	6%	0	0%	3	6%
Strongly agree	1	2%	3	6%	4	9%
Number Editors Responding	26	55%	21	44%	47	101%

*Questions or statement exactly as it was on the questionnaire.

Table 4. Editors' opinions of the reflection on the writer when news release format rules are violated.

Violating one or more of the aforementioned rules reflects poorly upon the professionalism of the person who wrote the news release.*

	Number	Percent
Strongly disagree	6	12
Disagree	6	12
Neutral	11	21
Agree	13	25
Strongly agree	16	31
Number Editors Responding	52	101%

*Questions or statement exactly as it was on the questionnaire.

Table 5. Editors' opinions of the reflection on the institution when news release format rules are violated.

Violating one or more of the aforementioned rules reflects adversely upon the institution in whose name the news release was produced.*

	Number	Percent
Strongly disagree	5	10
Disagree	5	10
Neutral	12	23
Agree	14	27
Strongly agree	16	31
Number Editors Responding	52	101%

*Questions or statement exactly as it was on the questionnaire.

