Just Hit Reply:

How Student Journalists Use Email in the Newsroom

Sara Baker Netzley
Bradley University

Abstract

This article examines the way in which student journalists use email on the job. College students working at campus newspapers across the country participated in an online survey asking them how often they use email to conduct certain newsgathering tasks, including using email to conduct interviews with sources. It also asked about their perceptions of the quality of such interviews and their use of social media such as Facebook and Twitter. The findings could have implications for how these students will conduct themselves in professional settings upon graduation and how journalism educators should approach this topic in the classroom.

Introduction

New technology has fundamentally changed newsrooms, as typewriters have given way to computer and fax machines have given way to email. But the changes do not stop there; this new technology has also altered the way reporters do their jobs. They now rely on cell phones, the Internet, email and, increasingly, social media to talk to audience members, brainstorm story ideas, find sources and conduct interviews. In light of these changes, American Journalism Review writer Charlotte Huff (1997, 13) cautions that "online journalism doesn't alter professional ethics, but it can create new situations." In a new landscape of digital communications, it is not unreasonable for the public to expect reporters to adhere to the professional norms that governed their newsgathering and reporting activities in the time before the Internet was a newsroom staple.

It is an understatement to say that young adults are comfortable with new technology. They grew up surrounded by it, and their lives often are wholly immersed in it. This article examines the way in which student journalists use email on the job at their campus newspapers. In particular, it examines how often the students use email to conduct interviews with sources and how they perceive the quality of such interviews. How they use these new tools in the newsroom while on campus could have implications for how they use them in professional newsrooms upon graduation.

Literature Review

Journalists have been communicating with the public via email for almost two decades. In 1999, Online Journalism Review suggested that newspapers should begin providing email addresses for their reporters to encourage feedback from readers (South 1999). A 2002 study from George Washington University found that while the 271 surveyed po-

litical journalists believed that reading and responding to the email they received was a "time-consuming chore," they nevertheless believed it allowed them better interaction with readers, which led to more story ideas and quotes (May, Graf and Thompson 2002).

A 2006 study found that 69 percent of reporters and editors believed newspapers increase their credibility when they include journalist email addresses at the bottom of stories and columns. Doing so opens lines of communication with readers, which can lead to story tips, new sources and follow-up information. Although some reporters and editors were leery about the increased time reporters spend in answering reader email, most celebrated the fact that newsroom employees and their readers were communicating again after a period of growing separation between the two groups (Hendrickson 2006). This separation, writes Jack Fuller in News Values, came from a sense of "insufferable self-righteousness" that reporters feel, which leads them to distance themselves from ordinary society (Fuller 1996, 200). Hendrickson (2006) points to the increased use of email as a tool to minimize this separation.

The specific ways in which reporters use email in interviews has also been of interest to media observers and researchers. American Journalism Review has long advocated for responsible and transparent use of email interviews, acknowledging as early as 1997 that in-person or phone interviews get better results, but email interviews are convenient when sources, for example, frequently travel or are located in a different time zone. However, the article cautioned that it is difficult to confirm the identity of the person actually writing the emails. In addition, email interviews eliminate the opportunity to capture the revealing details that face-to-face interviews allow reporters to gather, and it is too easy to misread the tone of printed words only. This can make it difficult, for example, to tell the difference between "absolute passionate outrage and just being pissed off" (Huff 1997).

This is a topic AJR has returned to again and again. AJR writer Kim Hart warned in 2005 that, while convenient, email interviews do not always lead to the best journalism. The author identified several points in favor of email interviews: sources can respond when it is convenient for them, accuracy in quoting is almost guaranteed and geographic and language barriers can be minimized. However, in-person interviews are better for spontaneity and capturing tone, personality, body language and setting, and even telephone interviews allow reporters to experience verbal inflection, pauses and so forth. In addition, email interviews are too easy and can be no different than quoting from a press release because sources are able to create overly scripted responses or work to spin information or cast it in a favorable light. And with no guarantee that the reporter is corresponding with the person he or she believes, opportunities for hoaxes and deception abound. Hart's article offered suggestions for improving the use of email interviews, such as indicating in the article when quotes came from email and limiting email to setting up face-to-face or telephone interviews. Hart also suggested that reporters actually speak to the source to verify that he or she was the one who sent the email (Hart 2005/2006).

In 2007, AJR again acknowledged the usefulness of email interviews but encouraged reporters to identify in the finished story when an interview had been conducted over email. One reason cited was so readers can understand why a response might feel too scripted or polished. This article pointed to the shrinking size of newsroom staff members and the temptation to avoid "shoe leather" reporting in favor of the ease of hitting reply as factors

leading to the rise of email interviews. Some reporters followed this advice. The first re-corded incident in the LexisNexis database of a journalist indicating that an interview was conducted over email was in a 1996 article in the Scotsman. Scottish freelance journalist Eamonn O'Neill had exchanged emails with a source in Washington, D.C., and didn't want to mislead his readers into thinking he was actually in Washington (Falquet 2007).

Bruce Garrison's 2004 survey of 201 journalists found that although not all journalists were using email interviews, those who did generally were pleased with the outcomes. He found that 6.5 percent of all the interviews the respondents performed were conducted by email, and 25 percent of those who conducted email interviews said they did so for no more than one in 10 interviews. However, 72.3 percent of those who conducted email interviews believed their interviews were successful, while 16.1 percent said the interviews were very successful; 11.6 percent believed the interviews were unsuccessful or very unsuccessful (Garrison 2004). A study in 2007 found that the number of reporters who reported conduct-ing interviews over email had jumped to 36 percent, while 78 percent reported using email to set up interviews. This same 2007 study found that reporters used email for other tasks, as well: 73 percent for reader story ideas; 70 percent for information from other reporters; 68 percent for press release story ideas; and 62 percent for source background information (Wanta, Reinardy and Moore 2007).

Some media companies have responded to this trend by adopting newsroom policies governing the use of email interviews, although the strength of their wording differs. The Associated Press' Statement of News Values and Principles instructs that "if we quote someone from a written document – a report, email or news release – we should say so" (The Associated Press 2006). The New York Times' Guidelines on Integrity do not advo-cate identifying email interviews in every situation, instead stating: "In those cases when it makes a difference whether we directly witnessed a scene, we should distinguish in print between personal interviews and telephone or email interviews, as well as written statements" (The New York Times n.d.). The Radio Television Digital News Association's Code of Ethics do not address the issue at all (RTDNA n.d.). And AJR reported that in 2013, several college newspapers had banned the use of email interviews, including the Daily Princetonian, the Stanford Daily, and the University of South Florida's paper, the Oracle. The Oracle told its reporters that this move would keep "strategically coordinated voices of public relations staff or prescreened email answers" out of the paper's stories (Lisheron 2013).

How younger reporters feel about new tools of communication has also been a focus for researchers. College students are always connected; a Ball State University study found that in 2010, 99.8 percent of students had a mobile phone, and 49 percent of those phones were smartphones. Of those students with smartphones, 90 percent used them to get online (Ransford 2011).

Studies also show that young people consistently turn to the Internet for news over any other type of media. The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press reported that in 2010, 65 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds said the Internet was their main source of national and international news; this was an increase from the 34 percent who cited it as their main source in 2007 (The Pew Research Center 2011). Writing in Quill Magazine, Bonnie Bress-ers predicted that today's tech-savvy journalism students, already accustomed to using the

Internet for all types of communication, will increase the pace of email interviews as they enter the workplace (Bressers 2005). Supporting this prediction, the 2008 Middleberg/ SNCR Survey of Media in the Wired World reported that journalists between the ages of 18 and 29 were newsroom leaders in embracing social media and citizen journalism. For example, 100 percent of the surveyed journalists between 18 and 29 believe new media and technology are enhancing journalism, while 40 percent of their colleagues between the ages of 50 and 64 felt the same way. Likewise, 87 percent of 18- to 29-year-old journalists believed that new media and communication tools enhance their relationship with their audience, compared to 42 percent of their 50- to 64 year-old colleagues (McClure and Middleberg 2009).

Some journalism educators have started to embrace email interviews and other forms of new communication. Educators and college media advisers have seen increased reliance on email as the primary form of communication for their students (Bressers 2005). Ken Metzler, emeritus professor at the University of Oregon and author of the textbook "Creative Interviewing," at first balked at the concept of email interviews. But by 1996, he had added a chapter to his textbook on the proper use of email in an interview setting. Many journalism textbooks — including News Reporting and Writing, Inside Reporting and Reporting for the Mass Media, to name a few — now include instructions about conducting email interviews, often suggesting that these types of interviews have their benefits but that they should not replace in-person interviews (Bender, Davenport, Drager and Fedler 2008, Harrower 2009, The Missouri Group 2007).

Indeed, as AJR reported in 2013, some observers believe that banning email interviews from newsrooms not only ignores the reality of today's digital society, but it can cause reporters to miss key pieces of information because they are not using all of the tools that are available to them. Sandy Banisky, who teaches urban affairs reporting at the University of Maryland, understands that her students may use emailed responses in their stories, but she requires that they first exhaust more traditional avenues, including knocking on doors and calling sources. "I'd like to see evidence of a different effort before you use email," she tells them (quoted in Lisheron 2013).

Finally, the rise of Facebook, Twitter and other social media sites has captured the attention of the media and researchers alike. The 2009 Middleberg/ SNCR Survey of Media in the Wired World found large increases in the number of reporters using social media since its study the previous year; 70 percent of the 341 journalists who responded to the survey reported using social networking sites, which was a 28 percent increase from the previous year. In addition, 48 percent reported using Twitter or other microblogging sites, which was a 25 percent increase from the previous year (McClure and Middleberg 2009).

Given the rise of social media usage in newsrooms, the Poynter Institute's Kelly McBride published an article with social networking guidelines that newsrooms could adopt, including suggestions for using social networks as a reporting tool, to promote journalists' work and to balance the personal and the professional use of the platform. When using social networks as a reporting tool, one of McBride's recommendations is for journalists to be transparent with audiences about how they contacted sources and how they gathered the information in a story (McBride 2009). This advice echoes the ethical recommendations from the Associated Press (2006) and, to a lesser degree, the New York Times (n.d.).

Research Questions

Past research has shown that young people are more likely to use and approve of new technologies such as email and social networking (Bressers 2005, McClure and Middleberg 2009, Ransford 2011). At the same time, media critics are concerned about the use of email interviews in news reporting, both in terms of the quality of the interview itself and in the public transparency about how the interview was conducted (Huff 1997, Fuller 1996). And educators have begun teaching student journalists about the benefits and drawbacks of email interviews (Bender, Davenport, Drager and Fedler 2008, Harrower 2009, The Missouri Group 2007).

RQ1: How often do student reporters use email for newsgathering tasks such as setting up interviews, conducting interviews, asking sources follow-up questions after interviews, communicating with readers about story ideas and using emailed press releases?

RQ2:Were students more or less likely to use email for newsgathering tasks if they were journalism majors?

RQ3: Were students more or less likely to be satisfied with the results of email interviews if they were journalism majors?

RQ4: Were students more or less likely to indicate that an interview was conducted over email if they were journalism majors?

RQ5: Would a student's desire to work in the news media business upon graduation have any relationship with the way he or she used email for newsgathering tasks?

RQ6: Would a student's social media usage have any relationship with the way he or she used email for newsgathering tasks?

Method

This study used a national online survey of students working as reporters, editors and photographers for campus newspapers during April 2009, July 2009, November 2009 and April 2010. The survey asked participants to respond to questions about how often they used email to perform certain newsgathering tasks, as well how they felt about the use of email for certain tasks. A five-point Likert scale measured their responses, with one representing "never," two representing "rarely," three representing "sometimes," four representing "often" and five representing "always." It also gathered basic demographic information, along with information about their career goals and their use of social media.

The sample was chosen by compiling a list of all the college and university student newspapers in the country using NewsDirectory.com and NewsLink.org. First, systematic random sampling was used to select 107 newspapers, or about 25 percent of the list of 433 student publications. A skip interval was established, as was a randomly selected starting point to choose the newspapers to be included. Next, email addresses were collected for the editors-in-chief, section editors and/or the faculty advisers of each selected newspaper. In some cases, no contact information for any newspaper employees could be found. In all, 104 invitation emails were sent. In the second wave of data collection, a stratified sample was collected by dividing the country into the five regions employed by the U.S. Census Bureau: South, Midwest, Mountain, Pacific and Northeast (U.S. Census Bureau n.d.). One state from each of those regions was randomly selected, which resulted

in Alabama, Illinois, Idaho, Oregon and New Hampshire being used for the study. As many email addresses as possible were collected for all staff members from the 71 total student publications in these states. When full staff lists were unavailable, or when student email addresses were not publically listed, email addresses were re-collected for the editors-in-chief, section editors and/or the faculty advisers. At this stage, 575 invitation emails were sent, for a total of 679 emails.

In all cases, the invitation email contained a link to the survey, and participants received a reminder email two weeks later, as this has been found to increase response rate (Kittleson 1997, Solomon 2001). When only the editors-in-chief, section editors or faculty advisers were contacted, they were asked to forward the survey invitation to all reporters, editors and photographers on the newspaper staff. Of the sent messages, 15 were undeliverable, which accounts for 2.2 percent of the total. This left 664 recipients, of which 176 filled out the survey. This equaled an initial response rate of 26.5 percent, although this does not account for the snowball sampling that relied on advisers and editors. Studies have found that email survey response rates are generally lower than response rates achieved through mail surveys (Cook, Heath and Thompson 2000, Granello and Wheaton 2004), and Mass Media Research reports that acceptable Internet survey response rates can range from 5 percent to 80 percent (Wimmer and Dominick 2011). This study's response rate is higher than the 8.5 percent response rate for Wanta, Reinardy, and Moore's email survey (Garrison 2004, Wanta, Reinardy and Moore 2007) and the 12.7 percent Internet response rate reported by Don Dillman et al (2009). In the end, 38 responses were eliminated because participants did not complete at least half of the survey. This left 138 usable surveys. The total number of students who answered each question varies slightly. So, while a total of 138 students were included in this analysis, between one and five students did not answer a number of these individual questions. No one student skipped more than two questions.

Results

RQ1: How often do student reporters use email for newsgathering tasks such as setting up interviews, conducting interviews, asking sources follow-up questions after interviews, communicating with readers about story ideas and using emailed press releases?

Student newspaper employees reported frequently using email to set up interviews with sources. Of 138 students, 8 percent said they always did and 49 percent said they often did, while 23 percent said sometimes, 14 percent said rarely and 6 percent said never. However, fewer students said they actually conducted those interviews over email. Of the 137 students who responded, 19 percent said they never did, 47 percent said rarely, 25 percent said sometimes, and 8 percent said often. None of the students indicated they always conducted interviews via email. See Table 1 for more details.

Table 1: Student Journalist Email Use

	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Set up interviews	11 (8%)	68 (49%)	32 (23%)	1	9

(14%)8 (6%)
   Conduct interviews   0 (0%)   13 (8%)   34 (25%)   6   4
(47%)26 (19%)
   Reader story ideas   4 (3%)   18 (13%)   33 (24%)   5   2
(38%)30 (22%)
   Press release ideas   15 (11%)   27 (20%)   46 (33%)   4   7
(34%)3 (2%)
   Follow-up questions   1 (1%)   23 (17%)   55 (40%)   3   6
(26%)22 (16%)

The students reported using email for other reasons, as well. In terms of exchanging emails with readers regarding story ideas, of 137 who responded, 22 percent said they never did, 38 percent said they rarely did, 24 percent said they sometimes did, 13 percent said they often did and 3 percent said they always did. More than half of the student reporters also used emailed press releases for story ideas. Of 138 students, 11 percent always did, 20 percent often did, 33 percent sometimes did, 34 percent rarely did and 2 percent never did. Fewer students emailed sources follow-up questions to answer after an interview; of the 137 who answered, 1 percent said they always did, 17 percent often did, 40 percent sometimes did, 26 percent rarely did and 16 percent never did. See Table 1 for more details.

RQ2: Were students more or less likely to use email for newsgathering tasks if they were journalism majors?

Of all the tasks studied, the only one with a statistically significant difference between journalism majors (defined as students majoring in print journalism, broadcast journalism, news/editorial, photojournalism and mass communication) and non-journalism majors (defined as defined as students in all other majors, including public relations, advertising, political science, business and so forth) was in the use of emailed press releases. Journalism students were more likely to use emailed press releases for story ideas than their non-major counterparts, with a mean of 3.08 for journalism majors compared to a mean of 2.57 for non-journalism majors (t = 2.024, p = .05).

RQ3: Were students more or less likely to be satisfied with the results of email interviews if they were journalism majors?

Journalism majors were more likely to be dissatisfied with interviews conducted over email than non-journalism majors. Journalism majors had a mean satisfaction of 2.51, while non-journalism majors had a mean satisfaction of 3.18 (t = -2.536, p = .015).

Looking at all students in the sample, a quarter said they were often or always satisfied that the email interview they conducted had done an adequate job in gathering the information necessary to write the article. Of 133 students, 16 percent were never satisfied, 28 percent were rarely satisfied, 26 percent were sometimes satisfied, 23 percent were often satisfied, and 4 percent were always satisfied. Most students also believed they could have gotten more information from a face-to-face or telephone interview. Of 135 students, 38 percent always felt that way, 26 percent often did, 17 percent sometimes did, 7 percent rarely did, and 9 percent never did. See Table 2 for more details.

Table 2: Student Journalists and Email Interviews

	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never

Satisfied with interview	9 (4%)	31 (23%)	35 (26%)	37 (28%)	21 (16%)
Phone/in-person better	52 (38%)	36 (26%)	24 (17%)	10 (7%)	13 (9%)
Indicate done via email	38 (28%)	12 (9%)	18 (13%)	2	3 (17%) 45 (33%)

RQ4: Were students more or less likely to indicate that an interview was conducted over email if they were journalism majors?

A little more than one quarter of all student reporters said they always indicated in their articles that an interview was conducted over email. Of 136 students, 28 percent always did, 9 percent often did, 13 percent sometimes did, 17 percent rarely did, and 33 percent never did. See Table 2 for more details. However, there was no statistically significant difference between journalism majors and non-journalism majors. On average, non-journalism majors indicated that interviews were conducted over email more often than journalism majors, with a mean of 3.25 to 2.61 (t = -1.767, p = .084).

RQ5: Would a student's desire to work in the news media business upon graduation have any relationship with the way he or she used email for newsgathering tasks?

There was a difference between those who planned to work in the news media – either print, broadcast or online – and in non-news jobs. Those planning on careers in the news media were less likely to indicate in the article that the information had come from an email interview than their counterparts who did not plan to seek news jobs after graduation by a mean of 2.58 to 3.36 (t = -2.070, p = .044).

RQ6: Would a student's social media usage have any relationship with the way he or she used email for newsgathering tasks?

Those who used Twitter for professional or personal reasons were more likely to communicate with readers about story ideas than those who did not use Twitter by a mean of 2.58 to 2.19 (t = -2.172, p = .032.). They also were more likely to use emailed press releases by a mean of 3.20 to 2.76 (t = -2.595, p = .010), and they were more likely to ask sources follow-up questions via email after the interview by a mean of 2.79 to 2.43 (t = -2.208, p = .029). However, the Twitter users were less likely to be satisfied that the email interviews had done an adequate job of gathering the information they needed to write the story by a mean of 2.48 to 2.86 (t = 2.007, p = .047). Furthermore, student reporters who said they had used Facebook to set up interviews or conduct interviews with sources were more likely to conduct interviews via email than those who had not done so by a mean of 2.41 to 2.07 (t =2.405, p = .018) and to discuss story ideas with readers by a mean of 2.56 to 2.21 (t = 1.978, p = .050).

Results

One in three student journalists in this study – 33 percent – sometimes or often conducted interviews via email. This is an increase from Garrison's 2004 findings that 6.5 percent of the reporters surveyed conducted interviews by email, and it is more in line with Wanta, Reinardy, and Moore's 2007 study showing that 36 percent of reporters used email inter-

views. Still, this is a relatively low percentage of students conducting email interviews, and perhaps the reason for this is the attitudes the students had about email interviews. Only 27 percent of students said they were often or always satisfied that the email interview they conducted had done an adequate job in gathering the information necessary to write the article, and 64 percent believed they could have gotten more information from a face-to-face interview or telephone interview.

Furthermore, journalism majors were more likely to be dissatisfied with interviews conducted over email than non-journalism majors. This could indicate that journalism educators are doing a good job in teaching students about the strengths and weaknesses of different interviewing techniques and warning journalism students about the limitations of email interviews (Bressers 2005). As educators recognize that emailed interviews are becoming more widespread, particularly among students who grew up surrounded by electronic communication, perhaps they are spending more time teaching the do's and don'ts to their students, which in turn makes the students more aware of the pitfalls of conducting interviews over email.

Students in this study used email for a number of reasons beyond interviews. The most common use of email was to set up interviews with sources; 57 percent of student journalists always or often did this. Far fewer reporters regularly performed other tasks via email: 31 percent always or often used emailed press releases for story ideas, 18 percent always or often emailed sources follow-up questions to answer after an interview, and 16 percent always or often exchanged emails with readers regarding story ideas. The small percentage for the latter item is a bit puzzling in light of findings that show that almost seven in 10 reporters believe a newspaper's credibility is enhanced when journalists provide their email addresses at the end of stories to increase communication with audience members (Bender, Davenport, Drager and Fedler 2008, Harrower 2009, Hendrickson 2006, The Missouri Group 2007). It seems that fewer student journalists than professional journalists see the same utility in maintaining contact with their readers and thereby enhancing newspaper credibility.

One area where journalism educators could focus their teaching efforts is in their instructions on transparency about how interviews with sources are conducted. About one-quarter of student reporters said they indicated in their articles when an interview was conducted over email, while one-third said they never do. More troubling, non-journalism major reported including this information with more frequency than journalism majors. Similarly, those planning on careers in the news media were less likely to indicate in the article that the information had come from an email interview than their counterparts who did not plan to seek news jobs after graduation. Inasmuch as journalism majors were more likely to be dissatisfied with email interviews, perhaps they were more reluctant to admit to their readers that this is where the information came from because they were aware of the concerns about such interviews. In light of this finding, while educators are telling students that email interviews are less desirable than telephone or in-person interviews, they should also emphasize the importance of transparency about the method of the interview. Both are equally important lessons to impart.

The finding that students majoring in journalism were more likely to use emailed press releases for story ideas than their non-journalism major counterparts might be explained

by a better understanding of the interplay between journalism and public relations. Perhaps journalism classes are doing a better job of explaining the role public relations profession-als play in providing information for the media to use, so journalism majors are more will-ing to read and consider using such information in their stories.

The use of social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook helped predict the fre-quency with which students would communicate with sources and readers. Students who used Twitter professionally or personally and who used Facebook to set up interviews were more likely to talk about story ideas with readers, ask sources follow-up questions over email and use emailed press releases. In addition, student reporters who had used Facebook to set up or conduct interviews with sources were more likely to conduct interviews via email compared to those who hadn't used Facebook in this way. This finding is not overly surprising; students who use one form of digital communication likely will be comfortable using others. However, like journalism majors, the social network users were less likely to be satisfied that the email interviews had done an adequate job of gathering the informa-tion they needed to write the story. Perhaps these findings are a sign that convenience is trumping common sense about what type of interview will give them the best results. In this case, the warning in Falquet's article that new technology could lead to lazy reporters may be coming to pass (Falquet 2007).

One possible avenue for future research is to turn the focus to source perception of email interviews. In AJR, Huff quoted then-Wired managing editor Peter Leyden as saying that some sources prefer emailed interviews because it allows them to spend time crafting thoughtful responses. In addition, then-ProfNet President Dan Forbush told Huff that some sources feel more in control of the information when they have written proof of their quotes (Huff 1997). Lisheron, too, points to greater control of the message as a reason sources might before the email interview (Lisheron 2013). It might be useful to survey news sourc-es to see if their perceptions of email interviews are positive or negative — and why.

Conclusion

This study offers an idea of what the future of journalistic communication might look like. As more reporters embrace Twitter and other forms of social networking, perhaps the two-way communication with readers and sources will increase. On the other hand, email interviews might increase, as well. Journalism educators must do their best to instill in their students a desire to conduct interviews in the best manner possible – which often, but not always, rules out email. Likewise, they must teach students the importance of transpar-ency about their interview methods in order to gain and keep the trust of their readers, for maintaining reader trust was an essential component of journalism long before the Internet came to newsrooms, and it will continue to be crucial as journalists evolve to embrace new communication techniques brought on by digital advances.

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About the Author

Sara Baker Netzley is the associate chairperson and an associate professor of journalism in the Department of Communication at Bradley University. She earned a Ph.D. from Southern Illinois University Carbondale's School of Mass Communication and Media Arts, a master's degree in Public Affairs Reporting from the University of Illinois Springfield and a bachelor's degree in Communication Arts and Political Science from Wartburg College. She has worked as a state government reporter and a feature writer and reviewer. She joined the Bradley University faculty in 2004, and she occasionally startles her students by peppering them with Buffy the Vampire Slayer quotes, Game of Thrones trivia, and zombie survival tips during class.