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Digital Journalism within the Framework of Higher Education Public Relations: A Case Study and Manual for Creating Online Feature Stories to Engage Prospective Students

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Abstract

Higher education institutions (HEI) are facing increasing competition for student enrollment. Studies indicate that websites are now the main source of a prospective student's information-gathering process, but little research has been done on how higher education institutions can operationalize their websites as functions of public relations to persuade prospective students to apply. This project investigates how concepts of digital journalism can be used to create online feature stories that engage prospective students. A case study was conducted that included an examination of digital journalism literature, an analysis of digital journalism and public relations textbooks, and a content analysis of college feature stories. Findings guided the creation of an instructional website for student workers, teaching actionable items on reporting topics, storytelling with visuals, engaging audiences, and attributing content within the framework of higher education public relations.

Keywords: higher education, public relations, digital journalism, prospective students, college, university, website, feature story, engagement

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Chapter 1

Statement of the Problem

Introduction

For the past six decades, higher education has been a "growth industry" experiencing a constant increase in student enrollment (Pierson, 2011; Steinberg, 1966). According to the National Center of Education Statistics, enrollment in undergraduate programs increased by 26% from 2000 to 2018 and is projected to reach a total of 17 million students by 2029 (NCES, 2020). A college education is considered necessary by many, as a degree serves as a gateway to careers and financial self-sufficiency (Pierson, 2011). The boom of the higher education industry corresponds positively to competition among colleges and universities seeking attention and applications from prospective students (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015). Commonly viewed as the most important stakeholder for higher education institutions (HEI), prospective students can be influenced to apply through a strategic public relations campaign.

The Public Relations Society of America defines *public relations (PR)* as "strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics" (PRSA, n.d.). Building relationships with stakeholders is the core of public relations, and the goal is to persuade audiences to engage in certain actions or hold certain perceptions. This objective is reached through storytelling (Ade, 2018; Kent, 2015), reputation management, and engagement through two-way communication (Sung & Yang, 2009).

Higher education public relations (HEPR) is complex due to its varied audiences. Communication is divided into internal stakeholders (current students, faculty, and administrative staff) and external stakeholders (parents, donors, alumni, and prospective students), both of which are critical to an HEI's financial and functional survivability (Al-Debei,

2014; Faulkner, 1961; Harpel-Burke, 2006; Poock & Bishop, 2006). HEPR is typically conducted in-house and focuses on building mutually beneficial relationships with their constituents.

For prospective students, the HEI provides academic programs to enhance career outcomes and a campus comprised of desirable facilities. In return, prospective students provide tuition and academic contributions to the college. Reaching prospective students requires a public relations strategy that accomplishes three things: (a) it must satisfy the needs of prospective students, (b) persuade prospective students to apply over other HEIs, and (c) be visible and accessible enough to be found. To accomplish these objectives, HEPR staff must strategize on which messages should be conveyed to prospective students and how the messages should be communicated.

Although a ranking has not been popularly determined, the five factors most important to prospective student decision-making during the application process include: (a) majors and programs, (b) career prospects, (c) institution reputation and credibility, (d) student experience, and (e) cost of attendance (Frølich, Stensaker, Scordato, & Bótas, 2014; Klein & Washburn, 2012; Kretchmar & Memory, 2010; Le, Dobele, & Robinson, 2019; Sutton, 2018). By communicating these factors, an HEI illustrates its unique value proposition, which is a "statement that describes the benefits students and families can expect from attending your school, why your school is a better choice than the alternatives" (Major, 2020, para. 5).

Research suggests that websites are the primary method for finding information on HEIs during the decision-making process (Lažetić, 2018; Kelly, 2019; Saichaie & Morphew, 2016; Zhang & O'Halloran, 2013), used by 84% of prospective students in 2011 and 95% in 2014 (NACAC, 2011 as cited by Saichaie & Morphew, 2016; Slack, Mangan, Hughes, & Davies,

2014). A 2019 report by RNL, a higher education enrollment technology service, found that an HEI's website is the most influential resource among high school seniors, juniors, and sophomores. It is both the first resource they use and the one they interact with the most (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2019).

The popularity of HEI websites can be traced to the demographics of prospective students. Falling within an age range of 15 to 24, prospective students are *digital natives* born into a culture of technology, having used the internet and computer-mediated channels of communication since childhood (Joy, 2012; Prensky, 2001). Accustomed to information-gathering via the web, prospective students respond best to visual communication through images and videos and conversational engagement through digital platforms (Neutuch, 2020; Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2019). Prospective students seek visuals of campuses, classes, and facilities and will be more likely to remember the college if presented with such imagery (Sundar, 2000, as cited in Pincus et al., 2017; Wilkins & Huisman, 2015). Impressions from these visuals are used to compare colleges and universities to one another, making an institution's online presence critically important (Saichaie & Morphew, 2016) and can be the determining factor when choosing to attend one university over another (Quinn, 2013).

Considering this abundance of research on how colleges use websites to provide information, it can be inferred that a website is an HEI's best chance at communicating the value of its offered education compared to other institutions (Kelly, 2019; Poock & Bishop, 2006). There is, however, a noticeable gap in that there is little research in how HEIs use their websites as functions of public relations to persuade rather than just inform (Ford, 2011).

This project suggests that HEPR professionals can build relationships with prospective students and influence them to apply through storytelling and engagement on HEI websites. The

factors of decision-making must be communicated in a visual, interactive way that satisfies digitally native prospective students. HEPR professionals can accomplish this by producing online feature stories using the concepts of digital journalism.

Digital journalism, or *online journalism,* is the production of news stories specifically for distribution on the web (Salaverría, 2019). Recent trends of consumption show that the number of Americans who prefer to consume news in interactive, digital environments is growing (Mitchell, 2018; Walker, 2019). A Pew Research study estimated that 86% of Americans were most likely to consume news through digital devices including smartphones, laptops, and tablets and are least likely to read print news. Segmented by age group, the study also found that college-aged (18 to 29) American adults preferred to consume news digitally more than any other age group (Shearer, 2021).

Demand for digital journalism skills such as video production and editing, search engine optimization, knowledge of content management systems, and HTML coding have only increased in demand since the creation of the internet (Ureta & Fernández, 2018). Within the news industry, professionals are recognizing that digital practices will be critical to continue operations as interacting with online audiences stabilizes or increases readership (Newman, 2020).

HEPR student work studies are an ideal group to use digital journalism strategies to create HEI feature stories. Research indicates that current students are a proven way to attract prospective students, as they can act as ambassadors for their college (Pavlik, 2019). Like the prospective students that HEIs are attempting to engage, work studies are also digital natives accustomed to navigating the web. Furthermore, they have a knowledge of the five factors that influence prospective student decision-making. Given that they made the decision to apply and

enroll, student work studies can act as both informants and persuaders of majors, credibility, and student experience.

In brief, an HEI should utilize their website as a public relations tool to engage prospective students and persuade them to apply over their competition. This can be accomplished through visual and engaging online feature stories produced by student work studies. Although both higher education and digital journalism are growing industries, gaps in the literature reveal very little research exists on the intersection of the two subjects. Previous studies recognize the potential of the web as a medium for public relations (Le et al., 2019; Moody & Bates, 2013), but HEIs historically have failed to use it effectively (Erickson, Trerise, Lee, & VanLooy, Knowlton, & Bruyere, 2013; Kimmons, Veletsianos & Woodward, 2007) or as a tool of persuasion (Ford, 2011). Furthermore, there is little research on how HEPR can use digital journalism techniques to engage prospective students through storytelling.

Purpose of the Study

Addressing the gaps in the literature, this project seeks to provide HEIs with a guide on how to use digital journalism within the framework of HEPR to engage prospective students. Using HEPR student work studies as the target audience, this project results in a manual for producing and distributing online feature stories that satisfy the needs of digitally native prospective students. To accomplish this, the following research questions were explored:

RQ1: What are the key concepts of digital journalism that can guide best practices for higher education public relations (HEPR) student work studies when writing online feature stories?

RQ2: What are the intersecting themes and pedagogical practices shared between digital journalism and public relations textbooks in relation to writing online feature stories?

RQ3: How do top-rated HEIs operationalize the best practices of digital journalism and public relations to engage prospective students through online feature stories?

To address these questions and to inform such a manual, a typical, collective, and problem-solving case study of four digital journalism textbooks and one public relations textbook was conducted. Themes and findings developed during a textual and content analysis of the texts have been cross-referenced between a precoded codebook created from the literature review, the codebook made during the case study, and sampled HEI online feature stories from credible institutions. An artifact was then crafted, hoping to serve as a template for institutions of higher education to construct their own digital journalism training programs for work studies within their public relations offices. Such programs allow institutions to better invest in their public relations staff and better reach digitally native potential students through their website.

Summary

The opening chapter outlines the foundation of this project: institutions of higher education should invest in digital journalism training for their public relations staff to best engage prospective students. Chapter 2 presents a literature review tackling this project's RQ1 and will explore the three key concepts of digital journalism: (a) interactivity, (b) hypertextuality, and (c) multimediality. These themes share the theoretical foundation of convergence are investigated as well. Guided by the findings of the literature review, Chapter 3 outlines this project's methodology, explaining the design of the case study implemented and the subsequent textual analysis, content analysis, and triangulation of data. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the analysis. Chapter 5 concludes this project with and original manual of online feature story writing for HEPR student work studies.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Introduction

Research exists on how HEIs should develop their websites from a design perspective (Garett, Chiu, Zhang, & Young, 2016; Harpel-Burke, 2006; Richardson, 2018) to best conduce information finding, but there is a glaring lack of research investigating online feature stories and other promotional web content used to engage prospective students. There is an abundance of research, however, on the production of web news stories from mainstream news outlets, generally referred to as "digital journalism" (Salaverría, 2019). Using the research on digital journalism, this project will identify key concepts, summarize the scholarly discussion on the concepts, and extract best practices to be applied within a framework of HEPR.

In brief, the following literature review seeks to explore this project's RQ1:

RQ1: What are the key concepts of digital journalism that can guide best practices for higher education public relations (HEPR) student work studies when writing online feature stories?

The key concepts identified inform the research methodology in the following chapter used to explore RQ2:

RQ2: What are the intersecting themes and pedagogical practices shared between digital journalism and public relations textbooks in relation to writing online feature stories?

Method

The following literature review is based on a collection of scholarly articles gathered through Seton Hall University Library's online database and the Google Scholar search engine. Criteria for search results included peer-reviewed, full-text available, and originating from

academic journal articles or books. Dissertations, conference papers, and book reviews were not included. Keywords initially included “higher education”, “writing”, “web”, “best practices”, “internet”, and “news.” These keywords yielded few relevant results, as most retrieved articles spoke on journalism courses taught online as opposed to journalism designated for the internet. Specifying the topic to higher education was abandoned, and keywords were changed to “digital journalism”, “online journalism”, “writing for the web”, “internet news”, and “online news.” This method was far more effective in yielding articles relevant to the best practices of online news writing. Reviewing these articles revealed other important keywords such as “convergence” and “hypertext” that additionally led to an abundance of relevant texts. In addition to scholarly articles and books, a handful of popular texts on web writing have been cited to help synthesize the conceptual foundations of the scholarly literature with the less abstract practices of online news writing.

The author recognizes that other relevant texts may be excluded from this literature review, but access to said texts was limited due to paywalls and out-of-institution database agreements. The following literature review attempts to summarize the key concepts of digital journalism and synthesize them into best practices for higher education feature writing in a manner as complete as possible given the availability of resources.

Journalism vs. Public Relations Writing

Before investigating how digital journalism fits within the framework of public relations, this project reviewed how the two fields compare in their writing. Across the literature, the purpose of journalism is to inform, serving as an important function of society that keeps the public aware of current events (Tárcia & Marinho, 2008). Public relations differs in that its purpose is not only to inform, but to influence, engage, and build relationships as well (PRSA,

n.d.). To this end, the two fields produce different types of news stories, where journalists generally produce hard news stories and public relations professionals write feature stories.

Hard news stories are time-sensitive, fact-focused, and unbiased. They are written to inform readers of current events that may affect them, but not to persuade them on how to respond. *Feature stories* differ in that they are less dependent on time, more creative in nature, and are written with an angle (Kennedy, 2020; North, 2016). These stories are evergreen—regardless of when they are published, they can still be used to promote their topic. Features can cover breaking news like hard news stories, but they usually provide more quotes, more information, and more emphasis on profiles to enhance emotional appeal to the reader. In summary, hard news uses facts to inform while feature news uses facts to influence the reader.

Although they differ in purpose, journalism and public relations both use the internet as a medium of communication. Both hard news and feature stories are published as articles on websites, and thus both require the skills and competencies for digital publication. Throughout the literature, these concepts are discussed within the discipline of digital journalism.

Digital Journalism

Digital journalism studies focuses on how traditional journalism has adapted to online formats. Among the research, *traditional journalism* is a process of newsgathering through channels of old media (newspapers, radio, television) (O'Sullivan & Heinonen, 2008) that does not include methods of interaction, such as comments or email correspondence, or multimedia elements, such as videos and input-responsive graphics. The shift from print to online news has been influenced by several factors including emerging technologies, changes in organizational structures, and the shifting roles of journalists and audiences (Boers, Ercan, Rinsdorf, & Vaagan, 2012; Tárcia & Marinho, 2008). Although the research emphasizes these influences, an agreed

upon term has not been widely adopted by scholars or professionals. News writing for the web has been referred to most widely as “digital journalism,” (Salaverría, 2019) but other terms, such as “online journalism” and “multimedia journalism” are also commonly used.

Some scholars such as Dutta and Gangopadhyay (2019), Deuze (2003), and Matheson (2004) used “digital journalism” and “online journalism” interchangeably but differentiate it from “multimedia journalism.” Other authors, such as Abraham (2002), equated “online journalism” to “multimedia journalism.” One distinguishing factor for multimedia journalism is that there must be more than text and a singular element of multimedia. At minimum, two modes of media must be present in the news story, such as text, music, moving or still images, animations, interactive hypertext, and/or video (Pincus et al., 2017). Deuze (2001) and Matheson (2004) argued that digital journalism is only digital journalism if the piece is produced exclusively for the web. Multimedia elements are not required in online journalism, and scholars generally agree that multimedia should only be used if it enhances a story (Thurman & Lupton, 2008). Salaverría (2019) and Nielson (2018), however, considered multimedia to be one of the main traits of digital journalism. Authors generally agreed that to be considered digital journalism, the news piece must not be “shovelware,” which is a story created exclusively for print that is copied onto the digital platform with no alterations or enhancements (Deuze, 1999; Dimitrova & Neznanski, 2006; Matheson, 2004; Salaverría, 2019).

Regardless of terminology, *digital journalism* can be identified and distinguished from traditional journalism based on the following key concepts, as outlined by Deuze (2003): (a) interactivity—the news story provides options for audiences to respond or contribute to the production of news stories, (b) hypertextuality—the news story connects to other webpages

through hyperlinks, and (c) multimediality—the news story uses more than one form of media or media format to convey the story, such as text, video, audio, graphics, games, etc.

These three characteristics have guided studies since the beginning of digital journalism research in the 1990s and continue through 2020 (Steensen, 2011). This project continues this trend, exploring how the best practices of interactivity, hypertextuality, and multimediality can produce online feature stories that effectively engage and persuade prospective students.

To better understand these three concepts of digital journalism, it is necessary to examine the theoretical frameworks that influence how these concepts were formed and are currently used.

Theoretical Framework

Digital journalism and the concepts that define it are a result of multiple factors. The changes in how news is written, distributed, and read are theorized to result from technological innovations, changes in news organizations (Belair-Gagnon & Steinke, 2020), changes in public consumption (Deuze, 2003), changes in journalist self-perceptions (Du & Lo, 2014; Nielsen, 2018), and the cross pollination of these four factors (Chao-Chen, 2013). Referred to as *convergence,* this theoretical framework is examined on how it provokes interactivity, hypertextuality, and multimediality. Agenda-setting theory is also discussed in relation to how HEPR professionals can apply its best practices.

Convergence Theory. Similar to digital journalism studies, scholars have not agreed on a singular definition for convergence (Chao-Chen, 2013; Thornton & Keith, 2009), but running themes across texts can be identified. Generally, convergence within digital journalism is a result of (a) emerging technology, (b) socio-cultural influences, and (c) organizational influences.

Technological Convergence. Pavlik (2001) recognized that the nature of how news content is both reported and consumed changed dramatically with emerging technologies, starting with the distribution of news through radio and television. The internet altered journalism more profoundly, however, shifting its focus from linear, one-way communication on few platforms to nonlinear, interactive communication on a variety of platforms (Deuze, 1999; Deuze 2001; García-Avilés, Kaltenbrunner & Meier, 2014). News is no longer being distributed and consumed through print newspapers, but is being read, commented on, shared, and critiqued on computers, cellphones, tablets, and more. Readers are no longer exclusively consumers of information but now participants in the story who have means of responding through comment sections and forums, distributing through social media and email, producing by writing, recording, and reporting news directly from their personal devices (Bowman & Willis, 2003, as cited by Spyridou, Matsiola, Veglis, Kalliris, & Dimoulas, 2013). *Technological convergence*, the cross section of journalism and new technology, gave birth to user-generated content and participatory journalism. Where once journalism was exclusive to professionals, the abundance of technology has shifted the balance of power between professional and amateur journalism.

Boers et al. directly outlined how technological convergence affects the necessary skills of digital journalists, stating that "the successful journalist must project his/her narrative skills to a cross-media environment" (2012, p. 57). Online writers must be able to construct stories that are impactful based on the device used by the reader and be proficient in multimedia skills such as shooting and editing photos, recording and editing video, publishing podcasts, interacting with users via comment sections and social media, conducting online research, using content management systems, and more.

Social Convergence. Deuze argued that convergence is not only technologically based, but as "having cultural logic of its own, blurring the lines between different channels, forms and formats, between different parts of the media enterprise, between the acts of production and consumption, between making media and using media, and between active or passive spectatorship of mediated culture" (2008, p. 103). Tárcia and Marinho (2008) defined this as *social* or *organic convergence*, emphasizing consumers' newfound ability to multitask and navigate multiple environments. For example, if a person is watching a basketball game on TV, Tweets about the game on their phone, all while video-chatting with their friend on their computer (who is also watching the game), the person is experiencing social convergence. Social convergence appears through trans-media storytelling, which is the development of content across multiple channels (Tárcia & Marinho, 2008). As consumers look for more ways to experience social convergence, whether they know it or not, content producers look for more ways to meet the needs of their audience, looking to profit from engagement.

Organizational Convergence. Technological and social influences determine how news organizations restructure and adapt to convergence. A successful news operation that intends to use converged media requires a full commitment from management and should be utilized at all levels of an organization (Quinn, 2004).

Digital journalism scholars have agreed that commercial concerns regarding the technological and social influences, mainly the cutting of costs and the potential revenue by integrating social media and user interaction, are the determining factors for how, or if, organizations respond to convergence. Humprecht and Esser (2016) argued that commercial pressure and potential investments were the driving factor for organizations to adopt convergent means of storytelling. Nee (2013), Chao-Chen (2013), and Humprecht and Esser (2016) agreed

that commercial concerns, rather than an attempt to improve the quality of news contents, largely determine how traditional media organizations use the new media. The main financial advantage of hosting online content is the low cost of adding additional pages, and adding text and multimedia is essentially free (Pearson & Kosicki, 2017).

Agenda-Setting Theory. Digital journalism theorists have commonly cited agenda-setting theory as being influenced by convergence. *Agenda-setting* is the ability for news media to determine the importance of certain topics by controlling the distribution of topics and what is seen by the public. This strategy is used to influence news consumers into considering some topics more important than others. Within the context of digital journalism, Dutta and Gangopadhyay stated, "agenda setting is not about reality but the reality filtered and shaped by media, digital journalism can construct reality and use the interactive space to build a public narrative" (2019, p. 721).

Traditionally, mainstream news outlets and employed journalists have been actors that set agendas, but convergent technologies and the rise of user-generated content and interactivity are challenging this paradigm. Salaverría (2019) noted the emerging prominence of non-mainstream influential people who speak and write on social media platforms, known as influencers, and how they detract from the mainstream's ability to set agendas. Laor and Galily (2020) stated how the internet has challenged agenda-setting as blogs and other forms of audience interaction blur the lines between news creators and news consumers. By responding to the media, media consumers have become media producers, as is the case of "influencers" on social media (Laor & Galily, 2020). As consumers are exposed to more voices producing more content, they have more choices and more access to differing views on subjects.

The flow of information in the digital age has altered the top-down model of information dissemination as participatory journalism and user-generated content propagate a horizontal flow of information (Paulussen & Ugille, 2008). This remodeling of agenda-setting has proven difficult for journalists who struggle to relinquish their roles as gatekeepers (Deuze, 2004; Singer, 2011), but recent studies have shown a gradual embracing of interaction with the public.

Implications for HEPR Online Feature Stories. The three types of convergence have a clear impact on how HEIs reach prospective students. Technological convergence changed what prospective students expect to see in online feature stories, seeking multimedia content. Furthermore, technological convergence enhances the public relations aspect of online feature stories as they are a channel for two-way communication between the producer (HEPR student worker) and consumer (prospective student). Social convergence progresses this through trans-media storytelling, as an online feature story can be found on mobile social media, shared to other prospective students, read on desktop computers, and shared again to other devices. Organizational convergence shows that HEIs have a financial incentive to digitally engage prospective students, and that all levels of administration from the president to student workers should invest themselves in convergent storytelling. Finally, agenda-setting theory illustrates a precedent of public relations techniques within digital journalism. Just as digital journalists can determine which topics consumers should consider newsworthy, HEPR writers can curate information and angle their stories to make their institution appear as favorable as possible.

The theoretical frameworks of digital journalism can influence HEPR strategies on their own, but a more in-depth investigation into digital journalism studies reveal three core concepts that can guide best practices: (a) interactivity, (b) hypertextuality, and (c) multimediality. The following is a summary of each concept as discussed by digital journalism scholars.

Interactivity

Interactivity in terms of online news writing is the concept that audiences are no longer only consumers of information. Through technological convergence, audiences have easy and accessible ways of producing, distributing, and discussing content. They are no longer "passive" but an active member of the online news process (Deuze, 2001; Gregory, 2004; Tárcia & Marinho, 2008). At its core, interactivity is a two-way method of communication as opposed to a one-way method.

It is important to note that audiences can interact with both the text/final product and the authors/organizations producing the text. Deuze (2003) summarized the ways in which audiences respond to stories as three types of interactivity: (a) *navigational interactivity,* which encompasses how users work their way through online texts, such as using hyperlinks to skip to certain parts of the news story or to be rerouted to other webpages; (b) *functional interactivity,* where users interact with other readers or authors through email, comment sections, and message boards; and (c) *adaptive interactivity,* where websites automatically respond to user inputs and preferences, displaying content that the website believes the user will want to interact with.

Adaptive interactivity is not a concern for HEPR writers, as its computer science-based foundation is beyond the scope of the writing process. Navigational and functional interactivity, however, have significant consequences to online writers who must now think about how readers navigate through content in their stories. This is now referred to as hypertextuality which is discussed further along this literature review. Regarding functional interactivity, digital journalists must consider how readers now contribute to news production, a process called *participatory journalism.*

Participatory Journalism and User Generated Content. "Participatory journalism" does not maintain a consistent definition across the research (Hermida, 2008) and includes synonyms such as "citizen journalism", "reciprocal journalism", and "conversational journalism" (Nielson, 2018). Despite the variance, participatory journalism is understood to include enhanced integration of user-generated content (UGC) during news production (Paulussen, 2008). Journalists interact with non-journalists, most often through digital technologies (Nielson, 2018), to produce content. Online users are participants in news production, engaging in gathering, selecting, publishing, distributing, commenting on, and publicly discussing the news (Singer, 2011).

User generated content (UGC), sometimes referred to as "crowdsourcing" (Boers et al., 2012; Salaverría, 2019), is digital content (including but not limited to text, photos, videos, audio, and blogs) developed by non-professional users with no professional intervention (Barredo-Ibáñez et al., 2020). UGC can be created and distributed on a mass scale by anyone with internet access (Nee, 2013).

One study identified five points in the content creation process that participatory journalism and UGC can occur: (a) access and observation, where non-professionals are prompted to submit ideas for content; (b) selection and filtering, where users select what content gets published; (c) processing and editing, where users submit original content; (d) distribution, where users control which content is shared, how it is shared, and with whom it is shared; and (e) interpretation, where users comment on and discuss content with one another (Domingo, Quandt, Heinonen, Paulussen, Singer, & Vujnovic, 2008). Participation can occur at any point in the news process, ranging from simply commenting on news stories to contributing content. Although the degree of interaction between journalists and citizen participants varies, as do

journalist perceptions of user-contributions (Barredo-Ibáñez et al., 2020; Paulussen & Ugille, 2008; Spyridou et al., 2013), the primary idea is that journalists and users interact throughout the news-producing process.

Scholarly Discussion: Use, Credibility, and Ownership. Case studies by Paulussen and Ugille (2008) and Thurman and Lupton (2008) identified three factors that influence participatory journalism: (a) organizational structures, (b) work practices, and (c) professional attitudes towards users. Regarding organizational structures, news organizations might not promote collaboration between staff from different departments, whereas writers and community managers may not communicate regarding intake and use of UGC. Additionally, some journalists do not have enough experience in content management systems to innovate and add UGC to their own work.

Concerning work practices, journalists routinely rely on official sources of information. Some admit that they recognize the internet as becoming an important news gathering tool (Thurman & Lupton, 2008), so they ocasionally use UGC as secondary sources despite questions of reliability. Some journalists avoid utilizing UGC as it adds too much to their workload (Domingo et al., 2008; Paulussen, 2008). As for professional attitude towards users, results of Paulussen and Ugille's (2008) study found that journalists are willing to accept most UGC that does not require verification or sourcing, such as personal or "everyday life" content. According to interviewed journalists, UGC is not credible due to lack of objectivity and accountability, but there is a growing awareness among journalists of the importance of UGC and audience interaction (Paulussen & Ugille, 2008; Thurman & Lupton, 2008).

UGC allows more people to create content that voices public opinion (Chao-Chen, 2013) and allows for hyperlocal news coverage free of corporate threats (Dutta & Gangopadhyay,

2019), but the credibility of the piece will be questioned given that non-journalists rely on opinion as opposed to investigation (Domingo et al., 2008). UGC has been a useful resource for immediate coverage of events that may be inaccessible to professional journalists, such as terrorist attacks and other eyewitness events, but recognize risk in using such content as it may not always be verifiable (Barredo-Ibáñez et al., 2020; Dimitrova & Neznanski, 2006). Results of Barredo-Ibáñez et al.'s (2020) study found that journalists distrust user contributions as they are still viewed as consumers, not citizens. Journalists think UGC is better for discussion of opinions that might spark ideas for new, official content. This contrasts with findings from the Spyridou et al. (2013) study that found a belief among journalists that gatekeeping and agenda-setting should stay with professionals; news should not be a result of UGC.

Another challenge of UGC is the question of who legally owns the content; users that create the content, media organizations that use and distribute it, both, or neither? Boers et al. (2012) and Domingo et al. (2008) recognized opportunities for crowdsourcing content, but additionally acknowledge users' creeping tendency in replacing professional journalists. Regardless of intentions to do so, journalists have to share control and ownership of news production with users as they become increasingly involved in content creation (Paulussen & Ugille, 2008). Journalists and users alike can now play the role of contributors and distributors.

Scholarly Discussion: Gatekeeping. Although digital news organizations are pushing for increased engagement via UGC, comment sections, and social media, journalists are slow to adapt to new frameworks where journalist-audience relationships are no longer top-to-bottom, but horizontal and collaborative (Deuze, 2004; Nee, 2013). A common discussion across the literature, both as a theoretical concept and a practice, is the idea of *gatekeeping*. At the macro level, gatekeeping is the action of agenda-setting, where journalists actively decide what stories

are produced and disseminated to the public to control the flow of information (Barredo-Ibáñez et al., 2020; Dimitrova, 2003). At the micro level, gatekeeping can include daily tasks of journalists as they engage with their audiences, monitoring comment sections and deciding which UGC is published and which is not (Singer, 2014). Journalists still view gatekeeping as one of their primary functions (Paulussen & Ugille, 2008), but the shift to collaborative news production has put audiences in the role of secondary gatekeepers who decide which stories to share, discuss, and distribute. Singer (2014) offers two models of moderation for gatekeeping journalists. In the first model, journalists monitor UGC before distributing it, able to choose which comments or questions by users get published. In the second model, journalists review UGC shortly before or immediately after publishing.

Pearson and Kosicki (2017) suggested that instead of gatekeeping, digital journalists should invest in *way-finding.* Whereas gatekeeping serves as a packaged product of information created by mass media for users, wayfinding suggests that news organizations can understand paths that users take to certain news stories via search engines and social media. Instead of choosing what content is created, organizations can manipulate how users get to certain content.

Implications of Interactivity for HEPR Online Feature Stories. College students are an outspoken audience that, mediated by technology and social media, commonly voice their opinions on the choices and direction of their respective institutions (Cole & Heinecke, 2018; Mihailidis, 2014). Current students can be used to market to prospective students (Pavlik, 2019), and participatory journalism from current students can act as both a knowledgeable and relatable source of information on majors, student experience, and more. For example, if a student submits a quote about their experience as a biology major with a photo of themselves in the new campus

science lab, prospective students will simultaneously learn more about an offered program, connect with personal experience, and retain more information through visual communication.

Participatory journalism and UGC can be especially useful when producing online feature stories if HEPR staff are unable to attend campus events or provide photos for stories. For example, if a college wants to promote their study abroad program, HEPR work studies can reach out to study abroad students currently residing in foreign countries for quotes, photos, story ideas, and other content that would be otherwise inaccessible. Faculty participation can also be useful for marketing purposes. For example, if a faculty member works with the PR staff to write a story on their recent publication, mainstream news organizations may find this story and reach out to the faculty to interview them as an expert in their field. This earned media can be utilized to market the college. To summarize, student and faculty participation in the news production process can result in content that markets the college while saving time and resources.

Participatory journalism can be applied as a best practice, but HEPR professionals should engage in gatekeeping so that unfavorable information is not made available to external audiences. From a public relations perspective, gatekeeping is important in maintaining a positive angle for the HEI. This project suggests Singer's (2014) first model of gatekeeping as a best practice. To protect the college's brand, the HEPR staff should determine which news stories and UGC are published, and which are not. While story submissions are helpful in conserving resources, they can also potentially damage the college's credibility if the content is not of a certain standard of quality or the information is not accurate. Pearson and Kosicki's (2017) way-finding model should also be implemented, utilizing SEO keywords to attract potential readers (Mizrahi, 2013).

Hypertextuality

Hypertext is the interconnection between online texts linked together through hyperlinks (Lagerwerf & Verheij, 2014). From a purely communications-based perspective, *hypertextuality* is present when a set of messages with a common topic are connected and users can navigate from one message to another with technology (Prom, 2020). The literature additionally identifies two types of hypertextuality (Baehr & Lang, 2012; Deuze, 2003): (a) *internal hypertext* that sends users to another location on the same website/domain, such as specific section within the same article (micronavigation), a document, or another webpage/article; and (b) *external hypertexts* that lead users to other websites (macronavigation). For both types of hypertext, common characteristics include nonlinear methods of storytelling and the presence of hyperlinks providing pathways to other texts.

Nonlinear Narratives. Hypertext was originally coined by Ted Nelson, who defined it simply as "non-sequential writing" (Nelson, 1965, as cited in Palau-Sampio & Sánchez-García, 2020). Whereas traditional journalism is linear in nature with a clear beginning, middle, and end, digital journalism is *nonlinear*, meaning that readers can enter and exit a story at multiple points through hyperlinking and can be sent to other stories as well (Bacalja, 2020; Baehr & Lang, 2012; Deuze, 1999). For example, readers of digital journalism can be linked to page six of ten of a news story, which then links to a video at the beginning of the story, which then provides a share button that links to social media sites. Nonlinear hypertexts build narratives through multiple texts connected by a theme as opposed to a beginning, middle, and end (Abraham, 2002).

Scholarly Discussion: The Inverted Pyramid. The nonlinear nature of online news stories puts pressure on digital journalists to consider the structure of their content relating to

user navigation (Abraham, 2002), as web writing is more concerned with layered, connected chunks of information as opposed to sequential narrative (Du, 2014). Journalists do not only have to rethink ways of reporting and writing information, but plan on how that information is presented in hypertext formats.

Traditional journalistic writing process uses the *inverted pyramid* technique that places key information at the top of a news story with less important details filling in the rest of the story in order of descending importance (Mazrahi, 2013; Nielsen & Fox, 1998). Scholars disagreed on whether digital journalists should continue using the inverted pyramid. Some have argued that the inverted pyramid is critical to digital journalism. Despite readers becoming more active seekers of information, many do not stay on one page for long and attempt to look for key information as quickly as possible, opting not to scroll down (Gregory, 2004). Other scholars argued that due to hypertextuality, the inverted pyramid is less important and that information should be neatly organized into separate, linkable chunks (Baehr & Lang, 2012). Both sides of the argument have concurred that digital journalists should write for "scannability" where the most important pieces of information, such as keywords, headings, and lists, can be quickly found by readers who skim through the text (Mazrahi, 2013).

Another, less common writing method is the *F-shaped pattern* where the most important information is found within two horizontal lines found at the beginning of an article, generally the first two paragraphs, and less important information is found descending vertically below the horizontal lines (Mazrahi, 2013; The Manifest, 2018). This method is based on research on readers' eye movements and suggests that the first two lines are the best spots to place important information because users naturally look there.

Hyperlinks. Hyperlinks are thought to be "a fundamental feature of the web" (De Maeyer, 2012, p. 737) that connect texts to the rest of the internet, potentially infinitely. In its most basic form, *hyperlinks* are words, phrases, or buttons that, when clicked on by the user, move readers from one chunk of information to another (Dimitrova, 2003). This movement is optional and serves as an additional, complementary source of information. Hyperlinks are largely responsible for the nonlinear nature of online news stories, as they provide readers with choices to navigate through and across stories as they please. Not only do hyperlinks make vast amounts of information available to users, but it allows users to determine what type of information they seek (Dimitrova, 2003).

Scholarly Discussion: Sourcing and Credibility. With information made accessible by hyperlinks, scholars have agreed that hyperlinking to external sources can increase transparency and credibility in news stories (Coddington, 2014; Humprecht & Esser, 2016). In addition to the literal boost in credibility from providing hyperlinks to sources, the presence alone of hyperlinks make texts seem more credible to readers (Lagerwerf & Verheij, 2014; Mor & Reich, 2018).

As readers become increasingly less passive and more willing to investigate information for themselves, digital journalists can directly link to supporting evidence that justifies the information they are disseminating. Hyperlinking allows authors to connect readers directly to sources and illustrates how authors came to conclusions (Lagerwerf & Verheij, 2014). This is especially useful when source information includes wide sets of data that are difficult to integrate through written text.

How hyperlinks are used in digital journalism, however, varies depending on the organization, individual author, and platform used to present a story. Studies have found that, despite its potential, many news organizations are hesitant to use external hyperlinks that point

away from their website (De Maeyer, 2012; Dimitrova & Neznanski 2006). This is largely a commercial concern, as organizations want to keep users on their websites for as long as possible and on as many internal pages as possible (Vobič, 2014). Internal hyperlinking is important for web traffic and revenue but harms availability of information.

Implications of Hypertextuality for HEPR Online Feature Stories. Adopting a nonlinear structure in feature stories can help HEPR writers better communicate with their audiences. College websites have become a critical part of the college application process, and prospective students browse these websites seeking information that will persuade them to consider a certain college (Al-Debei, 2014; Harpel-Burke, 2006). Since online readers, prospective students specifically, tend not to read whole articles (Mizrahi, 2013) and the nonlinear nature of web articles allows users to enter or exit an article at any point, HEPR writers should communicate the most important information clearly and quickly. HEPR online feature stories should be written with scannability in mind, as prospective students want to find important information quickly, even if they only skim the article (Garett et al., 2016; Nielsen & Fox, 1998; Poock & Bishop, 2006). This can be achieved by using the inverted pyramid structure, the "F" shape structure, and by using headers and lists to clearly organize important information.

Hyperlinks are another critical resource available to higher education writers, as internal hyperlinks can transport users to important pages on the college's website, namely major and tuition pages. As a best practice, hyperlinks to internal pages should be included as often as possible, not only to influence prospective students' willingness to apply, but also to boost web traffic and revenue. External hyperlinks can be useful for marketing purposes. For example, if the college achieves a high spot on a ranking list, such as the *U.S. News* Best Colleges Rankings,

authors should include a hyperlink to the external rankings webpage to communicate institutional reputation, influence applicants, and fortify the college's credibility.

In terms of perceived quality, a study by Al-Debei (2014) found that perceived quality of higher education websites has the strongest effects on students, stronger even than the quality of information provided. This perceived quality of the college's website affects prospective students' intentions to apply and seek further information on the college. Considering the perceived credibility from the presence of hyperlinks and that transparency and credibility are strong indicators of brand value (Humprecht & Esser, 2016), HEPR writers should look to include hyperlinks as much as appropriately possible.

Multimediality

Multimedia, as outlined by Deuze (2003) and echoed by proceeding digital journalism scholars, is defined as "a presentation of a news story package where two or more media formats are utilized" (p. 140). Media formats include any element used to help tell the story (Jacobson, 2010), including text, images, photos, videos, animated graphics, and/or audio (Pincus et al., 2017). It is standard for both digital and print news stories to include text and photos, so a story must include one other element to truly illustrate multimediality (Steensen, 2011).

Formats. Within the context of online news stories, multimedia comes in two formats. In the *Christmas tree format,* media elements such as photos and interactive maps are treated as add-ons, placed to the side of the main text like ornaments on a tree (Pincus et al., 2017). Multimedia is used as an extension of the main text and not a primary storytelling technique (Deuze, 2004; Steensen, 2009). The second format, *embedding,* also features text as the main source of information, but additionally places multimedia elements at appropriate positions in the

narrative, emphasizing the flow and transitions between text and photos/videos/graphics (Pincus et al., 2017).

Scholarly Discussion: Juxtaposition. Authors as early as 1999 recognized the potential for multimedia to serve as gimmicks in an online news story, where flashy graphics and videos are tacked on but offer no added value to the story (Lowrey, 1999). Interactive multimedia elements should not but juxtaposed to text but should in some way increase users' understanding of the narrative (Pincus et al., 2017; Thurman & Lupton, 2008). For example, an interactive graphic showing the path of a hurricane that allows users to choose locations and dates can increase a users' understanding of how an oncoming hurricane is going to affect them. Placed at an appropriate spot in the story, this example of embedding multimedia is not merely juxtaposed as a photo of a previous hurricane in the header would be.

Scholarly Discussion: Skills and Cost to Produce. Literature on multimedia within online news narratives has discussed when and how digital journalists should use it (Palau-Sampio & Sánchez-García, 2020; Pincus et al., 2017; Thurman & Lupton, 2008). The primary concern of including multimedia are the costs and skills required to make it. Digital journalists should have skills in photography, videography, and editing, but researchers have noted that not all journalists are willing or able to invest in such skills (Du & Thornburg, 2011). While UGC can provide multimedia content quickly and at no cost to the news organization, the content may not be usable or appropriate given its quality (Barredo-Ibáñez et al., 2020). Creation of quality multimedia content comes with high costs and high standards of skill that are not currently part of journalism's status quo.

Implications of Multimediality for HEPR Online Feature Stories. Including multimedia in online HEPR feature stories is important in visually communicating life at the

college. Prospective students will want to see what the campus, student body, faculty, and classes look like, and will be more likely to remember the college upon presentation of imagery (Sundar, 2000, as cited in Pincus et al., 2017).

This project recommends using a combination of the Christmas tree and embedding techniques when adding multimedia to HEPR online feature stories. Photos are a necessary element of feature stories and are better suited as ornaments, especially towards the beginning of an article, as they have a positive impact on prospective students' retention of information (Jacobson, 2010) and emotional appeal. Photos are especially useful for stories on campus events that readers cannot attend but want to see. Considering the lessons of juxtaposition, videos are better suited as embedded media at appropriate parts of a story (Thurman & Lupton, 2008). For example, if an article is summarizing the college basketball team's season and the author wants to highlight a specific player's scoring ability, a highlight reel video would be appropriate to place after a paragraph describing the player's role on the team. While text can better articulate how the student is a good teammate, a video can better display the action of basketball plays.

Use of animated graphics is not recommended, as online writing guides find they have issues with accessibility, are perceived to be fatuous, and may have difficulty loading on devices (Mazrahi, 2013; Nielsen & Fox, 1998).

Although HEPR professionals must consider whether multimedia elements enhance a story, they must also consider if producing multimedia is worth the time and cost. This consideration will be dependent on the size of the college or university. Some institutions have staff, departments, and budgets dedicated to producing marketable video and photo content. Other, smaller institutions do not have the resources to produce high quality multimedia. To cut costs and prevent extra workload, HEPR professionals should consider gathering UGC from

students and faculty for feature stories. Given the creative, more personal nature of feature stories, non-professional content is usually appropriate. For example, events such as a campus bake sale can utilize student-submitted photos. Furthermore, HEPR offices can cut multimedia costs by employing work studies who can write text, take photographs, and record videos straight from their smartphones.

Summary

This literature review summarizes the core concepts of digital journalism, reviews associated debates among digital journalism scholars, and suggests best practices within the context of HEPR online feature stories based on the discussed concepts. Interactivity, hypertextuality, and multimediality, along with their corresponding practices, can help capture the attention and provoke action in prospective students.

While these concepts provide foundational skills and best practices for HEPR feature writing, available research on digital journalism does not fully illustrate the technical aspects of online news writing. Digital journalism research has primarily focused on concepts and societal factors that impact the industry as opposed to production of digital news itself. Himma-Kadakas and Palmiste put it best when they said, “All these studies approach the journalistic discourse; however, they often neglect the core element: the content and how it is produced” (2019, p. 251). These specific skills necessary in online news writing, such as the ability to use content management systems or write in HTML, are explored in greater detail in Chapter 4. The following chapter details this project’s case study conducted to investigate these skills and how they are taught in digital journalism and public relations textbooks.

Chapter 3

Methods

Introduction

As described in Chapter 1, HEIs have incentive to use their websites as a function of public relations that persuades prospective students to apply over their competition. This can be accomplished through engaging, visual storytelling in online feature stories, but there is little research and no current manuals for HEPR staff to produce such stories for the online format. This project looks to address these gaps in the literature, resulting in a guide for producing online HEPR feature stories published to college and university websites. To accomplish this, the following research questions are explored:

RQ1: What are the key concepts of digital journalism that can guide best practices for higher education public relations (HEPR) student work studies when writing online feature stories?

RQ2: What are the intersecting themes and pedagogical practices shared between digital journalism and public relations textbooks in relation to writing online feature stories?

RQ3: How do top-rated HEIs operationalize the best practices of digital journalism and public relations to engage prospective students through online feature stories?

Following a review of literature that addressed RQ1, this project conducted a collective case study approach to investigate RQ2 and RQ3. A collective case study was utilized for its detailed examinations of typical phenomena, its boundedness, its focus on problem-solving, and its ability to "collect a group of cases for analysis of common features, themes, or processes" (Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2013, p. 120).

The case study took place from December, 2020 to February, 2021 and featured four digital journalism textbooks and one public relations textbook that served as points of data. For each of the four textbooks, a qualitative textual analysis was conducted to identify recurring themes, patterns, processes, and meaning creation. A content analysis was also conducted to identify pedagogical practices used to teach digital journalism and public relations. Codified themes that emerged from the textual and content analyses were cross-examined with a predetermined codebook featuring the three themes identified during the literature review: (a) interactivity, (b) hypertextuality, and (c) multimediality. These two codebooks were analyzed in conjunction with the findings of a content analysis on currently published HEI online feature stories, providing a triangulation of analysis. The triangulation of themes across the three data sources was used to guide the creation of an HEPR online news writing manual presented in Chapter 5. This chapter details the selected methodology and rationale, operationalization of research methods, and limitations of the study.

Method and Rationale

Case Study

Case study has varied definitions depending on scholarly perspective, as some have viewed it as a form of research methodology and strategy (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) while others viewed it simply as a means of selecting subjects to be researched (Stake, 2005; Thomas, 2015 as cited by Creswell & Poth, 2018). The latter has placed heavier emphasis on *bounding* the study; that is, placing specific criteria and limitations on samples being studied. Although definitions and types of case studies vary, Creswell and Poth (2018) identified characteristics true of all case studies, namely that they (a) specify a particular case or cases to be studied, (b) are bounded by certain parameters, (c) feature procedures dependent on

the intent of the study, (d) provide in-depth understanding of the case, (e) provide data analysis appropriate for sources, (f) describe themes of the case, and (g) end with *assertions*, which are general lessons learned from the case.

Case studies may be either *typical,* where a case is "chosen strategically because it is deemed to represent the most typical of its kind" (Saldaña, 2011), or *atypical,* where a case is chosen because of its unique character (Guest et. al, 2013). Choosing between typical versus atypical cases is a matter of either exemplifying or deviating from a norm (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Furthermore, case studies are typified by purpose and number of cases observed, being (a) *intrinsic,* (b) *instrumental,* and/or (c) *collective* (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). An intrinsic case study seeks understanding of a particular case as opposed to a general phenomenon, an instrumental case study seeks a better understanding of an issue, and a collective case study is an "instrumental study extended to several cases" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 237) that investigates a phenomenon through a joint study of multiple cases. Finally, case studies may be either (a) *problem-solving,* where a problem is investigated within a specific case and analysis provides recommendations for solutions, or (b) *descriptive,* where cases are examined to identify what happened and why (Western Sydney University, 2016).

Case study was determined to be the appropriate methodology for this project as it allowed for simultaneous in-depth examinations of educational textbooks that served as examples guiding this project's research objective: an original manual. Further, despite originating in medical research, case studies are now commonly used in the fields of education, journalism, mass communications (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994), and specifically digital journalism education (Du & Lo, 2016; Du & Thornburg, 2011). Instrumental case studies (and thus, collective case studies) are also used for development and training of staff

(Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Case studies are highly compatible with documents as primary sources, proving to be unobtrusive and non-reliant on human subjects (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Additionally, case study was selected for its emphasis on boundaries. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) warned against *data saturation* wherein an overabundance of samples may make it difficult to come to a holistic conclusion. The researcher set specific boundaries and criteria for selection to avoid this and to complete the project within a reasonable timeframe.

The case study conducted for this project was determined to be typical, problem-solving, and collective. It was typical by determining current norms in digital journalism and public relations education, problem-solving through its goal to create a product for HEPR, and collective because it gathered "a group of cases for analysis of common features, themes, or processes" (Guest et. al, 2013, p. 120).

Textual and Content Analysis

Textual analysis is a method of data analysis in which the researcher deconstructs texts for interpretation, reviewing its content, meanings, structure, and context (Lockyer, 2008). *Content analysis* is an approach of textual analysis (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 1999) that systematically and procedurally identifies patterns and categorizes data from a text (Julien, 2008). A content analysis can be either (a) *qualitative,* seeking to interpret meaning within messages found in data, (b) *quantitative,* focusing on frequency of messages or concepts within data, or (c) both (Carley, 1993; Palmberger & Gingrich, 2014). In either context, the researcher codes words, themes, and concepts into categories for analysis.

Content analysis is easily replicable and verifiable for its quantitative procedures (McKee, 2003). These procedures are commonly, but not always, conducted in the following sequence: select texts for analysis, determine units of meaning to be coded, cluster codes into

broader categories, and analyze data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). *Selection of texts* is based on predetermined criteria for study. *Units of meaning* defines what the researcher is going to record, such as frequency of keywords, background of authors, presence and positioning of multimedia elements, and representation of key themes. Codes and categories can be either definable characteristics such as age and occupation or abstract concepts.

Textual analysis was an appropriate data analysis technique within case studies in that case studies are interpretative and reflective (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Data can be precoded, coded and re-coded, and then interpreted again for classification, pattern, and revised meaning. It was additionally appropriate for its ability to identify themes and patterns that complimented the findings of the literature review. This approach provided meaningful insights into digital journalism pedagogy qualitatively by identifying and analyzing themes, patterns, and meanings within the chosen texts, but also remained replicable and verifiable by providing procedures of quantifying data that developed the themes, patterns, and meanings. Furthermore, textual and content analysis are also unobtrusive, reliant on a small number of document-based texts provide in-depth examination (Lockyer, 2008). These analysis techniques are highly flexible, allowing the researcher to analyze data at any time, in any location, and at a low cost.

Operationalization

Data Collection

Selection of texts within this project was determined by two guiding elements: (a) characteristics of documents as sources of data and (b) a set of sampling criteria based on reputation and use.

Documents, which appear in a variety of mediums such as written texts, oral speeches, photographs, films, webpages, and more (Polkinghorne, 2005), are usually supplementary

sources used to triangulate with interviews and observations but are increasingly becoming popular as a primary source of information (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). They are rich in description but meaning needs to be constructed by the reader. Documents come in three different types: (a) *personal documents,* owned and produced by private individuals (b) *official documents,* produced by organizations, and (c) popular documents, produced to inform or entertain. Textbooks are official documents, specifically as a form of external communication, for they are "materials produced by organizations for public consumption" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 137) which are useful in understanding programs such as course curriculums. They can also be considered as popular for their informational purposes.

Bogdan and Biklen advised that "you need to assess the depth and breadth of the material" (2007, p. 172), highlighting the need to determine how a document was produced, for what purpose it was produced, and who uses the materials for which purposes. These considerations provide criteria that narrow sampled data sets.

Sampling. The researcher built a list of criteria to select texts commonly used in college journalism and public relations courses. Keeping the outcome of this project in mind, the researcher acknowledges that HEPR work studies that will utilize this project's manual may have already been exposed to such course materials. Not all HEPR student workers are public relations or journalism majors, however. To this end, texts were selected given that they instructed on both communication writing and digital techniques.

Criteria for selection were as follows: selected text must (a) be an educational textbook, manual, or guidebook that instructs specifically in digital journalism, public relations, or online news writing; (b) be written by a qualified author in the field of communications, public relations, or journalism; (c) have a publishing date no older than 2010 to ensure the presence of

contemporary online practices and to minimize outdated practices; (d) have a page range of 200–400 pages to secure a significant amount of microdata to pull from while also being short enough to study within a reasonable timeframe; and (e) must come from a reputable publisher within the disciplines of communications and/or educational studies. For the purposes of this project, a reputable publisher included publishers recognized with high rankings, produce significant amounts of work in the field, and have high sales numbers.

SAGE Publishing and their subsidiary, CQ Press, were selected as they publish more than 1,000 journals and more than 800 books a year (SAGE Publications, n.d.). In 2020 alone, specific accolades included 646 journals ranked in the *Journal Citation Reports (JCR)*, with 199 titles ranked in the top 30% and 94 titles receiving a top 10 category rank. In 2019, SAGE was considered a market leader in education and educational research (Clarivate, 2020, as cited by SAGE Publications, 2020). ZoomInfo Technologies Inc., a software company that compiles financial data on large companies, estimated that SAGE's revenue in 2020 was about $398 million (ZoomInfo Technologies, Inc., 2020a).

Taylor & Francis and their subsidiary, Routledge, were also selected, publishing approximately 2,700 journals and over 5,000 new books each year (Taylor & Francis Group, 2020). In the 2010 edition of *JCR*, Taylor & Francis was the largest publisher of social science titles with 784 featured in the report. They also published the top ranked title in the communications discipline (Informa, 2010). The Balance Careers ranked Routledge third on the list of top five academic book publishers (Peterson, 2020). ZoomInfo estimated a 2020 revenue of $596 million, noting that it is SAGE's top competitor (ZoomInfo Technologies, Inc., 2020b).

These two publishers stand out from other notable textbook producers such as Cengage and McGraw-Hill because they have produced numerous texts on digital journalism education,

whereas other traditional textbook publishers have produced none. Only one public relations textbook from Pearson was selected, as the focus of this project is to investigate how digital practices can be applied within a public relations context. The primary focus was to explore lessons of digital journalism, and a secondary focus was to determine whether these themes intersected with basic concepts of public relations writing.

Based on the sampling criteria described, the following four texts were selected, as displayed in Table 1.

Table 1

Textbooks Selected for Collective Case Study and Content Analysis

Selected Text	Author		Book			
	Name	Qualifications	Type	Date	Pages	Publisher
The Online Journalism Handbook	Paul Bradshaw	Head of MA in Data Journalism and MA in Multiplatform and Mobile Journalism programs at Birmingham City University, UK.	Handbook	2017	368	Routledge
Practicing Convergence Journalism: An Introduction to Cross-media Storytelling	Janet Kolodzy	Associate Professor of Journalism at Emerson College and previously worked in the broadcast news industry.	Textbook	2012	216	Taylor & Francis
Online Journalism: The Essential Guide	Steve Hill	Senior lecturer in journalism at Westminster University, London and Association for Journalism Education committee member.	Guidebook	2013	304	SAGE Publications
	Paul Lashnar	Senior lecturer in journalism at Sussex University and investigative journalist.				
Producing Online News: Digital Skills, Stronger Stories	Ryan Thornburg	Assistant professor in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.	Textbook	2010	350	CQ Press
Public Relations Writing and Media Techniques	Dennis L. Wilcox	Professor of Public Relations at San Jose State University.	Textbook	2015	384	Pearson
	Bryan H. Reber	Professor of Crisis Communication Leadership and Public Relations at University of Georgia.				

Once selected, the textbooks were given an initial readthrough to ensure relevance to this project's research questions and to probe for the themes and patterns of digital journalism identified in the literature review: (a) interactivity, (b) hypertextuality, and (c) multimediality. All four selected samples passed these checkmarks, so subsequent examinations of the textbooks began to codify and analyze emerging themes.

Data Analysis

According to Creswell and Poth, *coding* "involves aggregating the text or visual data into small categories of information, seeking evidence for the code from different databases being used in a study, and then assigning a label to the code" (2018, p. 190). This case study featured both a textual analysis on shared themes across the textbooks and a content analysis on pedagogical practices that communicated these themes. The researcher enumerated microdata such as visuals and supplementary exercises, but also took field notes on how meanings of the microdata topics were constructed. This mix of data was used to provide a replicable, verifiable procedure of analyzing data while also interpreting meaning creation as if the researcher were a student using the textbook for class. The qualitative data and quantitative data informed one another, revealing what and how students learn from digital journalism and public relations textbooks.

Coding. Before coding began, the researcher recognized a *predetermined* or *preassigned coding system* in which coding categories were identified beforehand (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Carley, 1993). Categories in this coding system were derived from the literature review and included (a) interactivity, (b) hypertextuality, and (c) multimediality. The researcher analyzed the texts influenced by these categories, seeking similarities with each sample, but ultimately treated

the predetermined coding system as a separate codebook to be later used for triangulation of sources.

Analysis of the texts began with open coding where the researcher labeled specific emerging categories based on the microdata. These categories were initially abstract ideas that influenced multiple digital journalism techniques. For example, the idea of "immediacy" was found across the textbooks. For example, digital journalists and PR professionals can capture multimedia as an event happens or engage with readers in real-time on social media. Abstract ideas such as these were recognized as underlying factors, but they are not actionable items that can be taught in a guidebook. Upon a second reading of the textbooks, more attention was given to digital journalism techniques themselves and how they could be useful in a public relations context. For example, using multimedia and adhering to institutional style guides were originally coded as "meaning-making" but were recoded as "Using visuals to tell a story" during the second reading. The researcher codified this phrase among others, comparing these codes across texts to develop overarching themes. Coding of themes was followed by axial coding where the researcher documented the process of how meanings of these themes emerged. The researcher recorded their cognitive process, taking notes on what topics were more memorable, what lessons seemed more important than others, what subjects seemed to be missing from the texts, and overall impressions of the texts as learning resources.

This coding process resulted in a codebook (Appendix A) that identified recurring patterns as themes across the texts, complemented by descriptive boundaries and examples from the text. The researcher clustered codes into themes represented as phrases that describe actionable items that can be included in the manual artifact, such as "Storytelling and Meaning-making through Visual Presentation."

Interpretation and Triangulation. The researcher then interpreted the new codebook in comparison to the predetermined codebook. All three precoded themes were found to have varying degrees of influence over emergent themes from the textual analysis. The precoded themes overlapped in noticeable ways, such as how hypertextuality's emphasis on connecting webpages using hyperlinks was critical in reporting topics, storytelling, engaging audiences, and attributing work. The precoded themes are not strong enough to serve as the basis for a guide, however, as they also do not provide actionable items to be taught in a handbook. This project interprets the precoded themes as a categorized framework for the emergent themes that characterize this project's final artifact.

This interpretation was then cross-referenced with this project's third source: currently published online feature stories on reputable college websites. Three college websites were sampled based on each school's merit and web recognition. Merit was determined by the college's enrollment and accreditations, and rankings were determined by noting which colleges are frequently recognized by web design experts. Based on this criteria, Brown University, Cornell University, and Notre Dame University were selected. All three schools have an enrollment of at least 10,000 students, are accredited by their respectful regional Commission of Higher Education, and have at least five individual accredited programs (CHEA, n.d.). Each college has additionally appeared in top rankings of best college websites based on design, ease of navigation, and usability (FreshySites, 2020; Morrison, n.d.; Threlfall, 2020; WebFX, n.d.).

This project observed five articles from each institution's website, selected based on the following criteria: (a) the article is a feature story as opposed to a blog post or calendar event, (b) was written and published by someone from the university, and (c) was present on the HEI's website homepage on March 5, 2021. A content analysis of the articles was conducted, searching

for quantifiable indicators displaying the presence of emergent themes identified across the five textbooks.

When triangulating insights from the codebook of predetermined themes, codebook of themes emerging from the text, and published online feature stories, the researcher determined the following: the best practices of digital journalism, the foundation of which lying in interactivity, hypertextuality, and multimediality, should be specifically identified in a manual and are best learned through chapters detailing specific action items.

Limitations of Methods

This project recognizes its own limitations, the most glaring of which being that results of a case study are difficult to generalize (Beins, 2004, Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Saldaña, 2011). As a qualitative method of analysis, findings are a result of individual researcher interpretation. Although this project attempted to reconcile this weakness using quantitative techniques within the content analysis, other researchers attempting to replicate the study may recognize completely different codes and themes as important, choosing to quantify microdata distinct from the original study.

Denzin and Lincoln (1994) additionally warned against the comparison of samples or cases within a case study, as seeking similarities or differences between the two may undermine the uniqueness of one or the other. They argue that learning new information from an individual case study is more important than the difficult attempt to generalize findings. Furthermore, textual and content analysis are subjective. Interpretation of the data is not safe from researcher bias, wherein the researcher enters analysis with prior knowledge (Julien, 2008).

Summary

To guide this project's objective in creating a manual for HEPR student workers, a typical, collective, problem-solving case study was conducted featuring a qualitative/quantitative content analysis of digital journalism and public relations textbooks produced by reputable publishers and authors. Initial stages of the case probed these textbooks to explore this project's RQ2: What are the intersecting themes and pedagogical practices shared between digital journalism and public relations textbooks in relation to writing online feature stories? Interpretation of themes identified within the literature review provided comparative data from RQ1: What are the key concepts of digital journalism that guide best practices for higher education public relations (HEPR) professionals when writing online feature stories? Codebooks created from these two RQs were then triangulated with a content analysis of currently published HEI online feature stories to answer RQ3: How do top-rated HEIs operationalize the best practices of digital journalism and public relations to engage prospective students through online feature stories? This triangulation provided a holistic understanding of the subject and guided the creation of the HEPR online feature story manual. The following Chapter 4 examines the findings of the case study. Chapter 5 then concludes this project by dissecting the manual artifact, discussing recommendations based on the findings and how it embodies the literature.

Chapter 4

Findings

Introduction

To inform the creation of an online feature story production manual for HEPR student work studies, this project seeks to apply concepts of digital journalism within the framework of public relations and to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the key concepts of digital journalism that can guide best practices for higher education public relations (HEPR) student work studies when writing online feature stories?

RQ2: What are the intersecting themes and pedagogical practices shared between digital journalism and public relations textbooks in relation to writing online feature stories?

RQ3: How do top-rated HEIs operationalize the best practices of digital journalism and public relations to engage prospective students through online feature stories?

RQ1 is explored in a literature review that identifies three main concepts of digital journalism: (a) interactivity, (b) hypertextuality, and (c) multimediality. These three concepts, along with communication theories and scholarly points of contention that characterize them, are discussed within the context of HEPR online news writing.

This chapter illustrates and discusses the findings of this project's case study and is divided into three parts. The first part engages in a brief review of the key concepts of digital journalism, describing how the findings of the literature review acted as precoded categories that informed the case study. The second part involves an examination of four digital journalism textbooks and one public relations textbook, beginning with a textual analysis of shared themes across the five books. The themes are defined, compared to the precoded categoroes of

interactivity, hypertextuality, and multimedia, and discussed in relation to HEPR online feature story writing. The examination of textbooks also includes a content analysis of pedagogical practices shared between the books and is followed by a discussion of how these practices best inform the creation of a manual. In summary, the analysis of themes identifies *what* is being taught while the analysis of pedagogy identifies *how*. The third part of this chapter investigates RQ3 and articulates the findings of a content analysis on HEI online feature stories. The presence of themes and practices from RQ2's findings are investigated within HEI online articles, followed by a discussion on the triangulation of findings. This chapter concludes with a summary of findings, offering implications as to how it informs Chapter 5 and a manual artifact.

Precoded Themes

As discussed in Chapter 3, the researcher organized a preassigned coding system before exploring RQ2 and RQ3. Categories in this coding system were derived from the literature review and included (a) interactivity, (b) hypertextuality, and (c) multimediality. Emphasizing these three themes, the researcher created a codebook for these preassigned codes (Appendix A) that recorded coded language, a definition for the code, and boundaries for the code. For example, the theme of "interactivity" featured a code titled "two-way communication." This code was defined as "Any mention of correspondence between the journalist/PR professional and the stakeholders they wish to reach." The boundary for this code was that it had to have been a word or phrase in relation to the production, consumption, or distribution of online news articles. These three themes acted as initial codes that guided the researcher while analyzing the five textbooks. Following the advice of both Denzin and Lincoln (1994) and Creswell and Poth (2018), the researcher was careful not to express bias and tunnel on these categories. Continuing the prior example, "two-way communication" falls under the precoded category of interactivity,

but further investigation expanded this code to “mutually beneficial relationships with audiences” which later fell under the finalized theme “Facilitating exposure and engagement with audiences.” While the precoded themes focused on concepts, new themes focused on actionable items that can inform the creation of a manual.

Case Study on Digital Journalism and Public Relations Textbooks

Process and Boundaries

As outlined in Chapter 3, four digital journalism textbooks and one public relations textbook were selected based on the criteria of credibility, instructional purpose, and length. These books included *The Online Journalism Handbook* by Paul Bradshaw; *Practicing Convergence Journalism: An Introduction to Cross-media Storytelling* by Janet Kolodzy; *Online Journalism: The Essential Guide* by Steve Hill and Paul Lashnar; *Producing Online News: Digital Skills, Stronger Stories by Ryan Thornburg;* and *Public Relations Writing and Media Techniques* by Dennis Wilcox and Bryan Reber. Texts were given an initial reading guided by the preassigned codebook, looking for the presence of interactivity, hypertextuality, and multimediality within the lessons. A second reading followed, recording codes shared across all five texts (see Appendix B). A third reading was conducted, solidifying four main themes and corresponding subthemes. These themes are: (a) researching a topic, (b) storytelling and meaning-making through visual presentation, (c) facilitating exposure and engagement with audiences, and (d) consideration of ethics and law.

Two important considerations steered the creation of these themes: (a) they are not abstract concepts but rather actionable items that can be clearly articulated in a guidebook, and (b) they are a result of coded text that is specifically about the production, consumption, or distribution of online news articles. Abstract concepts such as “timeliness and immediacy”

appeared to be running themes across the texts, such as references to how mobile platforms allow speedy access to news or how user-generated content can provide photos and videos immediately from an event. While these concepts are beneficial to know, they do not provide teachable skills HEPR student workers need to know. Additionally, while actionable items such as "freelancing" and "designing a website" were shared across the five texts, they go beyond the scope of this project and are not necessary for teaching HEPR student workers how to write online feature stories. Finally, it is worth noting that despite recent publishing dates, the five textbooks featured outdated information, namely the recommendation of using Adobe Flash Player, Windows Movie Maker, and other discontinued software as a means of visual storytelling. Outdated information was not included in the analysis.

Textual Analysis of Themes Shared Between Online Journalism and Public Relations Textbooks

Theme #1: Researching a Topic. Choosing a topic to cover and gathering information are skills most closely associated with traditional journalism but are also vital aspects of public relations writing and online writing. When writing any news story, both journalists and public relations professionals begin their process by obtaining information. Information sought by the author should do three things: (a) cover a focused topic that exhibits newsworthiness, (b) answers the five Ws and one H, and (c) is of interest to a specific audience. A topic is considered *newsworthy* if it is new or timely, has geographical proximity to the audience, is unusual, or features a human interest. The *five Ws and one H: who, what, where, when, and how*, provide answers to all the questions an audience will want to know. The third element an online news writer must research is their audience's specific interests. The more a writer specifies their topic,

the easier it will be to report information to a *niche,* sometimes referred to as *hyperlocal,* audience.

Two subthemes emerged regarding researching topics: (a) searching for information on the internet, and (b) quoting expert and eyewitness sources.

Searching for Information on the Internet. The internet allows for seemingly endless access of information. Journalists and PR professionals both use the internet to find general to highly specific facts to include in their writing. These facts come from three places: (a) search engines such as Google or Yahoo!, (b) online databases, and (c) social media.

Search engines scan the internet and pull in hyperlinks to webpages based on keywords and terms input by the user. An online news writer should be aware of how to hone their search queries to find the most relevant information using specified strings and strategies that influence results of a search. A *string* is a specific sequence of characters, and the way a researcher inputs the string affects what results will appear. For example, placing your search query within quotation marks will scan for webpages that include the phrase with words in the specified sequence. Knowledge of how search engines work is helpful in finding the right information in a timely manner.

This access of information has led to the rise of *data journalism,* which is the use of databases such as government websites and WikiLeaks to create stories. Numbers and statistics can both provide the main subject of a story or act as additional information that verify claims. Online news writers should be aware of how to read and access online databases to bolster their research.

Social media is another way to gather information on a topic, specifically when it comes to finding sources for events happening in the moment. Social media's ability to distribute

information immediately and on a massive scale allows for a speedy collection of data, but the information needs to be verified. Journalists and PR writers can search for topics within social channels such as Twitter, using both profiles and hashtags to observe real-time updates and conversations on any given topic. Writers can also use crowdsourcing to get information directly from sources via social media. This is discussed further in Theme #3.

Quoting Expert and Eyewitness Sources. Quotes serve several purposes in online stories. Quotes from experts in the field can verify information and can provide readers with an additional understanding of a situation. An expert can be anyone from a working professional with years of experience in an industry to an academic scholar studying a certain discipline. Experts provide insight into situations that the general public cannot, making the article more authentic and credible. Contrastingly, eyewitness sources can give accounts on events limited by time and place. These sources provide a grounded perspective more relatable to average readers and are better suited for emotional appeals.

Discussion: Theme #1's Relation to Precoded Categories and HEPR. Hypertextuality is the foundation of researching online news stories. Hyperlinks, whether they appear in search engine results or on social media posts, are the interconnecting force that makes all information accessible and findable. In the context of HEPR, hypertextuality can guide a student worker's research through search queries for supplementary information. For example, an HEPR work study may want to include information that bolsters their topic, such as statistics from the EPA used to promote their HEI's Environmental Studies major.

Using tools such as Google Alerts, an HEPR student worker can also receive email notifications whenever the name of their institution is included on an external web page. These external webpages can act as leads to a new story or provide supplementary information to an

ongoing story. For example, if a college is featured as a "Top College for Graphic Design" on by *U.S. News & World Report,* the HEPR student worker can either write an independent story on the media hit or include the hit as part of a story on the college's improved rankings.

Interactivity is also prominent within this theme, as interacting with the audience can garner useful quotes or further leads on topics deemed newsworthy by prospective students. In the context of HEPR, this is commonly used for student testimonials and new campus projects and events. Interacting with faculty can provide double benefits, acting as an expert in the field to promote academics within the HEI or to serve a similar purpose as student sources.

Multimediality plays a limited role during research but plays a much larger role in the storytelling within online news stories.

Theme #2: Storytelling and Meaning-making through Visual Presentation. Both digital journalism and public relations communicate their messages in a narrative format, commonly referred to as storytelling. *Storytelling* is the act of packaging information gathered during the research process in a way that is best understood by the target audience. Readers will formulate different meanings from different methods of storytelling, so the author must be intentional in what messages they want to communicate and how they wish to communicate them. Throughout the textbooks, three subthemes were present: (a) using multimedia to convey specific messages, (b) intentional choice in layout and placement of information, and (c) ensuring quality and consistency through organizational style guides.

Using Multimedia to Convey Specific Messages. In today's online environment, audiences do not consume news through text alone, but rather through a combination of different mediums including photos, videos, text, audio, and graphics. For online news writing, each media element uses its individual strengths to enhance storytelling and the reader's

understanding of the topic. Text is best used for detailed descriptions, relaying nuances, quantifying data, and providing context. Photos are better equipped to capture critical moments in time and communicate perspective, emotion, and human connections. Furthermore, all five textbooks explain how photos communicate more information than text using less space. Videos have similar strengths and limitations as photos but are better at capturing action. Since videos can provide a multitude of images complemented by audio, they can relay a vast number of messages in a short period of time. Audio is highly engaging to audiences, as listeners must visualize what is being said. Audio stories such as interviews are also effective ways to express emotion and helpful in conveying tone as well. Graphics are best suited for making large sets of numbers easily digestible for readers through pie charts, line graphics, or other forms of data visualization.

An online news writer needs to be intentional in which media they choose to communicate a story. Although the presence of multimedia has been proven to improve information retention and memory, it should only be used if visualizing the message makes the story more easily comprehensible.

Intentional Choice in Layout and Placement of Information. Gathering information and recording multimedia are only the first steps in packing the presentation of an online story. The next step is to determine where each element will be located on the webpage. Layout of information should adhere to *scannability*, which is the idea that online audiences do not read entire articles but rather skim for information they are looking for. The author can enhance scannability by making information stick out with visual indicators such as clear headlines and subheaders, bullet points and numbered lists, indented quotes, bold text, and hyperlinks. Along

with these indicators, online news writers should emphasize brevity and conciseness, relaying information as quickly and clearly as possible.

Another layout consideration is the organization of information by sections. Journalists and PR professionals alike employ the *inverted pyramid* pattern of writing, placing the most important information at the beginning of a story and less important information at the bottom. This also aids scannability, as readers are unlikely to make it to the end of an article. Information can also be strategically placed via *chunking,* which is the splitting of longer articles into smaller sections that each have a more defined focus. Chunking usually appears in tandem with subheaders that clearly state what each chunk is about. Chunking is also a result of the *nonlinearity* of online news stories, which is the practice of readers entering and exiting webpages from specific parts of the page. Across the texts, online news writers are advised to consider writing nonlinearly to provide readers with the most immediate and personalized access of desired information.

Although elements of style are applied automatically upon publishing by the website's content management system (CMS), online news writers should have a basic literacy of *hypertext markup language (HTML)* to properly format the layout of a news article. HTML is a programming language that dictates the structure of a webpage using tags. When writing an online article, the author can use <p> paragraph tags, <h> header tags, and more to manually determine the article's layout.

Ensuring Quality and Consistency through Organizational Style Guides. Webpage quality has a multitude of consequences including the audience's perception of the website, the website's credibility, and the webpage's search engine optimization (SEO) rankings. To establish a consistent quality across a website, organizations place rules on how webpages are stylized.

Some elements of style such as font type and color are automatically applied by the website's content management system (CMS), but other rules such as grammar, punctuation, titles, abbreviations, and tone must be manually adhered to by the writer. Both journalists and PR professionals use the *Associated Press (AP) Stylebook* which has set the standard for presentation of news releases across both fields. Individual organizations commonly write their own style books that resemble AP Style but include institution-specific decisions on syntax, diction, layout, use of multimedia and hyperlinks, and more. Similar to layout, a basic knowledge of HTML tags is beneficial in maintaining consistent visual style, as <b> bold tags, italics tags, and <a ref> hyperlink tags will dictate the visual presentation of the text.

Discussion: Theme #2's Relation to Precoded Categories and HEPR. Multimediality plays the most important role in the storytelling of HEPR online feature stories, attracting attention and bolstering memory retention of prospective students. As described in the analysis, HEPR student workers should utilize various multimedia elements to communicate the unique value proposition and factors of application decision-making to prospective students. Text will be useful in detailing job statistics upon graduation or for outlining extensive experience of faculty members used to promote programs. Photography can be especially useful in communicating elements of the student experience, using photos of smiling current students or vibrant spots on campus to create a sense of belonging at the college. Video can be helpful in promoting on-campus events and activities that feature actions and emotions such as a sports game or theatre production. While the textbooks provide in-depth descriptions of high-quality cameras and advanced editing software, an HEPR student worker has the benefit of a mobile phone that can capture multimedia of similar quality in a more accessible and immediate manner. Audio recording and editing are not commonly used in HEPR feature stories, but audio skills

will be helpful in editing promotional videos. Student workers generally will not be asked to create graphics either but should be aware of their use in conveying numerical information if given one to use in a story assignment.

Hypertextuality has a significant presence when determining the layout of an HEPR online feature story. As a young, digitally native audience, prospective students will enter and exit news stories at various parts, scanning quickly for information that impact college choice such as tuition, program details, and career prospects. HEPR student workers can cater to this audience using hypertextual practices of nonlinear writing, linking headers from their story to internal webpages that satisfy prospective student inquiries. HEPR student workers should know basic HTML as well to format these nonlinear techniques and to properly uphold their institutions style guide. Knowledge of their institution's style guide is also important for maintaining brand consistency. For example, a college style guide may dictate that "the Department of Business and Marketing" is the correct way to refer to a department of interest. If the HEPR work study writes "the business department", they can potentially disrupt perceived quality and confuse prospective students.

Interactivity's role in visual presentation of HEPR feature stories is closely related to multimediality. Student workers should practice in-person engagement with current students, taking photos and recording video to better encapsulate student life and provide a more personal perspective to their feature stories.

Theme #3: Facilitating Exposure and Engagement with Audiences. While the purpose of journalism is to inform and the purpose of public relations is to persuade, the two disciplines share the common need to find creative ways to reach their audiences. Audiences play a role during all parts of an online news story's life cycle from the planning to production,

distribution, and redistribution. Online news stories should be written with both exposure and engagement in mind with the intent to attract readers and garner web traffic. *Exposure* within the boundaries of the textbooks involves making a published article findable by readers through a variety of methods. *Engagement* includes any multi-directional communication or conversation between authors and readers through multiple channels such as comment sections, email, and social media. These two considerations fall under the same theme for they both require the author of an online article to write with the audience in mind and directly facilitate how the article will reach the audience. Across the texts, three subthemes emerged: (a) making articles findable and shareable, (b) knowledge of audience consumption behaviors, and (c) utilizing audience participation.

Making Articles Findable and Shareable. Once an article is published to a website, there is no guarantee that anyone will open and read it. Access to online news stories is granted via hyperlinking, but where those hyperlinks appear depends on how findable and shareable the article is. The key to making an article findable is by using *search engine optimization (SEO),* which is the process of making your webpage (in this case, an article) appear higher in search engine results, thus improving the page's visibility and chance that someone will click on it. SEO can be improved in several ways, such as including links within the text, intentionally using searchable keywords, using HTML tags, and tracking metadata. Inclusion of links is viewed by search engines as an indicator of webpage quality. *Keywords* are terms input by someone using a search engine, and it is recommended that online news writers include relevant keywords within a story's page title, headline, first and last paragraphs, and subheaders. HTML tags are important in making keywords readable to search engines, as it is more likely to pick up words within a header that must be marked between <h1> and </h1> tags within the code. *Metadata,* which is

data about a webpage, can include information such as an article's date, subject, source, and author. Pieces of data such as a date will improve the article's relevancy, as more recent articles are more likely to appear in results.

SEO is not the only way to improve an article's exposure. Social media channels, most notably Twitter and Facebook, now play a critical role in the visibility of online news stories. A new term, *social media optimization (SMO),* is becoming increasingly popular among journalists and PR professionals. SMO is the process of optimizing a webpage for sharing and direct interaction with audiences to encourage sharing on social media. Webpages featuring multimedia, prominent people in the headline, and calls to action (CTA) in the headline are more likely to be shared between readers. Direct interaction on social media may involve the author or organization that published the article tagging featured interviewees or relevant groups, engaging in a back-and-forth discussion in the post's comment section.

Knowledge of Audience Consumption Behaviors. To increase the chances that a user opens an article, journalists and PR professionals should have a working knowledge of when, where, and how their audiences consume news. Modern news consumption is *on-demand,* meaning it is not limited by time, location, or device. The internet allows for 24/7 access of information, and the rise of mobile technology allows users to consume news anywhere from any device. Audiences now also have control of how they receive their news, using aggregation sites, social media, and Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feeds to curate articles that fit their interests. As previously discussed, modern news readers tend to be scanners that congregate on social media sites. To best facilitate exposure and engagement to enhance the visibility of online news stories, journalists and PR professionals can take several measures to capitalize on these behaviors. The most common tactic is to schedule content for posting that correlates to the time

and day that an audience member is most likely to read online news. Tagging, geotagging, and hashtagging are other popular methods that seek to capture audience attention by placing articles within personalized feeds. Acknowledging scannability, shared articles should feature concise but attractive headlines.

Utilizing Audience Participation. According to the PRSA, public relations "is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics" (PRSA, n.d.). This idea persists across the five texts, as mutually beneficial relationships can be built through crowdsourcing and user-generated content (UGC). *Crowdsourcing* is the act of asking for reader contributions to news stories. These contributions can appear at any point during the news writing process, can produce leads to potential stories and topics, can provide sources and quotes to include within an article, and can provide verification and corrections through feedback to articles. Crowdsourcing can additionally produce UGC such as photos or videos to be included within an online story. UGC is especially helpful in terms of timeliness and availability, as non-professionals at the scene of an event can send in multimedia for immediate use that otherwise would not be accessible.

Discussion: Theme #3's Relation to Precoded Categories and HEPR. The precoded category of interactivity has a clear presence in facilitating the exposure and engagement of HEPR online feature stories. In addition to writing online feature stories, HEPR student workers may be tasked with managing institutional social media accounts to share and distribute their articles. While developing their stories, HEPR student workers can employ SMO by tagging relevant student clubs and organizations in their posts who are likely to redistribute the post. Furthermore, HEPR student workers can directly converse with prospective students that

comment on posts that share published feature stories. Within this conversation, the work study can provide additional information that may influence the reader's decision to apply.

Knowledge of prospective student consumption habits additionally benefits an HEPR feature story's SMO, and student workers should schedule content based on the times and channels prospective students will most likely find the post. As discussed in the literature review, user-generated content can be especially useful to HEPR work studies if they are unable to attend college-related events to capture photos and videos, such as imagery of a study abroad program. In terms of digital journalism concepts, user-generated content and crowdsourcing illustrate a valuable intersection of interactivity and multimediality.

Hypertextuality plays an underappreciated role in the visibility of HEPR news articles. Similar to optimizing format, HEPR student workers should have a basic knowledge of HTML and metadata to better market their articles. For example, if their story's topic deals with the admissions process, they should include both the name of their college and the keyword "admissions" between the <h1> and </h1> tags to improve the chances of the article appearing in search engines when prospective students are researching the application process.

Theme #4: Consideration of Ethics and Law. As an official publication, an online news story is a representation of the organization that distributes it. Both journalists and PR professionals practice close attention to how their writing represents their organization's reputation, most notably through ethical and legal concerns. These considerations emerged under two subthemes: (a) minimizing harm, and (b) attributing and sourcing borrowed content.

Minimizing harm. Harm can come in many forms from online news stories, most notably through defamation/libel and privacy concerns. *Defamation* or *libel* occurs if an article presents false information that diminishes the reputation of an individual or exposes them to hatred. There

are two keys to avoiding defamation: (a) vetting and verifying sources and (b) being mindful of the article's angle and purpose. *Privacy* concerns involve the making public of personal information including but not limited to an individual's medical history, address, identity orientations, and likeness. Laws protect individual privacy, especially involving children, so it is always a best practice to request express permission before publishing personal information.

Attributing and Sourcing Borrowed Content. Unless the journalist or PR professional creates a work of multimedia or writes a line of text themselves, they do not own that content. *Plagiarism* is the act of copying another's work and passing it off as original, and *copyright infringement* is its legal equivalent that can result in damaging legal ramifications to the publisher. Journalism and public relations have an unusual relationship in terms of plagiarism in that journalists commonly copy and paste material sent to them in press releases. In the context of online news stories, however, there is no room for plagiarism.

In some cases, it is acceptable to borrow another person's content such as a photo or a quote, but only if given permission to do so and provided that the original source is given attribution within the news story. Both journalists and PR professionals are advised to use original content whenever possible, but borrowing content is an acceptable solution. The five textbooks additionally recommend using content from the public domain and Creative Commons. This content still requires attribution but does not hold the same legal threat.

Discussion: Theme #4's Relation to Precoded Categories and HEPR. There are very few instances that an HEPR work study should worry about defamation and libel, as the angle of their feature stories are promotional and made to uplift the college and its stakeholders. Interactivity and multimediality in HEPR do appear in privacy concerns, however, as students appearing in photographs and videos may not want to be used as promotional content.

Transparency is key for the HEPR student worker, as they should always ask a fellow student's permission and express clear purpose before capturing and distributing their likeness. Some institutions require students to sign waivers before appearing in photos, eliminating liability for the college and stating that the photos and videos they appear in are the property of the college. HEPR student workers should consult their institution's branding policies.

Multimediality intersects with hypertextuality in relation to the borrowing and sourcing of multimedia content used in HEPR feature stories. Work studies will have access to a large database of institutional photography stored within their CMS, but any photo or video that originates from outside the institution should be acquired with permission from the creator and attributed via hyperlink. For example, when writing a story on a political science professor visiting the White House, the student worker cannot simply copy and paste a photo of him featured in *The Washington Post.* The work study should consider using a photo of the faculty member already stored in the CMS, a public domain or Creative Commons image of the White House, or work with their supervisors in acquiring the rights to the desired photo.

Content Analysis of Pedagogical Practices Shared Between Online Journalism and Public Relations Textbooks

Practices. While examining the five textbooks featured in the case study, the researcher identified three common practices regarding how the author engaged readers: (a) use of visuals, (b) examples from the field, and (c) supplementary activities and exercises. These practices are bounded in that they are not in-text, as in, mid-paragraph or inside the body a chapter, but rather are modules separate from the narrative of the lesson that serve as complementary methods for further learning. Whereas themes identified during the textual analysis only investigated subjects pertaining to the lifecycle of online news stories, the pedagogical practices were examined

quantitatively throughout the entirety of each textbook. This was done to gain a replicable, holistic understanding of what teaching methods digital journalism and public relations instructors value and how they think their students learn best. Table 2 measures the frequency of each pedagogical practice observed across the five textbooks.

Table 2
Frequency of Pedagogical Practices of Online Journalism and PR Textbooks

Practice	Author				
	Bradshaw	Kolodzy	Hill & Lashnar	Thornburg	Wilcox & Reber
Use of visuals	19	47	117	145	170
Tables and charts	13	4	23	19	43
Screenshots of articles and software	5	18	36	119	50
Photographs	1	25	58	7	77
Examples from the field	7	5	15	42	18
Expert interviews and professional anecdotes	4	5	10	11	0
Case studies	3	0	5	0	18
Supplementary activities and exercises	194	5	148	12	132
Online learning modules or hyperlinks	70	5	51	12	0
Real-world assignments	58	0	36	0	132
Recommended further readings	66	0	61	0	0

Use of Visuals. Visualized information appeared in the forms of tables and charts, screenshots of articles and software, and photographs. Tables and charts served three purposes: (a) they exemplified how journalists and PR professionals visualize datasets in their news stories, (b) displayed the flow of processes such as news aggregation, and (c) displayed statistical data relevant to the lesson in a comprehensible manner, such as tracking social media demographics by region within a bar graph. Screenshots were used within the textbooks to draw attention to

certain parts of published online news articles, such as optimizing photo placement and illustrating what chunking looks like. Screenshots were also used to show readers how to use software such as Audacity that is required to edit, publish, and package multimedia content into a news story. Across the five texts, photographs were used to display the strengths of the medium in the context of storytelling. Photos taken by professional photographers from mainstream news outlets such as *The New York Times* served as examples for the reader. Photos were also included to explain photography and videography composition, providing examples of close, medium, and wide shots along with other framing considerations. Although it appeared to be less about pedagogy and more about crediting contributors, photos of experts and professionals were included as well. *Public Relations Writing and Media Techniques* appeared to be an outlier regarding photos for its significant number of stock photos. These stock photos provided imagery similar in topic to text in its proximity, such as the photo of the calendar near the "Timing and Context" header on page 29 (Wilcox & Reber, 2015). These photos do not include captions, so this conclusion is only speculation.

Examples from the Field. To put the lessons within the frame of real-world professional contexts, the five textbooks utilized examples from the field through expert interviews/anecdotes and case studies. Interviews mostly consisted of tips and tricks of the trade for aspiring journalists and PR professionals, ranging from editorial decision-making to career choices. Expert anecdotes focused more on decision making, such as how Matt Waite described how his choice to invest in data journalism eventually earned a Pulitzer Prize for his outlet, *The St. Petersburg Times* (Thornburg, 2012, p. 266). Case studies do not emphasize advice but rather exemplify phenomena, such as how the 2014 Oscar selfie illustrated the rapid distribution of multimedia through sharing on social media (Wilcox & Reber, 2015).

Supplementary Activities and Exercises. The final pedagogical practice shared across the five textbooks included calls to action for the reader to apply or test what they have learned. Online learning modules and hyperlinks printed into the text navigate the user to online resources. These modules sometimes involved digital versions of the textbooks or included interactive features such as flashcards and quizzes. Real-world assignments appeared at the end of chapters and prompted the reader to engage in the online journalism or PR writing practices. Exercises ranged from testing search engines depending on user input to practicing headline writing. Recommended further readings acted as both citations and opportunities for a more in-depth understanding of the subject.

Discussion: Implications for an Online News Writing Manual for HEPR Student Workers. Based on the findings, the use of visuals appeared the most times (498) throughout the five textbooks, with supplementary activities and exercises following close behind (491). Examples from the field were far behind in frequency (87), but these practices tended to be longer and provide more information. Screenshots made up the largest percentage of visuals at 45.7% followed by photographs at 33.7% and tables and charts at 20.5%. The researcher recognizes that the percentage of meaningful photographs is skewed high, as the previously discussed stock photos featured in *Public Relations Writing* did not serve a relevant instructional purpose. With these findings in mind, it can be inferred that screenshots will play an important role in the creation of an HEPR online news writing manual. Tables, charts, and photographs should be included in well, but only if they communicate a lesson in a quicker, more memorable way than text.

Expert perspectives (30) and case studies (26) appear nearly as frequently, but case studies may be more beneficial to include within the manual. Considering expert interviews and

anecdotes are largely advice-based, their presence in a manual may seem redundant and a misuse of valuable space. A case study may be considered, however, so that an inexperienced student worker with no knowledge of the field read a detailed example of an entire online news production lifecycle.

Given the subject of online news writing, online modules and hyperlinks deserve a significant role within the manual considering the acts of accessing and using them illustrate all three key concepts of digital journalism: interactivity, hypertextuality, and multimediality. Online modules are interactive in that they engage the reader through quizzes and games, they illustrate hypertextuality by navigating the reader across webpages, and they feature multimedia through explanatory text, videos, photos, and graphics. Real-world assignments and exercises make up the largest percentage of supplementary activities and exercises at 46% and can provide a "learning by doing" element to the manual, challenging student workers to learn more about their CMS, practice chunking articles, or testing their knowledge of HTML tags. Recommended further readings will be especially helpful in teaching students how to use relevant software. Utilizing hyperlinks, the manual can link out to copyrighted material that cannot be included within, such as guides on how to use Drupal, editing in Audacity, and more.

Triangulation through HEI Online Feature Stories

The researcher engaged in a triangulation of findings, comparing precoded categories from the literature review, emerging themes from the case study, and the presence of the themes within HEI online feature stories published to the web. As discussed in Chapter 3: Methods, three college websites were selected based on merit, credibility, and consistency of rankings. Five articles were sampled from each website, given the criteria that they were feature stories as

opposed to blog posts or event pages, did not originate from outside vendors, and were displayed on the college's homepage as of March 5, 2021.

Content Analysis of Quantifiable Data from Emerged Themes in HEI Online Feature Stories

The researcher conducted a content analysis of each article, searching for measurable data points that corresponded to the emergent case study themes. Theme #1: Researching a Topic was measured by the presence of external hyperlinks, experts/faculty that provided a quote, and students that provided a quote. External hyperlinks are links that navigate the user to a webpage on a separate domain, indicating that information used to develop the article was gathered from the outside source. Theme #2: Storytelling and Meaning-making through Visual Presentation was measured through the frequency of non-text multimedia elements (text is necessary to be considered an article). Components that dictate navigation and layout such as internal hyperlinks, headers and subheaders, and bulleted lists were also counted. Theme #3: Facilitating Exposure and Audience Engagement is difficult to measure within the bounds of the study, as each HEI's social media presence would have to be examined. Instead, keywords within the headlines were selected as a quantifiable ingredient of SEO and SMO. Keywords in the headline include public figures and organizations, academic disciplines and interests, locations, and indicators of media format. One keyword may be a string of multiple words, as is the case in first and last names or multi-word cities. Experts/faculty include anyone that has an identified title, and students were identified by qualifiers including grade, major, or graduation year. To analyze Theme #4: Consideration of Ethics and Law, the researcher counted the number of times that articles used multimedia from an external source, but also counted the number of times the media was properly credited. The results of the content analysis are displayed in Table 3 below.

Table 3

Frequency of Quantifiable Data from Emerged Themes within HEI Online Feature Stories

Theme	Metric	Institution		
		Brown	Cornell	Notre Dame
Researching a topic				
Searching for information on the internet	External hyperlinks	9	10	6
Quoting expert and eyewitness sources	Experts/Faculty	9	12	6
	Students	2	4	0
Storytelling and meaning-making through visual presentation				
Use of multimedia to convey specific messages (non-text)	Photo	20	9	2
	Video	1	1	1
	Audio	0	0	1
	Graphics	0	2	2
Intentional choice in layout and placement of information	Internal hyperlinks	18	21	15
	Headers and Subheaders	4	8	0
	Bulleted lists	2	0	0
Facilitating exposure and engagement with audiences	Keywords in headline	12	10	10
Consideration of ethics and law				
Attributing and sourcing borrowed content	Borrowed multimedia	3	4	3
	Credit by name and/or link	2	3	2

Discussion: Triangulation of Data. According to the data, Theme #2 accounted for the most measurable impact on HEI online feature stories. With 108 counted data points across all

fifteen articles, storytelling and meaning-making through visual presentation makes up 50.2% of the presence of emergent themes within the articles. This is largely a factor of the theme's application of hypertextuality and multimediality.

The role of hypertextuality is abundantly observable through internal hyperlinks, headers, and subheaders that dictate the reader's nonlinear navigation, scannability, and access to desired information. While chunking and bullet points were utilized in only a few instances, the authors made it clear that pushing readers to other internal webpages through internal hyperlinks was a priority. This priority engages prospective students by satisfying their desire for further information on the college, potentially influencing their decision to apply or commit.

Multimediality also maintained a consistently significant presence among the HEI feature stories, as photos appeared almost as often as text itself. There was only one feature story that did not include a photo. The three videos used within the stories played to the strength of the format, illustrating the actions of a studied animal, the sights and sounds of a march, and the facial expressions of an interviewed faculty member. There were a surprising number of graphics within the articles, one of which being an interactive 3D model of a campus building.

The second most frequent theme, Theme #1, revealed a surprising insight. Expert and faculty quotes outnumbered student quotes 27 to 6. This implies that feature stories are more focused on detailing the benefits of institutional programs and initiatives from informed, credible sources as opposed to connecting with prospective students through their potential peers. The high number of external hyperlinks supports this assumption, as these links provide verifiable, credible background information to support the main topic.

Regarding Theme #3, keywords included in the headlines were most often found to be faculty members or high-ranking administrators. This further supports the postulated theory that

credibility is more important than relatability when writing HEI online feature stories. The second most common keywords included specific interests such as “sustainability” that served a double purpose in promoting programs and promoting the college as a leader in innovation.

Theme #4 has notable implications as the number of borrowed multimedia is higher than the number of credits. Observable mistakes that lead to this within the sampled articles include failing to provide a source for a stock image and incorrectly sourcing an image. The case of incorrect sourcing had the word “Provided” under the image but did not name who it was provided by.

Summary

This chapter collects and compares the themes of online news writing and how they appeared within the literature, textbooks, and real examples of HEI online feature stories. The three main concepts of digital journalism, interactivity, hypertextuality, and multimediality, were determined to be the foundation of four themes shared between online journalism and public relations instruction: (a) researching a topic, (b) storytelling and meaning-making through visual presentation, (c) facilitating exposure and engagement with audiences, and (d) consideration of ethics and law. These themes, guided by the key concepts, were found to be observable in published feature stories. The triangulation of these three datasets, along with identified pedagogical practices, provided context and guided the creation of an online feature story writing manual designed for HEPR student workers. This manual was developed in the form of a website artifact titled “The Guide to HEPR Online Feature Writing” (Appendix C). The following chapter dissects this artifact, detailing recommendations based on the findings and advice from web design experts. Chapter 5 concludes with a summary of the project, illustrating how the case study and artifact fill the gaps in the literature and contribute to the field of HEPR.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Introduction

Upon reviewing the literature of online news writing, two gaps were identified: (a) an absence of research on how HEI websites can function as a tool for public relations and (b) a lack of literature on the use of digital journalism techniques within the framework of public relations. This project looks to fill these gaps through the creation of an HEPR online feature story writing manual. To inform this manual, this project explores the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the key concepts of digital journalism that can guide best practices for higher education public relations (HEPR) student work studies when writing online feature stories?

RQ2: What are the intersecting themes and pedagogical practices shared between digital journalism and public relations textbooks in relation to writing online feature stories?

RQ3: How do top-rated HEIs operationalize the best practices of digital journalism and public relations to engage prospective students through online feature stories?

The review of the literature identifies three key concepts of digital journalism that informed this project's research and manual creation: (a) interactivity, (b) hypertextuality, and (c) multimediality. A typical, collective, problem-solving case study was conducted featuring a qualitative/quantitative content analysis of four digital journal textbooks and one public relations textbook. Four themes emerged from the textual analysis: (a) researching a topic, (b) storytelling and meaning-making through visual presentation, (c) facilitating exposure and engagement with audiences, and (d) consideration of ethics and law. From the content analysis, the researcher

identified three common practices regarding online news writing pedagogy: (a) use of visuals, (b) examples from the field, and (c) supplementary activities and exercises. Finally, this project's research was concluded with a triangulated examination of online feature articles published by colleges with top-rated websites that compared this project's findings with what is currently being practiced.

This chapter provides a discussion of how the literature review and findings of this project's case study manifest in addressing the gaps in the literature. The discussion is followed by a list of recommendations and an overview of the artifact based on the findings. The manual (Appendix C), titled "The Guide to HEPR Online Feature Writing" was developed in the form of an interactive website and is available to view at https://hunteradesimone.wixsite.com/hepr. Strengths and limitations of this project are discussed followed by suggestions for future research. This chapter concludes with a summary of how this project addresses its research questions and the significance of its findings to the field of public relations.

Gaps in the Literature and Case Study

Both the scholarly literature and examined textbooks did not address how to apply digital journalism concepts to influence the specific audience of prospective students. Generalized relationships were made, such as using social media to get readers to share links to stories, but neither the literature nor case study textbooks identified how to use the concepts within a specialized public relations field. Given the absence of scholarly research on higher education online feature story writing, there are few current sources for HEPR professionals to receive proper training in engaging prospective students. As previously discussed, the purposes of journalism and public relations differ in that journalism is informational whereas public relations is rhetorical. As discussed in Chapter 1, institutions of higher education need to communicate

their unique value propositions (UVP) to persuade prospective students to apply (Major, 2020). Three of the five texts dissected during the case study mention that current readers of news are digital natives, but they do not directly address how this audience characteristic can be utilized to persuade action. Furthermore, with the exception of the online modules found in the textbooks, there is a gap found in both the scholarly literature and textbooks in that neither fully employ interactivity, hypertextuality, or multimediality in their content as it is impossible to do so within printed texts.

Based on the findings articulated in Chapter 4, the artifact presented in this chapter seeks to address the gaps in the literature and pedagogy using two resources: (a) student workers employed by HEPR offices and (b) an instructional, interactive website that teaches the student workers to communicate an institution's UVP to young, digitally native prospective students via online feature stories. "The Guide to HEPR Online Feature Writing" (Appendix C) is presented as a website because it can display the concepts of interactivity, hypertextuality, and multimediality in a visual and interactive way not impeded by the limitations of a text-only document. In summary, a website is the best way to teach writing for a website. The following is a list of recommendations that guided the creation of the artifact, drawing from both the lessons and shortcomings of the literature and case study.

Recommendations and Artifact Overview

Intended Audience

"The Guide to HEPR Online Feature Writing" is written to be consumed by student work studies working within HEPR offices. Work studies were targeted for their demographics and role within an HEPR office. As college age students generally ranging from 18-22, student work studies fall within a similar group to the prospective students they wish to engage. They are

young and up to date on current trends, can act as knowledgeable ambassadors of their HEI, and have similar news consumption habits to prospective students. Additionally, they are digitally native and digitally literate, so they have a predetermined background knowledge of the lessons presented in the manual. It is also worth noting that HEPR student workers are not necessarily public relations majors, so their knowledge of digital literacy and news consumption of their age group will be especially beneficial.

Depending on the size of the institution, full-time HEPR employees may not have the time to cover every campus event and thus distribute news assignments among student workers. Unlike full-time HEPR workers, student workers also have a network of fellow students that can provide quotes and UGC. Additionally, full-time employees most likely already have years of experience in producing online feature stories, diminishing the need for a manual. The following is a list of topics covered in the "The Guide to HEPR Online Feature Writing" that curate subjects from the case study findings that HEPR student workers will need to know.

Selecting Topics

Boundaries and Exclusions. The first recommendation this project suggests is to set reasonable boundaries on lessons being taught when considering who will be using the artifact manual. Student work studies will have far fewer responsibilities than those of the digital journalists targeted throughout the literature and case study texts. Job descriptions for these positions generally include writing feature stories and maintaining the college's social media presence. As discussed in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4, the artifact only focuses on the production and distribution of online feature stories. While it is helpful to be knowledgeable on CSS, XML, programming terminology, and other aspects of web development, the responsibilities that require these skills generally fall under the jurisdiction of the HEI's web development or

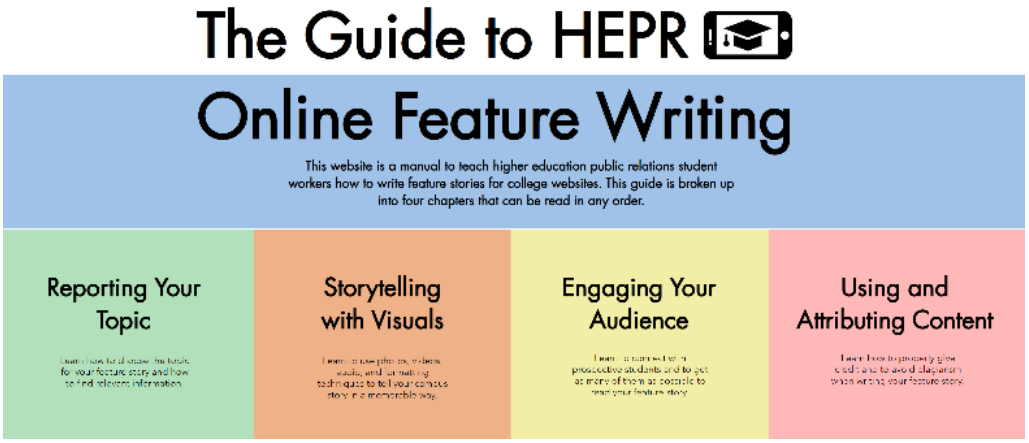
information technology teams. The five texts included lessons on web design, website creation, and blog creation, however these lessons are unnecessary as student workers will be using their institution's predetermined domain. Regarding multimedia, student workers can be reasonably expected to produce text, photos, videos, and audio from the convenience of their phone, however graphics are less reasonable. Non-interactive graphics can be created depending on the software at the work study's disposal, but interactive graphics are too complicated to produce and are generally a responsibility of an HEI's web development team. While the literature and case study texts provided step-by-step instructions and screenshots on software to edit multimedia, this project's artifact cannot do so due to copyright limitations and its emphasis on brevity. General editing techniques are discussed, and links to specific software guides are provided.

Furthermore, outdated software and multimedia skills, such as Adobe Flash Player, are not included in the artifact. Both the literature and observed texts explored the role of the digital journalist as entrepreneurs and structural components of democracy and society. These topics are beyond the scope of the student worker's purpose, nor do they align with the rhetorical function of public relations. Finally, decisions were made regarding topics where authors recommend different solutions, such as choosing to teach the inverted pyramid over F-shape format.

Topics From Actionable Items. The four themes observed throughout the case study emerged within the framework of actionable items to present in an instructional manual. This project recommends four corresponding chapters for the artifact based on these themes: (a) Reporting Your Topic, (b) Storytelling with Visuals, (c) Engaging Your Audience, and (d) Using and Attributing Content. Accounting for the nonlinearity of online news writing and the idea that each topic can occur at any point in the news production cycle, the website's homepage

displayed in Figure 1 (DeSimone, 2021a) presents chapters in a recommended order, but readers are encouraged to start wherever they choose.

Figure 1
Recommended Order of Chapters



Note. Chapter titles are linked to the website's four chapters and are accessible from the homepage. From "The Guide to HEPR Online Feature Writing" by H. DeSimone, 2021, https://hunteradesimone.wixsite.com/hepr. Copyright 2021 by Hunter DeSimone.

Based on Chapter 4's findings, the Reporting Your Topic chapter covers: (a) choosing a feature story topic, (b) answering the five Ws and one H using rhetoric, (c) how to best utilize search engines and Google Alerts to find information, (d) how to best utilize social media to find information, (e) crowdsourcing, (f) interviewing fellow students, and (g) interviewing faculty and staff. Storytelling with Visuals teaches: (a) the strengths and limitations of each type of media; (b) basics of multimedia recording and editing; (c) article layout through headings, chunking, and the inverted pyramid; (d) using a CMS and HTML to format; and (e) institutional style guides. Engaging Your Audience covers both navigational and functional interactivity, discussing: (a) use of hyperlinks; (b) SEO via keywords, HTML tags, and metadata; (c) SMO via headlines, tagging, multimedia, scheduling, and conversing with prospective students, and (d) accessibility. Finally, Using and Attributing Content discusses: (a) plagiarism and copyright, (b) privacy of students and individuals, and (c) borrowing content via sourcing, Creative Commons, and public domain.

Addressing Shortcomings. Although the five texts provided most of the lessons HEPR work studies need to write online feature stories, all texts failed to instruct readers on the importance and the implementation of accessibility within online stories. *Accessibility* in terms of online news writing is a webpage's degree of usability for all users, but especially those with disabilities (Erickson et al., 2013). Visual impairments, for example, make accessing information on webpages difficult. Digital tools such as screen readers assist people with disabilities in reading webpages, but webpages must be optimized by the author to be used by such tools (WebAIM, 2017). Throughout the five texts, accessibility is only mentioned one time in a brief summary paragraph.

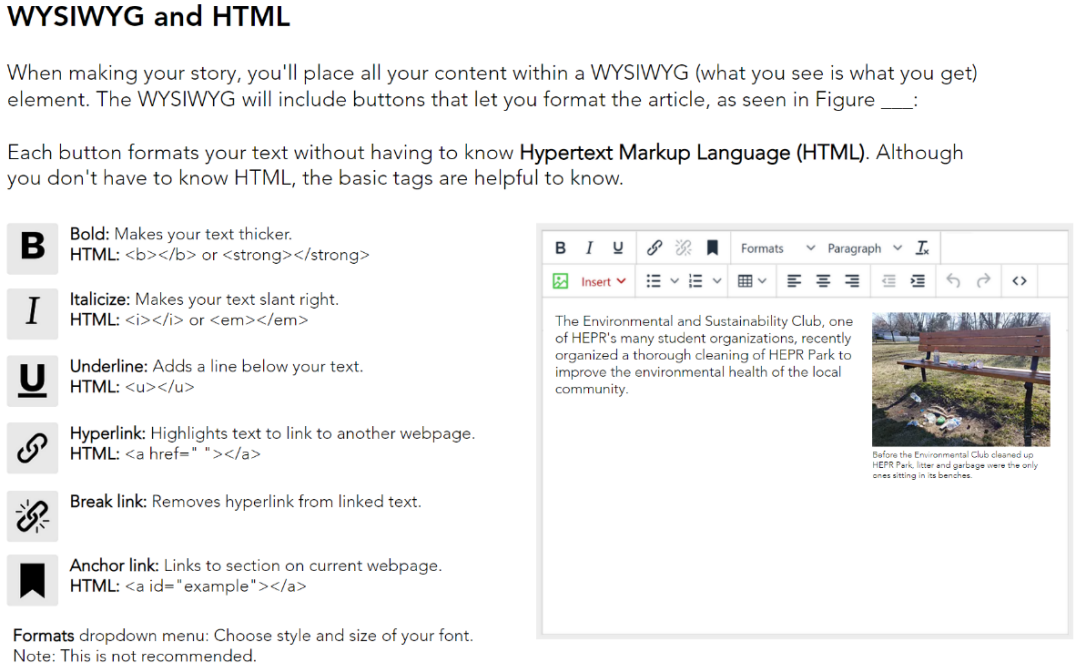
Harper and DeWaters (2008) and Erickson et al. (2013) found that a significant number of HEI websites do not meet web accessibility standards set by Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act. To meet the needs of prospective students with disabilities, this project recommends discussing accessibility in the Engaging Your Audience chapter, detailing how to use captioning, descriptive language, and HTML tagging to optimize a feature story for those with visual, auditory, or cognitive impairments.

The following sections break down how these topics function and are presented within the artifact website. Implementing lessons of online news writing into the design of the artifact, the website was created with an emphasis on brevity and scannability as student work studies share similar consumption habits to prospective students. The artifact's presentation and design are based on (a) the findings of the content analysis on digital journalism pedagogy, (b) recommendations from web design experts, and (c) the intentional embodiment of the literature.

Web Content

Lessons from Texts. According to this project's content analysis, visuals are the most frequent method of teaching digital journalism, which is appropriate considering its extensive use of multimedia. Screenshots of specific software are not possible due to copyright concerns, but screenshots of an originally produced fake CMS software are used to highlight specific ideas as they did within the textbooks. Original photos and videos are also used as examples for how the two media affect storytelling. A table is used one time to instruct on the use of What You See is What You Get (WYSIWYG) buttons within a CMS, but no charts are included. The screenshot of the example CMS, a photo, and WYSIWYG table are displayed in Figure 2 (DeSimone, 2021b) below.

Figure 2
Screenshot of Example CMS Software and WYSIWYG Button Table



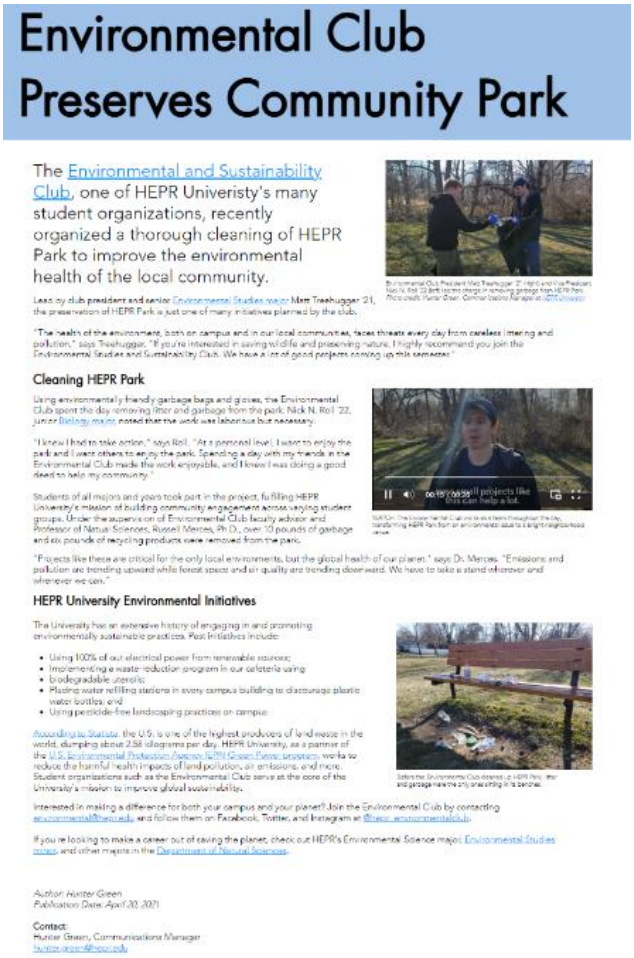
Note. The HTML code within the table and WYSIWYG editor example can be copied and pasted by readers for personal use. From "Engaging Your Audience" by H. DeSimone, 2021, https://hunteradesimone.wixsite.com/hepr/engaging-your-audience. Copyright 2021 by Hunter DeSimone.

Supplementary activities and exercises play important roles in specializing information for the reader. For example, while the artifact cannot provide an in-depth guide to the specific

CMS and HEI website uses, the artifact speaks on the basics of CMS use and links to specific guides on systems commonly by HEIs such as Drupal, LiveWhale, WordPress, and more. These links, along with citations to the literature, serve the role of further readings found within the content analysis. One online learning module is present in the form of an interactive quiz that will test the user on vocabulary, useful for remembering the complicated functions of HTML.

When considering examples from the field, this project recommends not using expert stories or case studies, as they hinder brevity. Unlike the case study texts, the artifact includes a full example of an online feature story. This example story is advantageous in that it allows the user to interact with hyperlinks and multimedia in a manner not possible in printed texts. Furthermore, the example story displayed below in Figure 3 (DeSimone, 2021c) illustrates the techniques of digital journalism within the context of HEPR, written in a way that uses majors and programs, institution reputation and credibility, student experience, and other factors to influence prospective students to apply.

Figure 3
Example Online Feature Story



Environmental Club Preserves Community Park

The Environmental and Sustainability Club, one of HEPR Univeristy's many student organizations, recently organized a thorough cleaning of HEPR Park to improve the environmental health of the local community.

Lead by club president and senior Environmental Studies major Mare Treehugger 21, the preservation of HEPR Park is just one of many initiatives planned by the club.

"The health of the environment, both on campus and in our local communities, faces threats every day from careless littering and pollution," says Treehugger. "If you're interested in saving wildlife and preserving nature, I highly recommend you join the Environmental Studies and Sustainability Club. We have a lot of good projects coming up this semester."

Cleaning HEPR Park

Using environmentally friendly garbage bags and gloves, the Environmental Club spent the day removing litter and garbage from the park. Nick N. Rol '22, junior Biology major, noted that the work was laborious but necessary.

"I knew I had to take action," says Rol. "At a personal level, I want to enjoy the park and I want others to enjoy the park. Spending a day with my friends in the Environmental Club made the work enjoyable, and I knew I was doing a good deed to help my community."

Students of all majors and years took part in the project, fulfilling HEPR University's mission of building community engagement across varying student groups. Under the supervision of Environmental Club faculty advisor and Professor of Natural Sciences, Russell Menzies, Ph.D., over 10 pounds of garbage and six pounds of recycling products were removed from the park.

"Projects like these are critical for the only local environments, but the global health of our planet," says Dr. Menzies. "Emissions and pollution are trending upward while forest space and air quality are trending downward. We have to take a stand wherever and whenever we can."

HEPR University Environmental Initiatives

The University has an extensive history of engaging in and promoting environmentally sustainable practices. Past initiatives include:

- Using 100% of our electrical power from renewable sources;
- Implementing a waste-reduction program in our cafeteria using biodegradable utensils;
- Placing water refilling stations in every campus building to discourage plastic water bottles; and
- Using pesticide-free landscaping practices on campus.

According to Statista, the U.S. is one of the highest producers of land waste in the world, dumping about 2.58 kilograms per day. HEPR University, as a partner of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Green Fence program, works to reduce the harmful health impacts of land pollution, air emissions, and more. Student organizations such as the Environmental Club serve at the core of the University's mission to improve global sustainability.

Interested in making a difference for both your campus and your planet? Join the Environmental Club by contacting environmental@hepr.edu, and follow them on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram at @hepr_environmentalclub.

If you're looking to make a career out of saving the planet, check out HEPR's Environmental Science major, Environmental Studies minor, and other majors in the Department of Natural Sciences.

Author: Hunter Green
Publication Date: April 20, 2021

Contact:
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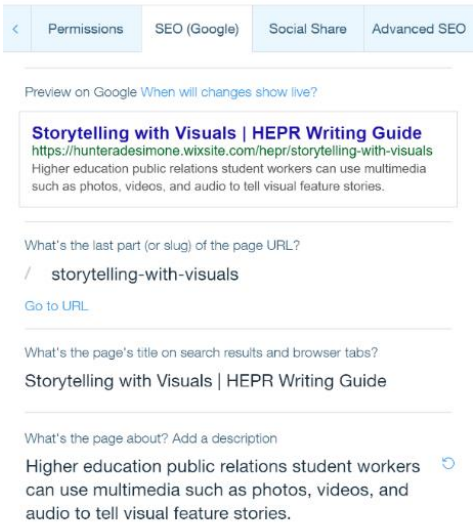
Note. Links such as "Environmental and Sustainability Club" move the user to webpages instructing on corresponding link types, such as internal or external links. From "Example Article" by H. DeSimone, 2021, https://hunteradesimone.wixsite.com/hepr/example-article. Copyright 2021 by Hunter DeSimone.

Differences from Texts. The artifact distinguishes itself from the literature review and the five observed texts in that it addresses the gaps in the literature by framing lessons within the context of college websites. The artifact also teaches exclusively within the context of public relations feature story writing as opposed to information news writing, emphasizing persuasion and favorable angles over objectivity. There is a heavy emphasis on how the topics of majors, student experience, and other factors attract prospective students. Written in a casual, conversational tone, the artifact is also relatable and engaging to student work studies. This tone

helps encapsulate brevity, as each chapter can be read in under ten minutes and excludes non-essential information.

The most drastic difference between the artifact and instructional texts are their channels of communication, as "The Guide to HEPR Online Feature Writing" is an interactive website instead of a printed textbook. A website allows the artifact to embody the concepts of interactivity, hypertextuality, and multimediality. It displays interactivity through its quiz and contact form; hypertextuality through its nonlinear chapter structure, search engine optimization reprinted below in Figure 4 (DeSimone, 2021d), metadata, and navigation via hyperlinks; and multimediality through photos, videos, audio, and graphics that complement the text. The website artifact also accounts for accessibility using alternative text and HTML tags whereas the case study texts neither discussed nor displayed this topic. As previously stated, these embodiments of the literature were not possible within the literature and case texts.

Figure 4
SEO Description of Storytelling with Visuals Webpage



Note. This screenshot is the editor's view in the Wix content management system, showing information only accessible to the website owner. From "Storytelling with Visuals" by H. DeSimone, 2021, https://hunteradesimone.wixsite.com/hepr/storytelling-with-visuals. Copyright 2021 by Hunter DeSimone.

Furthermore, the artifact exemplifies the optimal way to communicate with prospective students. As described in Chapter 1, the primary method for prospective students to find

information used in the application process is through an HEI's website. Presented in a website format, "The Guide to HEPR Online Feature Writing" uses visuals and engagement to convey its lessons. Artifact chapters also use prospective student decision-making factors (majors and programs, career prospects, institution reputation and credibility, student experience, and cost of attendance) to link the techniques of digital journalism to the relationship-building function of HEPR.

Web Design

Using Wix.com to build the website, "The Guide to HEPR Online Feature Writing" follows the findings of Garett, Chiu, Zhang and Young (2017) who conducted a literature review of the relationship between website design and user engagement. Their findings identified seven of the most common web design elements: (1) navigation, (2) graphical representation, (3) organization, (4) content utility, (5) purpose, (6) simplicity, and (7) readability.

According to the authors, *navigation* is the easy access of webpages through clickable pathways. Elements of navigation include menu bars, visible links, and search features. Evoking hypertextuality, the artifact website includes navigational pathways via hyperlinks, a search bar, anchor links, and buttons on the top navigation bar in Figure 5 (DeSimone, 2021e).

Figure 5
Navigation Bar and Anchor Links

Note. Clicking any of the bullet points or heading titles on the left will scroll to the corresponding section on the webpage. From "Reporting Your Topic" by H. DeSimone, 2021, https://hunteradesimone.wixsite.com/hepr/reporting-your-topic. Copyright 2021 by Hunter DeSimone.

Furthermore, the artifact displays the nonlinearity of online articles by featuring both anchor links and internal hyperlinks that move the user across the website. Figure 6 (DeSimone, 2021f) shows two links in one sentence, the first being an anchor link that brings the user further down the "Using and Attributing Content" chapter to a different section, and the second brings the user to the "Reporting Your Topic" webpage. Users can read more about the current subject without having to follow a chronological or structural order. Nonlinear navigation through hyperlinks also solves the issue of overlapping topics, as some concepts such as HTML are covered in multiple chapters and webpages.

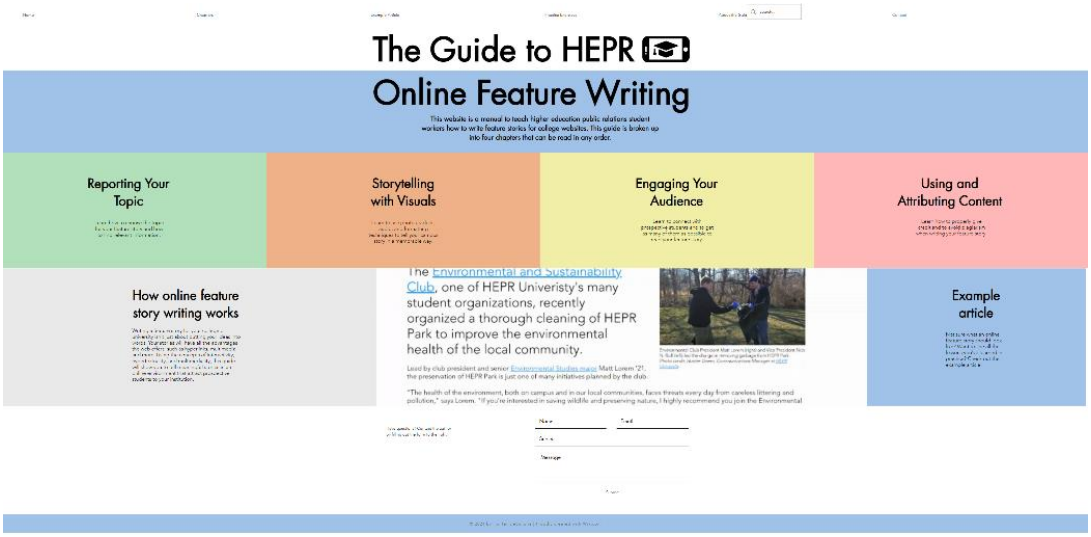
Figure 6
Nonlinear In-text Hyperlinks

Note. The first link is an anchor link that scrolls to a section further down the webpage and the second is an internal link that transports the user to the "Reporting Your Topic" webpage. From "Using and Attributing Content" by H. DeSimone, 2021, https://hunteradesimone.wixsite.com/hepr/using-and-attributing-content. Copyright 2021 by Hunter DeSimone.

Graphical presentation is the proper use of images, multimedia, colors, fonts, logos, and use of space. Special attention was given to this theme because according to a study by Ng (2014), "color, graphic, fonts and typography, were considered as the most important areas in

designing an educational website" (p. 107). Images and multimedia are used in the artifact to demonstrate their use in persuasive storytelling but are not used for the purpose of filling up space or aesthetic effect. Color is used to distinguish chapters and sections of the website. Light blue, white, and gray are the main colors of the guide because it is easy to read text placed over them. Green, yellow, orange, and red are assigned to corresponding chapters. The Futura font was selected for its simplicity, clearness, lack of serifs, and resemblance to HEI website fonts. Finally, the text and multimedia content are given a decent amount of space between one another, as density of content loses reader attention and focus (Garett et al., 2017). These elements of graphical presentation can be observed on the homepage, seen below in Figure 7 (DeSimone, 2021a).

Figure 7
Homepage



Note. The middle section of the second row is a moving video that navigates through the "Example Article" webpage. From "The Guide to HEPR Online Feature Writing" by H. DeSimone, 2021, https://hunteradesimone.wixsite.com/hepr. Copyright 2021 by Hunter DeSimone.

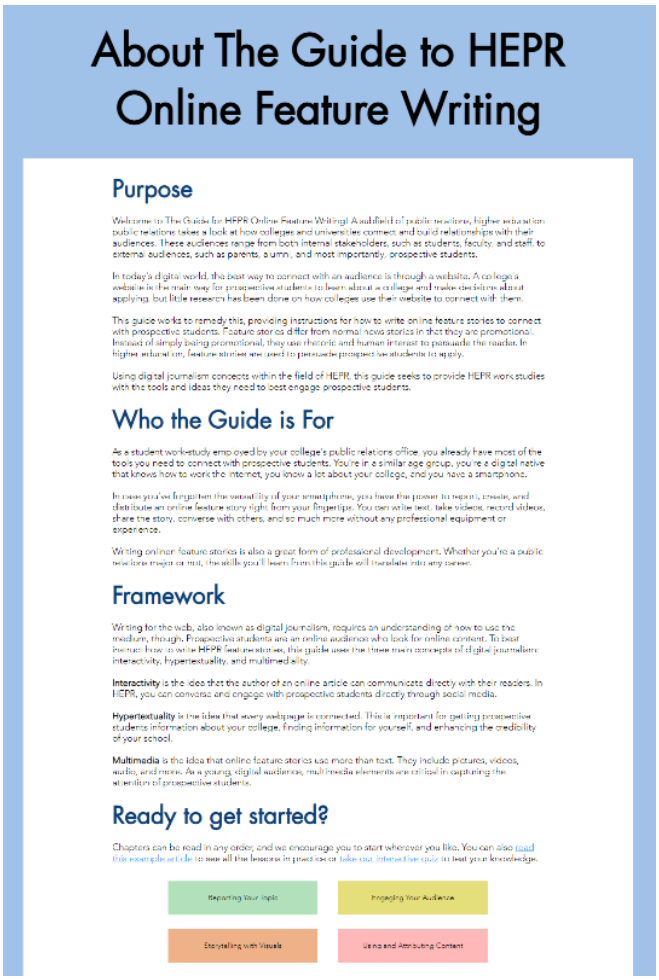
"The Guide to HEPR Online Feature Writing" estranges itself from Garett et al.'s (2017) findings on organization in that it replaces hierarchical structure with nonlinear structure to best

embody this project's findings on hypertextuality. The guide does, however, utilize meaningful headings and keywords as recommended by both web design and digital journalism experts.

Content utility is present if there is a sufficient amount of information relevant and usable to users that motivates them to continue using the website. As an instructional guide, this project's website artifact maintains content utility by breaking up lessons on feature story production into separate chapters on separate webpages, influencing users to explore the whole website to fully learn how to produce an online feature story.

According to Garet et al. (2017), "The purpose of a website is clear when it 1) establishes a unique and visible brand/identity, 2) addresses visitors' intended purpose and expectations for visiting the site, and 3) provides information about the organization and/or services" (p. 4). This is achieved on the artifact's "About the Guide" page displayed below in Figure 8 (DeSimone, 2021g).

Figure 8
About the Guide Webpage



Note. From "About The Guide to HEPR Online Feature Writing" by H. DeSimone, 2021, https://hunteradesimone.wixsite.com/hepr/about-the-guide. Copyright 2021 by Hunter DeSimone.

Simplicity is present if a website uses simple but transparent language that clearly states what each web element entails in a consistent, uncluttered manner. The artifact practices simplicity through brevity of word choice. For example, the "Engaging Your Audience" chapter title corresponds to the title of Theme #3: Facilitating Exposure and Engagement with Audiences but communicates the same message in far fewer words. This simplicity is also present in the navigation links as "Home", "Chapters", "Example Article", "Practice Exercises", "About the Guide", and "Contact" have clear functions while taking up as little space as possible.

A website is *readable* if its content is "1) easy to read, 2) well-written, 3) grammatically correct, 4) understandable, 5) presented in readable blocks, and 6) reading level appropriate" (Garett et al., 2017, p. 4). To achieve this, the guide utilizes its own lesson on chunking to divide the chapters into easily consumable sections. Furthermore, syntax and diction within the text are written to be casual and relatable to college-age student work studies, excluding vocabulary beyond that of an average conversation.

Strengths and Limitations of the Study

As a qualitative research project, the themes that emerged are backed by thorough and in-depth analysis of the topic. Intersections between the functional characteristics of the topic and the artifact itself are a notable strength of this project. Given that online feature stories and the artifact's webpages share similar production practices such as hyperlinks for navigation and the use of HTML, the findings of the literature review and case study are apparent from the beginning to the end of this project. Furthermore, the triangulation of data from Chapters 2 and 4 when compared to real, published online articles assists in the verifiability of the findings. Although this project used a sample size of 15 online stories, others that wish to replicate the findings can choose their own HEI online news articles from a seemingly endless dataset.

This project acknowledges its own limitations. Textual and content analysis are considered to be subjective, non-generalizable methods of analyzing data, as interpretations and findings can vary from researcher to researcher (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Choice of scope and boundaries can skew results as well, as some researchers looking to replicate this project may disagree on what is included or excluded in the production of online news stories. Additionally, themes determined in Chapter 4 emerged from a framework of creating a manual. Researchers who do not have similar goals may emerge with dissimilar themes. Furthermore, the choice in

sampled texts heavily favored digital journalism, outnumbering public relations four to one. This was a result of project focus and time/resource constraints. These limitations can, however, guide future researchers who are not impeded by the same constraints.

Suggestions for Future Research

To remedy the lack of research on how HEIs can use their websites as a public relations tool to engage prospective students, this project looked to find and use lessons from digital journalism within the framework of HEPR. Limited to documents and non-human data collection, this project can serve as an example for a non-intrusive method exploring the relationship between HEI feature stories and online audiences. Future researchers can contribute to this subject by replicating the project using more quantitative methods of data collection and analysis, expanding sample sizes, and customizing their scope and boundaries. This project specifically recommends future researchers to include human participants. This can include interviewing HEPR work studies to determine what skills they possess or lack. Researchers are also encouraged to interview students searching and applying to colleges, investigating what role HEI feature stories play in their decision-making.

Conclusion

Every higher education institution needs to answer the following question: Why should a prospective student apply here? Considering websites are now the main source of a prospective student's information-gathering process (Lažetić, 2018; Kelly, 2019; Saichaie & Morphew, 2016; Zhang & O'Halloran, 2013), online feature stories on institutional websites can serve as an effective way for an HEPR office to communicate answers to the questions at hand (Kelly, 2019; Poock & Bishop, 2006). A gap in the literature revealed, however, that there is little research on how HEIs us their websites as a public relations tool to attract prospective students. This project

looked to fill this gap by investigating how online feature stories published to HEI websites can use digital journalism techniques to build relationships between colleges and students seeking information during the application process. While there is an abundance of literature on convergence journalism and online news writing, another gap was identified through the lack of literature on using digital journalism techniques to accomplish public relations objectives. Additionally, before this project, there were no currently available guidebooks or manuals that specialize in writing online feature stories for HEI websites. These gaps resulted in this project's RQ1 and RQ2.

RQ1 asked: What are the key concepts of digital journalism that can guide best practices for higher education public relations (HEPR) student work studies when writing online feature stories? A review of the literature revealed three key concepts for HEPR to consider: (a) interactivity, (b) hypertextuality, and (c) multimediality. These three concepts then guided a typical, collective, problem-solving case study to address RQ2: What are the intersecting themes and pedagogical practices shared between digital journalism and public relations textbooks in relation to writing online feature stories? A textual analysis found four emergent themes shared across the texts: (a) researching a topic, (b) storytelling and meaning-making through visual presentation, (c) facilitating exposure and engagement with audiences, and (d) consideration of ethics and law. A content analysis revealed three pedagogical practices to teach these themes: (a) use of visuals, (b) examples from the field, and (c) supplementary activities and exercises. A content analysis of fifteen HEI online feature stories was then conducted to answer RQ3: How do top-rated HEIs operationalize the best practices of digital journalism and public relations to engage prospective students through online feature stories? Quantifying measurable indicators from the four emergent themes revealed that storytelling and meaning-making through visual

presentation was the most common practice in engaging prospective students, followed by researching a topic, facilitating exposure and engagement with audiences, and consideration of ethics and law respectively.

After triangulating the data collected from exploring the three research questions, this project designed a website artifact to address the gaps in the literature. The website, titled "The Guide to HEPR Online Feature Writing," trains HEPR work studies in producing HEI online feature stories to engage prospective students. Work studies were chosen due to their digital literacy and demographic similarities to the target audience. In a concise, interactive manner, the website teaches actionable items on (a) Reporting Your Topic, (b) Storytelling with Visuals, (c) Engaging Your Audience, and (d) Using and Attributing Content within the context of HEPR. These four chapters exemplify how HEPR student workers should communicate with prospective students, emphasizing visual communication, engagement, and factors of HEIs that influence application decision-making. The artifact separates itself from previous guides through its embodiment of the literature and specialized topic focusing on engaging prospective students.

In summary, this project expands upon the field of public relations in two ways: (a) it provides new research on the subsection of HEPR and (b) it provides a unique exploration of how public relations can borrow digital journalism practices to build a mutually beneficial relationship with an audience. The resulting website artifact contributes an interactive example for the field of HEPR. Public relations professionals employed by colleges and universities can use this manual to train work studies or to serve as a basis for creating original institutional online writing manuals. Researchers studying both HEPR and non-higher education industries within public relations are encouraged to replicate this project. The author believes that HEPR

benefits from an online news writing guide and that other public relations subfields can benefit as well.

"The Guide to HEPR Online Feature Writing" (Appendix C) can be accessed at https://hunteradesimone.wixsite.com/hepr. Please email the author at hepr.guide@gmail.com for access.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Key Concepts of Digital Journalism Literature

Theme	Code	Definition	Boundaries
Interactivity			
Hypertextuality			
Multimedia			

Appendix B

Codebook of emerging themes shared across textbooks

The Online Journalism Handbook

Theme	Code	Definition	Boundaries	Examples from text	Frequency	Researcher notes

Practicing Convergence Journalism: An Introduction to Cross-media Storytelling

Theme	Code	Definition	Boundaries	Examples from text	Frequency	Researcher notes

Producing Online News: Digital Skills, Stronger Stories

Theme	Code	Definition	Boundaries	Examples from text	Frequency	Researcher notes

Online Journalism: The Essential Guide

Theme	Code	Definition	Boundaries	Examples from text	Frequency	Researcher notes

Public Relations Writing and Media Techniques

Theme	Code	Definition	Boundaries	Examples from text	Frequency	Researcher notes

Appendix C

Website Artifact: The Guide to HEPR Online Feature Writing

https://hunteradesimone.wixsite.com/hepr