

Chapter 17: Research Remix: Soundwriting Studies of the English Language

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6. Hannah Ray's Discourse Ethnography: Professional Newsroom

Hannah Ray discovers how clarity can be both essential and ubiquitous in a professional newsroom.

Transcript

MW: *[laughing]* We need stories.

[Music begins to play loudly, layered with the following voices; it's bass-heavy, funky, danceable.]

SB: But I think that would only be a good story if I could find...

[Indistinct group voices continue talking about stories as music continues.]

Hannah Ray: When I first stepped into the newsroom at my summer internship at the High Point Enterprise this summer, I was really overwhelmed by the fast-paced conversations and confusing lexis.

JT: Beats.

MW: Slug.

JT: Jump.

MW: A teaser!

JT: Bylines.

MW: To bury the lede.

JT: What about the inverted pyramid?

Hannah: But there was this one word that seemed to sound more than any other word whenever I talked to reporters and editors.

[Music has been fading, and now it stops completely.]

MW: Clarity. . . . To be absolutely clear. . . . I still want to be clear!

Hannah: Over time, it became, well, clear that the newsroom had a hardwired goal towards clarity. And this came into focus as I worked to become part of this discourse community.

MW: We know for sure, we know we know what the other one's talking about with that.

Hannah: We want to make sure that we know that we know. This is the internalized mindset of those in the newsroom discourse community. The deadline-driven, fast-paced environment of the newsroom contributes to the overall directness that the staff has to achieve with one another, in order to accomplish their goals.

HR: *[interviewing]* So how do you find yourself communicating most often with reporters?

MW: Directly talking to them. When I am talking to, when I'm communicating with a reporter or an editor about work, like what they're working on, I would say it is 90%, face-to-face talking.

Hannah: Even their emails came across this way. Sounds good, timely for sure, would be good for weekend. At first my emails were so long and so wordy, but as the summer continued, I found myself writing shorter and shorter emails to be as succinct as possible.

But, there are times when this clarity among the staff seems ironically unclear.

MW: "Folo," we'll spell that on a budget, f-o-l-o, even though that's spelled wrong. But, so it'll be like . . . [*continues speaking but faded down under the following narration*]

Hannah: That's the editor of the newsroom. See, she's explaining this facet of grammar that the staff uses whenever they discuss an upcoming story that's going to follow up on a story that was previously told.

MW: [*hasn't stopped speaking, but now we hear her again*] Something that we do, we do "lede," which is the first, you know, opening paragraph of an article. We spell that l-e-d-e. And I don't even know why we do that.

Hannah: Wow, I spelled it wrong all summer. L-e-d-e?

MW: Uh-huh. You didn't spell it wrong. You spelled it correctly. But in newsrooms—

Hannah: Right.

MW: —we spell it l-e-d-e. I don't even know why we do.

Hannah: But you don't know why.

MW: I've never even looked it up. But it's just . . . maybe to be absolutely clear?

Hannah: Wait, hold up. You spell it wrong, to make it more clear?

MW: It sounds weird to say to be clear about something, you're spelling it wrong on purpose. It doesn't make sense, I agree.

Hannah: And this idea kept surfacing—that things are purposefully labeled or named incorrectly in terms of traditional language usage, but this specific incorrectness actually provides clarity for those who are in the newsroom community.

This seemed in direct opposition with this goal statement about grammar that I heard from a feature writer at the paper.

JT: If you're reading a story, and they've got misspellings in there, they've got, you know, poor grammar, poor sentence structure, things like that, even if it's subconsciously, you're thinking, "Well I can't trust this person's spelling, I can't trust their grammar, how do I know I can trust the basic story that they're telling me?"

MW: I definitely want it to be grammatically correct, AP style, 100%. Because it's important that we have accurate grammar, AP style, spelling, because if readers can't trust us to have things spelled right or our grammar, how can they trust our facts? And that's more important today than ever.

Hannah: So why fixate on correctness in some instances, but then seem to completely disregard it in others? Where's the difference? Audience?

MW: Uh, well with readers I don't use the . . . our vernaculars. For the reader we want more explanation of a headline.

JT: Um, so I think a conversational tone is something that resonates with readers. I think they see that I don't try to put big words in there just for the sake of using big words. You know, it's not going to impress them; it's going to turn them off to what you're writing.

Hannah: Because newsrooms are unique discourse communities. Unlike most, they're not really closed. While the paper may be created within the four walls of this community, the reach of its words goes far beyond the cubicles of the High Point Enterprise.

MW: We get a chance to change a community by informing them of an issue that they may not have realized or known. So when we can use our language to make positive change, that's exciting.

Hannah: Because it's not that the newsroom uses discourse to accomplish purposes. Discourse is the purpose.

JT: My goals are to write stories that impact the community, that touch readers, that inform readers about, uh, events in the community, about people in the community.

Hannah: Newsrooms are essentially inviting non-members into conversation, discussion, and information every day. And how do you bring outsiders into a community?

MW: Clarity. I can never take for granted that someone just knows what I'm talking about.

Hannah: Clarity. Credibility. Trust. Change. These are the purposes behind a newsroom's discourse community.

[Same funky music fades in.]

And maybe sometimes that means it takes misspellings within, to provide clarity without.

[Music plays a bit more before ending.]