

A Reincarnation of "The Morgue": Preparing today's student reporters to be tomorrow's advocates for research departments in the newsroom

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morgue, *n.*

I. Simple uses.

1.b. In extended use: any repository of unwanted, forgotten, or discarded things; a gloomy, cheerless place.

2. *slang*. a. In a newspaper office: a collection of miscellaneous material relating to people still living, assembled for use in future obituaries.

b. More generally: an archive or library of cuttings, photographs, or other reference material (sometimes including sense 2a).

II. Compounds.

3.b. morgue-man, a man who maintains a morgue (sense 2) in a newspaper office.

1912 *Outlook* 14 Sept. 84/1:

"In some newspaper offices the morgue man and his assistants...work inside of steel cages."

(from [Oxford English Dictionary Online](#))

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IT COULD BE WORSE

A November 17th [article](#) on The [Poynter](#) Institute for Journalism's website reported the announcement at the Knight-Ridder owned papers: [The Philadelphia Inquirer](#) and [The Philadelphia Daily News](#), that there would be further downsizing of their news research library staff. The columnist at Poynter, Steve Outing, concluded that: "I think one thing it points to is the need for journalists everywhere to beef up their research skills; they no longer can count on working for a news organization that has an adequately staffed research department. And journalism schools will need to be turning out students who likewise can fend for themselves in doing research."¹

This is only one recent example of the current trend in some media and publishing organizations. The announcement in Philadelphia inspired a spirited discussion on the Special Libraries Association [News Division's](#) electronic discussion forum, [NewsLib](#), which covered a variety of professional assessments, opinions, and predictions regarding the future (and possible lack thereof) for librarians, archivists, and researchers in the newsroom.

As resources available free of charge on the internet, such as [Wikipedia](#), grow in popularity and name-recognition, it is tempting for those who need to trim budgets, to cut back on subscriptions to premium information provider services, and also to assume that there is no longer any need to pay for professional researchers and archivists on staff. This is particularly tempting in the newsroom environment, where all reporters and editors are rightly expected to have some advanced research skills. Even Poynter Institute columnists are apparently resigned to accepting that young reporters should expect to "fend for themselves" when they leave the campus for the professional newsroom (never mind that four [San Diego Union-Tribune](#) staff librarians recently received published credit for their work on [stories](#) in the entry that received the 2006 [Pulitzer](#) Prize for National Reporting, and the 2005 George [Polk](#) Award for Political Reporting.)

In response to this news from Philadelphia, and other cities, news librarians around the country will continue to redefine their roles, and to find ways to impress upon decision-makers in their organizations, all the value added to their publications by professional researchers and archivists--just how much their work matters, how it adds to the final news product, and why it is important to the success of the journalistic mission.

This is nothing new for the modern news librarian, nor is it new to most information professionals across the broad spectrum of librarianship: public, special, academic, and beyond. The very nature of the profession, in nearly all of its many incarnations, is to be constantly changing as new technologies arise, and as patron needs evolve over time.

As well, for better or worse, while most people would automatically assume that they should at least consider consulting a brain surgeon, before attempting to perform an operation on themselves, they often do *not* think automatically about consulting a professional researcher, before assuming that whatever they have located on [Google](#) is probably more or less accurate, and in any case will have to suffice, whether it be personal, educational, or professional information that is required. For most librarians, then, part of their role as professionals will

invariably require them to participate in educating their patrons regarding the wide varieties, and the relative quality, of the many resources available today in print, electronic, and other formats, whether free or for a premium.

In a perfect world, the patrons would come looking for the expert guidance of a professional researcher whenever and where ever one might be available. In a perfect world, the absence of such guidance would be immediately noticed, keenly felt, and loudly criticized--perhaps most particularly in the work-place. In a perfect world, no business, community, or school would ever assume that closing their library or research department and firing their librarians, researchers, and archivists, would be a perfectly acceptable way to cut costs or maximize profits, and that somehow they might rely entirely on public internet resources such as Google, to permanently and adequately fill their every information need, free of charge.

Of course we don't live in a perfect world, and we never will--but that's no reason not to work toward improving the world we've got. Mr. Outing is not wrong to warn reporters that they "no longer can count on working for a news organization that has an adequately staffed research department." But might we--his colleagues in education--strive for more than merely accepting this trend as inevitable, and attempting to teach our journalism students only to "fend for themselves," and to settle for inadequate resources and support, once they leave the campus for the newsroom?

In my role as an academic librarian at the [University of Pittsburgh](#), I have been working for two years with the coordinator of the university's undergraduate Journalism major, and with the area reporters and editors, from [The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette](#) and [The Tribune Review](#), who serve as our faculty, in creating a new series of bibliographic instruction sessions specific to the research needs of reporters, which are now a required component of two of the core major courses. As a former newsroom librarian, as well as an educator, I hope to do more than merely prepare my students to "fend for themselves." I hope to also impress upon them an understanding and appreciation of the role of the librarian, archivist and researcher, as their colleague in the professional newsroom, and also to empower them to expect more in terms of such support, from their future employers. At the very least, when weighing two possible reporting positions, I expect that some of my graduates might even think to compare the availability of library resources, along with their other considerations, before making a decision.

In this paper I will share what is happening on my own campus, and consider how academic librarians working with Journalism students in similar instruction positions can contribute to forging more productive and cooperative relationships in the newsrooms and media libraries of tomorrow. In one respect, the focus here--Journalism--will be quite narrow, but by looking at the places of intersection and potential cooperation between academic librarians and other educators, professional researchers in the field and their current colleagues in reporting and editing, and even graduate programs in library and information sciences, I hope to open up the possibility of creating a model that may apply to other professions or subject disciplines. By working toward common goals, we not only make our own profession stronger, we also provide a greater benefit to the patron, both on campus and in the workplace.

IT CAN BE BETTER

reincarnation, n.

- 1.a. The action of reincarnating or the state of being reincarnated.
- 3.b. One that has been reincarnated: a fresh embodiment of someone or something.

(from [Webster's Third New International Dictionary](#), Unabridged 1993 edition
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My involvement with the Journalism program here, began in January of 2004, when the coordinator for library instruction contacted me regarding a request for a special session in research skills, made by the instructor--a local reporter for the city's largest daily newspaper--who was teaching the Advanced Reporting class that term. I was originally asked to prepare and present the session, because my area of concentration here as a Reference Librarian is in government publications, and the instructor had listed a number of public government databases with which he felt his students should be made familiar, before graduation.

We have a large number of departmental libraries and subject librarians on our campus, but the needs of all humanities and social sciences students are served primarily by the [main library](#). Additionally, the Journalism major here is only one of several [writing](#) concentrations, offered within the [English Department](#). As such, the 2005 Gale [College Blue Book](#) does not even include our program on the main campus, under the list of schools offering education in Journalism. Yet, we have a fairly healthy program, a very active, daily, student newspaper, both in print and [online](#), and a teaching faculty for the seven core reporting courses drawn primarily from professional, working reporters and editors. Something we do *not* have, is a special library, or librarian, designated specifically to work with instructors and students in the major. Previously, any research instruction for student reporters was at the discretion of the class instructors, and might fall to any available librarian in the main library. I expect the situation is similar at most of the more than 360 colleges and universities across the U.S., which *are* listed in the College Blue Book as offering a BA in Journalism.

Before accepting my current position with the University of Pittsburgh, I had previously worked as the solo Librarian, Archivist & Researcher for the [daily newspaper](#) in Athens, Georgia. Given this background, I was already familiar with the unique information needs of reporters in the newsroom, as well as with the amazing wealth of professional support to be found in SLA's News Division. As I had been away from the newsroom environment for several years by that time, it seemed obvious to me that the first thing I needed to do in preparing for this class, after consulting with the instructor, was to contact my old colleagues and ask for an update on the current state of research in the newsroom.

The instructor for this section was particularly interested in preparing his students to conduct their own research, using resources they might reasonably expect to find available to them in their first professional positions. The reality is that most of our Journalism graduates will find their initial employment in small media and news organizations, and will possibly have to

rely for a time on whatever services are available to them via the public library system in their area, and on free government information made available by the [Federal Depository Library System](#) and [Government Printing Office](#). If they are fortunate, there may be one information professional on site in their newsroom, a solid microfilm and clip-file archive of the publication to supplement any current stories being saved and indexed electronically, a small collection of print reference material, and some level of access to a premium service like Lexis-Nexis. With all of this in mind, and knowing that I would have less than three hours with these students, as part of my preparation I created a ten page take-home guide, covering far more resources than we could ever hope to discuss during the class, and geared primarily for those graduates who might find themselves entirely on their own for research purposes.

We routinely assess our formal instruction here by asking students to complete surveys after a session. The majority of students do not normally include any additional comments. However, several of these students wrote to ask why they had not been shown these resources specific to their research needs as Journalism students, earlier in their educational careers, despite in many instances having been to the library previously on one or more occasions for formal class instruction. Good question. Every discipline has its own special needs, but at the undergraduate level, I am afraid that the special needs of Journalism students are not always adequately addressed by standard information literacy and bibliographic instruction.

When I was contacted again the following term, by another reporter from the same city paper, teaching the Spring section of the Advanced Reporting class, in addition to updating my materials and adding some different resources in response to her requests and a list of story topics on which the students were planning to write, I also fashioned my own informal survey, to try and determine if the comments I'd received from some of the students in the first class, would be confirmed by others.

Of the eight students majoring in Journalism and related studies, who completed the survey, five had attended prior formal library instruction, and three had not. They answered as follows:

EngWrt 1760 Library Instruction for Advanced Reporting (9/28/04 Bradley-Steck)

1. How useful will this instruction be for your class assignment?

not at all

2

3

4

5

6

7 XXXX

8 XX

9 X

extremely X

2. How useful will this instruction be to you as a professional, after graduation?

not at all

2

3

4

5

6 X

7 XX

8 XX

9 XXX

extremely

3. Are you more likely now to make use of libraries, library resources (print or online) and librarians in the future--either here on campus, at the public library, or in the workplace?

no:

maybe: XX

already use frequently:

yes: XXXXXX

4. Would you have benefited from having had more Research Instruction, and/or from having had this kind of session earlier in your educational career (during Introduction to Journalism, for example?)

Yes: XXXXXXXXX

No:

Comments: "Yes, in fact, I could have used www.thomas.loc.gov this morning!"

Of course this is too small to be a statistically significant sample, and there were some students in the class who did not complete the survey, but of the eight who did, two of the five students who'd had prior formal library instruction, even as part of an earlier Journalism class, commented on the difference it made, having something that was designed specifically for their current classroom and future professional needs. Any instruction is good, but, particularly for upper-level students, addressing their unique information needs, is noticed and appreciated. None of the students were already using the library resources on a frequent basis. Six stated they will definitely use libraries and librarians more often after having had the class, and the other two stated that they might.

Every student felt that having had more course specific instruction earlier in the program would have benefited them. I shared these anonymous surveys with the class instructor, and told her that I would be willing to work further with the program. She, in turn, had a discussion with the Program Coordinator for the Journalism major, and he contacted me not long after. The program was currently under some revision, and given the student comments, the coordinator suggested that a progressive series of two or more classes in research be added as required

components of the core courses, one at the News I level, and one at the Advanced Reporting level. There were two sections of News I during that term, and both instructors then contacted me to arrange for a class as soon as possible. The library component is not required for the other core courses, but may be added at the discretion of the instructor.

As of the close of the 2006 academic year, I continue to provide instruction for the two News I sections and the Advanced Reporting class near the beginning of every term. Additionally, in Spring 2006 I conducted a session for one of the Introduction to Journalism sections. Other classes may be scheduled for standard library instruction, through the normal channels, and are not yet a part of this project.

I am continuing to assess the demographics of the classes, and the students' perceptions, in each session, as I update and refine the materials prepared, and the topics and resources covered. In the last two terms, I have been able to also track the difference in survey responses among the students at the Advanced level who have already attended one of the required sessions at the earlier News I level, in order to compare them with responses from students who, due to the timing of their personal class scheduling, did not receive the News I instruction as part of my project. I believe that with the Fall 2006 classes, all students at the Advanced level will have been included in the project at the News I level (which will make my preparation and presentation a lot easier, for the Advanced class, knowing what they have already been taught, and what they haven't.)

Preliminary results from the seven sessions provided during the Fall 2005 / Spring 2006 academic year, seem to confirm my impression from the Fall 2004 Advanced Reporting surveys: Any instruction is good, but, particularly for upper-level Journalism students, addressing their unique information needs, is noticed and appreciated. Combined answers from all seven classes, grouped by variety of prior formal instruction, or lack of any, show the following:

EngWrt 0550, 1330 & 1760 Fall 2005 and Spring 2006

Library Instruction for:

Introduction to Journalism (1), News I (4), and Advanced Reporting (2)

85 complete responses from Journalism & related majors only (all levels)*

**At the Introduction and News I levels, CGS and other non-Journalism majors may take this course to fulfill their writing requirement. These student surveys are not included here.*

Student Perceptions of Value

I. Students with no prior formal library instruction (29 students)

"How useful was this instruction?"

not at all:

2:

3:

4: XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
very much: XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

"How often did you use Librarians and/or Library services before?"

not at all: XXXXXXXX
2: XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
3: XXXXXXXX
4: XX
very much:

"Are you more likely now to use Librarians and/or Library services in the future?"

not at all:
2:
3: XXXXXXXX
4: XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
very much: XXXXXXXXXXX

II. Students with prior formal library instruction (42 students)

"How useful was this instruction?"

not at all:
2: X
3: XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
4: XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
very much: XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

"How often did you use Librarians and/or Library services before?"

not at all: XXX
2: XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
3: XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
4: XX
very much: X

"Are you more likely now to use Librarians and/or Library services in the future?"

not at all:
2: X
3: XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
4: XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
very much: XXXXXXXX

III. Students with prior formal library instruction as part of the project with the Journalism program (14 students, from Advanced Reporting only)

"How useful was this instruction?"

not at all:

2:

3: XX

4: XXXXXXXX

very much: XXXXXX

"How often did you use Librarians and/or Library services before?"

not at all: X

2: XXXXXX

3: XXXXXXXX

4:

very much: X

"Are you more likely now to use Librarians and/or Library services in the future?"

not at all:

2: XX

3: XXXXXX

4: XXXXXX

very much: XX

There are other questions from the surveys, which I have not yet calculated, but my focus at this time is to evaluate the students' perceptions of the value of the instruction, their interest in making more use of libraries and librarians in the future, and any changes in their research habits. In addition to introducing them to specific research skills, I am seeking to encourage them to make better use of the library resources available. These preliminary results seem to show that the objectives are being met. 61 students, of the total 85 surveyed (or 71.76%.) stated that they would be more likely to use librarians and library services in the future, marking either "very much" or the "4" option. That means over 70% of the students may well go into the professional work-place, expecting to find librarians and researchers awaiting them there as colleagues.

As well, course specific instruction appears to have some effect upon the students' search strategies. Combined answers from all seven classes, grouped by variety of prior formal instruction, or lack of any, show the following:

EngWrt 0550, 1330 & 1760 Fall 2005 and Spring 2006

Library Instruction for:

Introduction to Journalism (1), News I (4), and Advanced Reporting (2)

91 responses from Journalism & related majors only (all levels, includes 6 students who completed the demographic questions prior to the class, but did not complete the assessment afterwards.)

Search Behavior

"When you prepare to write an article, what are the first and second resources you check, to begin your research?" (please rank #1 and #2)

All first choice marks were given 2 points, and second choice marks were given 1. The highest possible point total for any single resource then, equals the number of students who answered, doubled (for students who marked resources, but did not rank them, of two resources marked, each was given 1.5 points, of three marked, each was given 1 point.) The percents shown are the actual points awarded, as a percentage of the total possible, per resource.

When looking at free web resources, versus library resources, the total points possible then equals three times the number of students surveyed who fit the category (2 points for every first choice, plus 1 point for every second choice, per student.) The percents shown are the total points given, as a percentage of the total possible, when the resources are grouped by type.

Weighted scores as a percent of total possible points for each group of students --

Students with no prior formal library instruction, 60pts possible, each:

Google	49.0	81.67%
Library Database	19.0	31.67%
Other free website	15.0	25.00%
PittCat	03.0	05.00%
Librarian	01.0	01.67%

Free Web Resources:	64.0 (of 90)	71.11%
All Library Resources:	23.0 (of 90)	25.56%

Students with prior formal library instruction, 94pts possible, each:

Google	75.5	80.32%
Library Database	33.5	35.64%
Other free website	15.0	15.96%
PittCat	10.0	10.64%
Librarian	00.0	00.00%

Free Web Resources:	90.5 (of 141)	64.19%
All Library Resources:	43.5 (of 141)	30.85%

Students with prior library instruction in the Journalism project, 28pts possible, each:

Google	20.0	71.43%
Library Database	13.5	48.21%
Other free website	02.0	07.14% (InfoTrac)*
PittCat	01.5	05.36%
Librarian	01.0	03.57%

Free Web Resources: 21.0 (of 42) 50.00%
 All Library Resources: 17.0 (of 42) **40.48%**

**InfoTrac is, of course, not a "free website" or a database directly accessible to the public without fee, and so it rightly belongs in the "Library Database" category here. However, this common mistake brings up important issues regarding user perceptions of electronic library services versus information freely available on the web. This 1pt. is moved to the library database subcategory in creating the final score.*

No doubt the popularity of Google among undergraduates will come as no shock. It is a useful resource, although hardly a sophisticated or scholarly one. Given the reality, I do not attempt to work against this behavior, but instead to refine and redirect the students' efforts. While at the level of students with no prior formal library instruction, as a first or second step in research, Google receives 81.76% of its total possible point score, it is the case in most of my classes that only one or two students, if any, have ever used more sophisticated search options, like /UncleSam, or site specific searches, or limiters such as language or date range. In the News I classes, rather than dismiss Google, we look at how it can be used more effectively, as well as discuss what such resources are not able to do, and talk about concepts like Boolean operators. In the results above, by the third level--students in Advanced Reporting who have previously attended the News I library instruction as part of the project--Google falls to 71.43% of its possible total score. More importantly, the score for the Library Databases option rises from 31.67%, to 48.21%, and the score for the Librarian consultation option rises as well (detailed results for this survey question may be found after the Selected Bibliography page.)

This project is a work in progress. A review of the Journalism education and academic library literature reveals a number of other pilot projects underway on campuses across the nation, yielding results not unlike those above.² Students who state their appreciation of specialized instruction, and indicate that they are more likely afterwards to make greater use of librarians and library resources, may hopefully one day also become professionals who will expect, appreciate, and become advocates for their library and research colleagues in the workplace. What these pilot programs may accomplish in establishing the foundations for that future relationship, our current compatriots in professional newsroom and media libraries will no doubt compliment as they continue to redesign and improve their research departments, and adapt to changes in technology and needs.

In my project, I encourage the student reporters to seek library assistance in preparing to write their stories for the classroom and for the campus newspaper. Our instructors also encourage this, by pointing out instances where the students' stories would benefit from more in-depth research. With each successive term, more students make contact with me, or with my fellow reference librarians, after these library sessions, for more individual assistance in planning

and conducting their research. It is my hope that when these students enter the professional newsroom, they will be looking for our special libraries colleagues there, hoping to continue that collaborative relationship.

There is an opportunity here, as Journalism educators reassess and consider their own goals³, and as special librarians in the newsroom and media libraries redesign and expand their roles, for librarians on campus to step forward and work with them, to the benefit of both the Journalism students, and the library profession. As the project on my campus threatens to expand beyond what the reference and instruction librarians can reasonably address, I have taken preliminary steps to reach out to the university's highly respected MLS program, trying to find graduate level library students who have an interest in the newsroom and media specialties or in journalism education, to create internship positions for them with the instruction project, or even possibly with the campus newspaper. The more we all work together across the campus, and beyond, the more the potential benefits to all will increase. I see no reason why this same collaborative approach may not be applied to any of the disciplines where economic issues endanger the future of professional research departments in the work-place. Any librarian involved at any level, in any specialty, has the opportunity to make these connections between the campus and the professional work-place.

In large Journalism programs, with dedicated library resources and librarians, these relationships already exist, but in the many smaller programs, like our own, there is a role that waits to be filled. If we do not fill that role, our students may indeed be taught only to "fend for themselves," and we shall all be the poorer for it, whether we are academic librarians, newsroom librarians, students, reporters, or citizens in a free Democracy which relies upon a vibrant media to keep us well informed.

End Notes

1. Steve Outing, "Philly Papers' News Library Now Extra Lean," *Poynteronline* 17 November 2005.

2. Colleen Bell and Juanita Benedicto, "The Companion Course: A Pilot Project to Teach Discipline-Specific Library Research Skills," *Reference Services Review* (Fall/Winter 1998): 120.

3. Jeremy Cohen, "Symposium: Journalism and Mass Communication Education at the Crossroads," *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator* (Autumn 2001): 4-27.

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Detailed Results: Search Behavior

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Library Instruction for:

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91 responses from Journalism & related majors only (all levels, includes 6 students who completed the demographic questions prior to the class, but did not complete the assessment afterwards.)

"When you prepare to write an article, what are the first and second resources you check, to begin your research?" (please rank #1 and #2)

All first choice marks were given 2 points, and second choice marks were given 1. The highest possible point total for any single resource then, equals the number of students who answered, doubled (for students who marked resources, but did not rank them, of two resources marked, each was given 1.5 points, of three marked, each was given 1 point.) The percents shown are the actual points awarded, as a percentage of the total possible had every student chosen the resource as their #1 ranked choice.

I. Students with no prior formal library instruction (29 + 1 students, 60pts)

Google or other free public search engine on the Web

First:	XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX (18)	36.0pts	
Second:	XXXX (4)	04.0pts	
unranked (2):	XXXXXX (6)	09.0pts	SCORE: 49.0 81.67%

PittCat (for books)

First:	X (1)	02.0pts	
Second:	X (1)	01.0pts	
unranked (2):			SCORE: 03.0 05.00%

Library database for journal or news articles

First:	XX (2)	04.0pts	
Second:	XXXXXXXXXX (9)	09.0pts	
unranked (2):	XXXX (4)	06.0pts	SCORE: 19.0 31.67%

Consult a Librarian:

First:			
Second:	X (1)	01.0pts	
unranked (2):			SCORE: 01.0 01.67%

Other free public website/database (Yahoo(5 write-ins), CNN, newspapers)

First:	XX (2)	04.0pts	
Second:	XXXXX (5)	05.0pts	
unranked (2):	XXXX (4)	06.0pts	SCORE: 15.0 25.0%

Library Database for journal or news articles

First:	XX (2)	04.0pts	
Second:	XXXXXX (6)	06.0pts	
unranked (2):	X (1)	01.5pts	
unranked (3):	XX (2)	02.0pts	SCORE: 13.5 48.21%

Consult a Librarian

First:			
Second:			
unranked (2):			
unranked (3):	X (1)	01.0pts	SCORE: 01.0 03.57%

Other free public website/database (Wikipedia, InfoTrac*)

First:			
Second:	X (1)	01.0pts	
unranked (2):			
unranked (3):	X (1)*	01.0pts	SCORE: 02.0 07.14%

1
2
3