

News and Its Communicative Quality: the inverted pyramid—when and why did it appear?

HORST PÖTTKER *University of Dortmund, Germany*

ABSTRACT *There is a general assumption that the inverted pyramid (lead-and-body principle, answers to four or five w-questions at the beginning of the article) became a professional standard during the American Civil War (1861-65), either because of the unreliability of the new telegraph technology (technological explanation); or because of the information policy of the Union (political explanation); or because of the increasing commercial interests of publishers and competition between them (economical explanation). But a content analysis of the New York Herald and the New York Times shows that the inverted pyramid became commonplace only two decades later. Between 1880 and 1890, moreover, publishers and editors attempted systematically to enhance the comprehensibility of their products by using, for example, headlines and illustrations. The author therefore favours the thesis that the journalistic routine and genre of the inverted pyramid resulted from the professional effort to strengthen the communicative quality of news.*

KEY WORDS: *History of Journalism, Journalistic Genres, News Paradigm, Telegraphy, Inside Editing, American Newspapers in the Nineteenth Century*

When and why did the form of news universally recognised today, which is described in journalism handbooks as the “inverted pyramid”, appear? Let me first describe this special form of news. Thereafter, I will discuss four theses regarding its development as described in journalistic literature: a technological, a political, a cultural, and an economic approach. These theses have in common that they seek the reasons for the development of this professional standard and its constitutive aims outside of journalism: in the development of telegraphy, in the interests of government to control and steer the flow of information, in the changing of the educational system, or in the commercial interests of publishers. I would like to confront these approaches—reminiscent of the foundation-superstructure categories in Marxist theory—with the argument that the widespread use of the inverted pyramid in professional journalism must be explained by its communicative potential to reach readers or listeners even with uninteresting and undesired news, thereby creating a public discourse. To support my thesis, I present a diachronic con-

tent analysis of the *New York Herald* and the *New York Times* from 1855 to 1920. I collected the relevant literature and press materials during a research semester at the University of Iowa in the fall of 2001.

The Inverted Pyramid

Professional journalism knows a variety of standardised forms of presenting information, all of which developed in the nineteenth century and for which special communicative principles of dissemination are characteristic. Reportage uses authenticity to overcome resistance to reception; commentary employs conclusive argumentation; the interview takes advantage of the attractiveness of real dialogue. The widest-investigated and, in the training of journalists, most extensively taught genre is “hard news”, which attacks the selectivity of perception by expressly placing the most important information at the beginning of the story, thus circumventing the reader’s decision whether to continue or stop the reception.

“Hard news” is commonly considered an es-

pecially objective form of reporting events. This is only true, however, of the chronological report if the reporter refrains from adding her or his own judgements and interpretations. It is not necessarily true of a descriptive method that presupposes, to a great extent, decisions on the relevancy of the topic by the journalistic subject. Even if these decisions are based on widely accepted conventions, they are not—in contrast to the chronological chain of events, for example—inherent in the objects of journalistic work.

If the most important information comes first, the name "pyramid" seems an obvious choice. It is far less obvious why an "inverted pyramid" should be concerned, bearing in mind that if the most important information comes first, it is printed in newspapers at the top of the column.

The most important information is summarised in the so-called "lead sentence" that, according to standard practice, has to answer four or five "w-questions" (who? when? where? what? and perhaps why?). After the lead sentence comes the rest of the story, which may already be redundant for the reader. The information presented after the lead sentence appears in decreasing order of relevance and with an increase in quantity. The details considered least relevant appear at the end.

In addition to quick readability, the professional advantage of this descriptive style is that news written in such a way can easily be shortened from the end so that—always pressed for time—the journalist responsible for the final editing is not obliged to undertake a time-consuming comprehensive reading of the text when compiling a page or a broadcast transmission.

The answers to the question about when and why this form of presenting information originated and ultimately prevailed, finally becoming the trademark of professional journalism, are of interest not just to academic historians. If it could be demonstrated that extensive use of the pyramid form in newswriting was only due to the influences of interest groups not related to journalism, the dominance of this method in the education of journalists would hardly be understandable.

If it can be shown, however, that the inverted

pyramid owes its success to the fact that journalism became conscious of its role in informing the public, then appropriate historical examples and analyses could be used in journalism education to make students more familiar with this standardised form of presenting news by making them more aware of its communicative quality and function. During their education and further training, journalists are often told that the reasons for using professional genres lie in their established conventions and their prominent patterns of style. In order to demonstrate to future journalists that the inverted pyramid is neither a fortuitous development without real significance nor a straitjacket used merely to discipline the writer, but rather a suitable means of disseminating information in the field of mass communication, a functional retrospective of the genesis of this journalistic technique is needed.

Like most other professional standards, the pyramid form of newswriting originated in nineteenth-century American journalism. In German and other European newspapers, for example, the event that triggered World War I was largely presented in chronological order. However, in European newspapers, the Austrian successors to the throne are followed during their carriage ride to each stop until they finally—in the ultimate sentence—fall victim to the assassin's bullets is commonly used in journalism education as an example of how news should *not* be written (cf. LaRoche, 1988, p. 62f.). At the same time, the pyramid form was already customary in the American press. Like most other investigations regarding the origins of the inverted pyramid, I restrict myself therefore to an analysis of American press practices. From there the inverted-pyramid newswriting style began to spread around the world during the last third of the nineteenth century. In the process it supposedly left its mark—like the interview or reportage—on European journalism. Whether, when, and how this happened still remain to be clarified by empirical diachronic content analyses. In this connection it should not be forgotten that historical-genre research as a whole is an undervalued branch of communication research.

Two Paradigmatic Examples

Old narrative style, chronological, opinion bias:
New York Herald, 17 January 1850:

TORTURE IN SWITZERLAND.

A strange circumstance has just taken place at Herisau, the capital of Inner Appenzell, in Switzerland, showing how much in these countries of old liberties civilization is behindhand in some matters. A young girl of 19, some months back, assassinated her rival. Her lover was arrested with her, and, as she accused him of the crime, both were put to the torture. The girl yielded to the pain, and confessed her crime; the young man held firm in his denial; the former was condemned to death, and on the 7th of this month was decapitated with the sword in the market-place of Herisau. This fact is itself a startling one, but the details are just as strange. For two hours the woman was able to struggle against four individuals charged with the execution. After the first hour, the strength of the woman was still so great that the men were obliged to desist. The authorities were then consulted, but they declared that justice ought to follow its course. The struggle then recommenced, with greater intensity, and despair seemed to have redoubled the woman's force. At the end of another hour, she was at last bound by the hair to a stake, and the sword of the executioner then carried the sentence into effect.

Factual news style, inverted pyramid, no bias:
New York Herald, 17 January 1920:

PHYSICIAN KILLS HIMSELF—AFTER ROMP WITH SON

Dr. Frank Lawrence Cochrane, forty three years old, of No. 742 Dt. John's place, Brooklyn, shot and killed himself yesterday in his home by firing a bullet through the roof of his mouth. He was found by his wife, who heard the shot, lying in the bath room.

Dr. Cochrane was well known in Brooklyn, where he practised for the last twenty-five years. He belonged to many clubs. It was said that he killed himself because of worries over the interest due on a mortgage on his house. He was educated at the Boy's High School, Brooklyn, and completed his course at Cornell. He was a graduate of the College of Physicians and Surgeons, from which he was graduated in 1900.

Mrs. Cochrane told the police that shortly after breakfast yesterday her husband romped with his five-year-old son, James. He then went to his office, left the combination of his safe and the key to his safe deposit vault on his dresser, wrote a check to his wife for all the money he had in the bank and then made his way to the bath room, where he killed himself.

The Inverted Pyramid: the four explanations

The Technological Thesis: unreliable telegraph lines

The most famous German dictionary of communication studies contains an entry about the development of the inverted pyramid form (also called "climax-first" or "top-heavy form") which reads as follows:

The top-heavy form of presenting news developed during the American Civil War (from 1861 to 1865). Due to the fact that at that time the telegraph lines were still rather unreliable, very often only the beginning of a report on military action reached the editors. If the report had been chronologically built the core message, i.e. the outcome of the reported fighting, did not reach the reader. Therefore the journalists started firstly to transmit their messages in two parts, namely in the first place the so-called lead or head sentence and in the second place the body of the message. In the lead or head sentence a summary of the most important news was presented whilst in the body part additional information was given. (Noelle-Neumann et al., 1989, p. 72f.)

We find a similar formulation in the *Dictionary of Socialistic Journalism* under the heading "News pyramid": "This method developed in the early years of telegraphy when technical malfunctions were still frequently experienced" (Sektion Journalistik der KMU, 1984, p. 147f.).

Explaining the development of the inverted pyramid by referring to the unreliability of the electric telegraph seemed so obvious and was so convincing that neither Marxist nor traditional communications scientists felt obliged to support this claim with empirical evidence. This can perhaps be explained by the fact that technological explanations have a plausibility of their own based on the foundation-superstructure premises of Marxism, which postulates the dependence of consciousness and various forms of communication (superstructure) on the material being (base) as well as on the progress paradigms of the Enlightenment that see a sign of liberation in humanity's increasing command over natural resources.

If the technological thesis is true, the inverted pyramid form must have spread in journalism at the same time as the use of the electric telegraph. After nearly a century of

experiments, electric telegraph connections began transmitting news even before 1850—in the US in 1844 (Washington–Baltimore) and in Germany in 1848 (Berlin–Frankfurt-am-Main). In 1865, William Howard Russell reported for the London *Times* on a failed attempt to lay a transatlantic cable by ship from Ireland to the United States (cf. Hudson, 1995, pp. 231–43). By 1870, the initial technical difficulties had been overcome, and the electric telegraph was used by journalists and newspapers on both continents. Russell, dispatched from *The Times* as a special correspondent to France, could no longer compete with his colleagues because he continued to submit his reports, such as those on the founding of the second German Reich in 1871, by letter—in contrast to the Americans, who used the much quicker telegraph (cf. Hudson, 1995, p. XXIVf.).

Did the inverted pyramid really succeed in making its way into American newspapers between 1850 and 1870, possibly with a push between 1861 and 1865 during the Civil War? Even if this could be empirically proven, it would not resolve the question why it did not disappear after the electric telegraph had become fully reliable if one sees in the unreliability of that technology not only the primary cause but also the reason for the subsequent development of the pyramid form of newswriting. If, however, use of the inverted pyramid in newspaper reporting between 1850 and 1870 did not significantly increase, the technological thesis would at least require serious re-evaluation if it were not dismissed altogether.

The Political Thesis: governmental steering

Although some authors in the United States also argue that the rise of the inverted pyramid in journalism must be attributed to the unreliability of the telegraph lines, this opinion is by no means universal. Mitchell Stephens thinks that the war reporters of the Civil War, "rushing to transmit their most newsworthy information over often unreliable telegraph lines" (Stephens, 1997, p. 253f.), are responsible for the development of the inverted pyramid (cf. also Jones, 1947, p. 322). Other American historians of journalism, especially those work-

ing with empirical and quantitative data, doubt that the thesis found in German dictionaries is correct. Frank L. Mott presumes that, although a more direct style had been used to cover the Civil War, the traditional chronological presentation of facts was still prevalent in the reporting of the time (cf. Mott, 1962, p. 330). Michael Schudson refuses to believe that the episode of the Civil War was at all relevant for the development of the pyramid style. He argues instead that the first examples of the pyramid only occurred in the 1870s and 1880s (cf. Schudson, 1978, pp. 61–87). The standard work of American press history by Emery and Emery also places the development of an "objective" style of reporting in the post-Civil-War period. In any case the authors regard the murder of President Lincoln on 14 April 1865 as the decisive moment when the rise of the inverted pyramid began (cf. Emery and Emery, 1996, p. 143f.).

David T. Z. Mindich (1998) undertakes a critical synopsis of empirical studies on the development of newswriting style in nineteenth-century American journalism. He suggests that the findings concerning a possible correlation between the use of the telegraph and the rise of unbiased ("objective") news, proposed by Donald L. Shaw, are unconvincing if one considers that news bias had its heyday in 1872: i.e. a full generation after widespread introduction of the new technology. Mindich also criticises Shaw for not examining the pyramid form with sufficient rigour, which was typical of such research prior to Harlan Stensaas's analysis of the contents of six daily papers (cf. Stensaas, 1986/87) in which he demonstrated that "the inverted pyramid form was not common until the 1880s and not standard until the turn of the century" (Mindich, 1998, p. 68). On account of the state of the research, Mindich refutes technological explanations and favours instead a political thesis. Like Emery and Emery, he is of the opinion that the Civil War and the murder of Lincoln coincide with the genesis of the pyramid form.

Mindich demonstrates his political thesis using the figure of Edwin M. Stanton, secretary of war for the Union during the Civil War, who, despite a lack of military expertise, was ap-

pointed by Lincoln in 1861 to rid the Army of the Northern States of corruption and other troubles. Mindich can show with some justification that the power-hungry politician Stanton, unpopular among the generals and in need of suitable means to catch the ear of the Union army, favoured the pyramid form when preparing official bulletins because, by this means, public opinion could be better influenced in the interests of the government. By using an elevated, almost authoritative bearing, the pyramid makes the public more susceptible to official positions. By hiding judgements in line with the position of the government behind the façade of its rigid, apparently objective construction, the inverted pyramid increases their influence on the public. By placing those items that the government regards as most important at the beginning, officials exert influence on what the public views as important. Mindich explains thus: "The 'objective' news report is, at best, an honest attempt to assemble facts as fairly and accurately as possible; but it can also be a deliberate ordering of 'facts' to manipulate public perceptions ... Stanton's 'objective' facts are used to mask his personal agenda. During his tenure as war secretary, Stanton was fanatical about controlling the dissemination of information" (Mindich, 1998, p. 74f.).

Mindich substantiates his thesis that the development of the inverted pyramid in American journalism is attributable to the interest in power and the ability of politicians like Edwin M. Stanton to steer public opinion, by referring to a number of official bulletins in pyramid form that were released to the press and printed virtually without alteration: among them was the "official dispatch" of the death of Lincoln and its circumstances which appeared in the 15 April 1865 issue of the *New York Herald* (cf. Mindich, 1998, pp. 68–94). He quotes General Grant's conclusion that Stanton "never questioned his own authority". Mindich continues, "This is true, and it is precisely this excess of governmental *authority*, blended with the privilege to *author*, that made Stanton so powerful. His role as dictator was a function of his *dictation*. While we consider that the Civil War press was held balanced to a controlling

central *authority*, we might want to remind ourselves how much the modern inverted pyramid form relies on government sources to *author* both sides of a 'balanced' story" (Mindich, 1998, p. 93f.).

The objection that the pyramid form should have vanished after Stanton's demise from the political stage is not valid against Mindich's political thesis because the interests of governments and rulers in making use of the instrument discovered by Stanton for steering the flow of information has been effective later and elsewhere. Other objections are more difficult to refute: there were, of course, authoritative politicians long before Stanton who wished to influence public opinion. It must be asked why the inverted pyramid would have first appeared during the Civil War and Stanton's tenure as a member of Lincoln's cabinet. The political explanation that specifically refers to Stanton, as well as the technological argument, would have to be regarded as void if it could be demonstrated that the pyramid form did not spread in the newspapers during or shortly after the Civil War, but considerably later. Such evidence can be found in the relevant literature (cf. Stensaas, 1986/87).

Last but not least: if the pyramid form is in fact deeply connected with the political intention to steer public opinion, it would have occurred most frequently in authoritative systems where such intentions were most advanced, e.g. during the Nazi regime or in the former German Democratic Republic. This explanation seems to contradict all historical experience.

The Cultural Thesis: educational paradigm change in the Progressive Era

While the technological and political theses date the rise of the inverted pyramid to the time of the Civil War, two explanations that focus respectively on the socioeconomic and sociocultural context date the spreading of the "relevance principle" as a news standard to the years from 1890–1910, the so-called Progressive Era. Most explicit in terms of dating is the cultural thesis that, to my knowledge, has so far only been published on the internet (cf.

Errico et al., 1997, <<http://www.scripps.ohiou.edu/mediahistory/mhmjour1-1.htm>>). After analysing a number of randomly chosen newspapers from 1860 to 1910 in a diachronic content analysis, Errico and colleagues come to the following conclusion:

Few examples of the summary news lead can be found in newspapers of the 1860s. In fact during 1865, when the Civil War ended, no examples of stories that used the summary news lead or inverted pyramid writing were found ... It was not until 1895 that even 1 percent of all stories surveyed had summary news leads ... Between 1890 and 1900, however, this study found a significant nationwide increase ... in the number of stories with a summary news lead and the inverted pyramid story form. The trend continued steadily upward ... By 1910 one of nine news stories surveyed used the summary news lead and inverted pyramid construction. (Errico et al., 1997, p. 3)

Around 1920 the summary news lead reportedly became the rule rather than the exception and was subsequently introduced in the handbooks for journalists as the only valid form of reporting (cf. Errico et al., 1997, p. 8).

Based on their findings, the authors conclude that the pyramid form did not develop prior to 1880, but spread most strongly in the first decade of the twentieth century. They attribute this fact to the quantitative expansion of education, which resulted in the rapid decline of illiteracy, and the paradigm change from the classical-humanistic to the pragmatic-technological ideal of education in the Progressive Era United States. Hand in hand with this paradigm change, in their opinion, there was also a change in the expectations and skills of both journalists and the public. Consequently, a change from the traditional "soft" comprehensive narration to the "hard" reporting of concise and relevant facts became unavoidable.

Although innovative and empirically as well as historically well founded, the survey is not without gaps. Doubts concerning the method of data collection are justified: the survey authors only considered longer texts (more than five sentences) and consequently that news material was neglected which is most characterised by the comprehensibility factors of shortness and conciseness—two principal features of the inverted pyramid. In addition it should be noted

that James Gordon Bennett's *New York Herald* was not among the newspapers chosen—a paper that, as one of the first "penny papers", became famous for its major innovations in the field of journalism. Both omissions suggest that Errico et al. may have under-estimated the early distribution of the pyramid form. Regarding the evaluation of the data, I am of the opinion that this survey—beyond noting the timely coincidence—did not succeed in explaining convincingly the causality between the change in the educational ideals of society and the spread of the pyramid form in journalism. The survey authors provide no theoretical framework for this argument.

The Economic Explanation: cost saving

Explanations focusing on the economic context of the rise of the inverted pyramid are often found in scholarly literature. These explanations, often imprecise in dating this process, try to explain the development of a form of journalism that—while neglecting chronology and argumentation—favours relevant facts and apparent objectivity, which must be attributed to the profit-mindedness of the publishers, especially their interest in minimising costs. Examination of the thesis focusing on the commercialisation of news reveals that practically the entire period from the introduction of the "penny papers" in the 1830s to the full unfolding of the "penny press" at the end of the nineteenth century is regarded as related to the development of the pyramid form. Most representative of this economical approach is Gerald J. Baldasty, who interprets the standardised form of presenting news exclusively as a consequence of commercialisation (cf. Baldasty, 1992).

If one looks more closely at this thesis, one will notice that the relevant literature mentions several economic advantages of the new "hard" style of newswriting. Most common is the explanation that the huge costs of wiring news by telegraph forced the publishers to put as much information as possible into as little text as possible (cf. Bleyer, 1973; Emery and Emery, 1996; Jones, 1947; Schudson, 1978). The connection to the technological approach that obvi-

ously exists in this argument can also be demonstrated by another fact: in order to save money on labour costs, publishers increasingly relied on the growing telegraph services of the news agencies, especially that of the Associated Press (AP), whose influence on the presentation of news had continually increased since its founding in 1848 (cf. Dicken-Garcia, 1989; Emery and Emery, 1996; Hynds, 1980; Mott, 1962; Shaw, 1967).

A third theory suggests that the swiftness with which newspapers can be produced—implying the saving of time and money—must be regarded as the main stimulus of competition (cf. Dicken-Garcia, 1989; Kobre, 1969; Perry, 2000; Warren, 1944). However, the opinion that the summary news lead was primarily used as a lure in the fight of competing daily papers to reach the biggest number of readers by offering a quick and superficial reading is relatively rare (cf. Stephens, 1997; Warren, 1944).

The economic approach is rather helpful in reminding one of a fundamental fact that is often deliberately neglected in communication studies, where many researchers take it for granted that there is a fundamental contradiction between the commercial interests of the mass media and journalistic quality. The pyramid form, like other professional standards of journalism, arose in a media system that was fully market-oriented from the very beginning. Not only the principle of creating publicness and public discourse (not by chance more cherished in American culture than anywhere else in the world), but also the rules of journalistic professionalism developed not despite but *because* of the dynamics of capitalism. To explain this unquestionable historical connection, communication research still needs a closed theory. The economical approach to explaining "hard" news coverage could be the first step in this direction.

The deficiencies of this approach can be seen, however, in its inaccuracy in dealing with the question of dates. Since the introduction of the "penny papers" in the 1830s, the commercial interests of publishers have played an enormously important role in American journalism. However, the inverted pyramid certainly developed as a standard of news presentation

decades later. If the changes in the economy caused by telegraphy are regarded as the main cause, not only the economical but also the technical thesis must be rejected if the pyramid form proves not to have developed during the Civil War or the decade immediately following it.

Like the technical, the political, and the cultural thesis, the economic approach suffers from the fact that only factors *outside* journalism and its organisation in the mass media are considered. The economic and the cultural theses at least have the advantage that, instead of a focus on single factors, social connotations are more comprehensively considered as possible explanations.

A Diachronic Content Analysis of the *New York Herald* and the *New York Times*

In order to verify the approaches described above and possibly detect new explanation patterns, a diachronic content analysis of one or more prototypical newspapers of the period that began with the introduction of telegraphy prior to the Civil War and ended with the climax of modern print journalism before the introduction of the even more modern medium of radio after World War I is necessary. For this reason I have chosen the legendary *New York Herald*, founded in 1835 by James Gordon Bennett, Sr as a "penny paper" and merged in 1920 with the *Sun* after the sale of the Bennett press empire, because this paper can be regarded as an example of professionalism in nineteenth-century American journalism in terms of its support for entrepreneurial and editorial innovation.

Beginning with the historically rather uneventful years 1855, 1875, 1895, and 1920, which were at least not overshadowed by big wars and could thus be considered "normal", the number of articles written in the pyramid form was tallied from the total number of articles that appeared on a fixed day chosen at random, i.e. 17 January.

In very short texts, it is virtually universal that the most important news is presented at the beginning, which is also already the end. With some justification, Errico et al. maintain

Table 1. *New York Herald*, 17 January. Articles in the editorial section using the pyramid form (Except "Financial and Commercial" and "Maritime Intelligence/Shipping News")

Year	Number of articles	% of pyramids	% of pyramids ≤ 50 words	% of pyramids > 50 words
1855	66	6.1	3.0	3.0
1875	116	15.5	6.9	8.6
1895	194	35.6	8.7	26.8
1920	187	39.0	10.7	28.3

that one can only speak of the pyramid form if there is not only a "lead", but also a "body". They therefore analysed only those articles that were longer than five sentences. In my opinion, however, it is possible to determine whether an article comprising three, four, or five sentences is written in the inverted-pyramid form, and consequently I have analysed all articles, even the shortest. In order to determine the not-too-significant share of peaks in the use of the inverted pyramid due to the small size of an article, the length of all articles was also recorded. The results of a comparison of the number of news stories longer than 50 words that used the pyramid form with the total number of articles evaluated seem, in my opinion, especially significant.

Table 1 shows that in 1855, i.e. six years before the outbreak of the Civil War, 3 per cent of the articles over 50 words used a real pyramid structure. These are not telegraph messages, and the number (two articles in one issue) is so small that the idea of the inverted pyramid as a working routine or even a professional standard at this time can be excluded. Rather, one may presume that this happened by accident. Up to 1875 the share of pyramids increased to 8.6 per cent, which at best can be attributed to the working routine of individual journalists but not to a professional standard. Only between 1875 and 1895 does the share of pyramid news stories rapidly increase to more than a quarter, precisely 26.8 per cent. Because the percentage remained more or less constant from 1895 to 1920 (28.3 per cent), one can reasonably assume that the inverted pyramid news became a professional standard in American journalism no earlier than 1875, but certainly not later than 1895.

The main transition in newswriting style presumably happened in the 1880s, as evidenced by an additional rough analysis of the year 1890 in which the total share of inverted-pyramid news stories is already 26.3 per cent ($n = 179$). This needs, however, to be thoroughly verified by an analysis of more conclusive material. The thesis that the inverted pyramid became the professional standard sometime between 1880 and 1890 is supported by the fact that the pyramid phenomenon is clearly mentioned in a journalism handbook that appeared in 1894 (and not, as maintained by Errico et al., only after World War I) in conjunction with the advice "that a well constructed story begins with its most important fact and ends with the least important" (Shuman 1894, quoted after Mindich, 1998, p. 65).

Between the years 1875 and 1895, additional changes in the appearance of American papers took place: see Table 2. The number of articles in a single issue of the newspaper increased substantially and rapidly; the average length of an article decreased. In 1875 there are no illustrations, while in 1895 8.2 per cent of the articles are illustrated. This use of illustrations increases only slowly until 1920, when photography replaced drawings as the primary illustration technique. While 80 per cent of all articles are without headlines in 1875, 85 per cent of the news stories appear with a headline in 1895. The number of headlines then decreases slightly until 1920, but those that do appear increase in size.

Additional changes not recorded on the table above also took place: in contrast to 1875, a number of editors are mentioned in the masthead in 1895. Furthermore, the articles are more clearly sorted into categories such as

Table 2. *New York Herald*, 17 January. Articles in the editorial section (Except "Financial and Commercial" and "Maritime Intelligence"/"Shipping News")

Year	Number of articles	Average word length	Articles with illustrations (%)			Headline of article (%)		
			Drawings	Photos	Total	Without	Small	Big
1855	66	711				97.0	3.0	
1875	116	627				81.0	12.1	6.9
1895	194	367	8.2		8.2	14.4	61.9	23.7
1920	187	244	1.1	5.3	6.4	20.9	30.5	48.7

Washington, New York, international, sports, or culture. However, section divisions still do not appear.

In conclusion, one can say that in 1895 the *New York Herald* had become much more clearly arranged, readable, and stimulating for the reader than it had been in 1875. American publishers and journalists at that time had discovered their readers and, finally, some better methods for selling information as a product. The task of the journalist now no longer consisted merely of placing news arriving from outside sources into the paper in its original condition, but of preparing them for the reader by adapting their size, appearance, and textual and visual condition to the needs of the newspaper and its readers. By means of this "inside editing", the communicative quality of the texts improved considerably, making them more understandable.

In order to find out whether and, if so, to what extent the *New York Herald* must be seen as an exception, I have also analysed the relevant issues of the *New York Times* from the years 1855, 1875, and 1895 (cf. Table 3, p. 510).

Although the changes taking place during 1875 and 1895 are less obvious in the *New York Times* than in the *New York Herald* (perhaps attributable to a smaller degree of readiness for innovation), the same fundamental developments can also be found: a tripling of inverted-pyramid news stories; in one issue considerably more and, on average, shorter articles; the addition of illustrations; and the use of bigger headlines. We may therefore assume that the *New York Herald* is no exception and that the general trend of the 1880s toward communicative quality and journalistic professionalism was only more striking in the paper edited by

James Gordon Bennett, Jr than among its competitors.

The Inverted Pyramid, Journalism and Public Communication

If the inverted pyramid really became the professional standard in American journalism in the 1880s, the technical, the political, or the cultural thesis cannot be true. If unreliable telegraphs or power-hungry politicians during the Civil War were responsible for this phenomenon, its development would have been finalised in the mid-1870s at the latest. Had the increase in the quality and quantity of education during the Progressive Era caused the increased use of the inverted pyramid, it could not have happened before the turn of the century. If one does not want to rely entirely on the economic approach, one has to look for a new thesis that takes the question of chronology into account.

At the beginning I pointed out that the "lead principle" enhances the receptivity of the reader by circumventing selective perception. It enables a quick reading, and even readers with little time can learn the most important facts. Writing news in the inverted-pyramid form—like the reduction of text and sentence length, the illustration of articles with drawings and photographs, the use of headlines, and the sorting of news into specific sections—therefore enhances the communicative quality of the journalistic product. It is not surprising that this style of news presentation spread at the same time as other innovations intended to stimulate the readers' receptivity. The emergence of this professional standard should therefore be viewed primarily as a function of its commu-

Table 3. *New York Times*, 17 January. Articles in the editorial section

Year	% of pyramids > 50 words	Number of articles	Average word length	Articles with drawings (%)	Headline of article (%)		
					Without	Small	Big
1855		101	?		8.9	91.1	
1875	4.6	153	684		6.5	93.5	
1895	14.5	241	362	1.7	2.1	94.2	3.7

nicative potency—helpful in the journalist's task of creating publicness and public discourse—rather than solely as the result of influences from fields outside its own domain, i.e. technical, political, or cultural frameworks.

The thesis based on communicative aspects does not exclude the economic interest of publishers in making newspapers more attractive to readers. The development of inside editing after 1880 must surely be connected with the economic considerations of American publishers eager to enhance the usefulness of their papers. But economic considerations and journalistic professionalism do not exclude each other. They share the ambition of reaching as many people as possible via the media—regardless of whether they are called buyers, consumers, readers, or recipients.

The advantage of the inverted pyramid as a *work routine* lies more in its cost-saving aspects. The advantage is that texts can be shortened from the end if the final layout requires it, and this saves time and staff during the editing process. At the same time, it facilitates quick production that increases the currency of the news, a journalistic quality appreciated by both newspaper readers and sellers which is honoured with an increase in the number of copies sold.

Only if and when a general understanding emerges in the field of critical communication

research that mercantile interests and the journalistic ethos are not diametrically opposed, but share (at least partly) the same aims, will professional standards like the inverted pyramid, which originated in the fully market-oriented American media system, be seen no longer as external obligations that journalists must simply endure, but rather as means of increasing professional efficiency. There must be a general recognition that the standardised form of news did not emerge as a function of technical, political, or cultural developments, but because of its communicative quality that coincides with the journalistic task of creating publicness and public discourse and also with the financial interests of the publishers. Only then can we hope that this standard will be most convincingly taught in the education of journalists.

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