

The Rise and Development of the Inverted-Pyramid News in English Journalism

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ABSTRACT

In the evolution of American newspaper industry and its news writing practices, the penny newspapers and the proliferation of yellow journalism gave rise to the emergence of objective journalism. The inverted-pyramid journalism, which originated during the North American War of Independence, can guarantee objective journalism, and therefore gained popularity and became the dominant news writing method in the English-speaking world during the 1920s and 1930s. As the global situation became increasingly complex, new forms of news writing practices and genres continued to develop. This article aims to re-explore the concept of objective journalism and the historical emergence of the inverted-pyramid journalism in the evolution of news writing practices in the American newspaper industry, and further to review the new reporting practices and genres derived from the transmission of the inverted-pyramid journalism, thereby addressing gaps and inaccuracies in previous research.

Keywords- objective journalism; inverted-pyramid journalism in English; rise and communication.

I. INTRODUCTION

Throughout the development of the American newspaper industry, different news writing practices emerged, thus forming classic reporting genres of American journalism. The "inverted-pyramid structure" is a news writing structure that arranges facts according to their news value, such as importance, immediacy, and reader interest. During the American Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln's Secretary of the Army, Edwin M. Stanton, was the first person who promoted this Inverted-Pyramid Style of news writing (Mindich, 1993), which presents facts sequentially according to the six elements (5W+1H: Who, What, When, Where, Why, How) and their value. At that time, readers in Britain and America were eager for war news. News agencies required war correspondents to prioritize the most important and the most timely news via telegraph. Even when the lines were dropped, the message being sent could still be published as an independent brief, thus leading to the emergence of the "inverted-pyramid structure" news (Gan, 1993).

In the Late 19th and Early 20th Century, American journalism shifted from "yellow journalism" to "objective journalism". The inverted-pyramid structure, that best ensures objective reporting, became the mainstream news writing approach. As the international situation became increasingly complicated since the world wars, the inverted-pyramid structure, applicability to reporting "hard news" or breaking news, could barely explain the context of "soft news." Its "monotony" in objectivity and its limitations became more apparent. Based on the inverted-pyramid structure, other news genres such as interpretive journalism, literary journalism/new journalism, advocacy journalism, and precision journalism

were developed. For most of the 20th century, the inverted-pyramid structure was used as the fundamental writing approach for the news industry around the world, giving rise to news writing approaches like the "Hourglass Style" (Itule & Anderson, 2003: 83) and the "Circle Style."

It is generally described in contemporary and modern Chinese and foreign journalism literature that the inverted-pyramid structure originated during the American Civil War in the 1860s. While there is consensus on its significant status, explanations for its origins have remained inconsistent and unsatisfactory (Shan, 1994). The main reason is that various explanations on the origin of the inverted-pyramid structure have not been analyzed from the angle of the historical evolution of American journalism. This paper analyzes the rise of the inverted-pyramid structure within the historical evolution of the American newspaper industry, aiming to clarify its emergence and its interactive development with the entire newspaper industry and even society.

II. EVOLUTION OF AMERICAN NEWS WRITING PRACTICES AND THE ORIGIN OF INVERTED-PYRAMID NEWS

Different stages of the American newspaper industry nurtured different news writing practices. From the emergence of the first political newspapers in the North American colonies in the early 18th century to contemporary journalism, the American newspaper industry has experienced historical periods including Colonial Political Newspapers, Penny Press, Yellow Journalism, Objective Reporting with inverted-pyramid, Interpretive Journalism, Literary Journalism (New Journalism), Advocacy Journalism, Precision Journalism, and Contemporary Journalism. Each stage created news writing practices and genres, thus laying the cornerstone for the British and American news industry. The inverted-pyramid structure was advocated by Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton during the American Civil War. It became a popular news writing approach during the transition from yellow journalism to objective journalism at the turn of the 20th century. From the 1920s and 1930s onwards, it developed into a dominant news reporting method that holds a leading position in Chinese and foreign journalism and gives rise to new writing genres.

1. The Origin of American Journalism and the Prototype of the Inverted-Pyramid: Political and Commercial Newspapers from the North American Colonies (1704 to Early 19th Century)

American journalism has its origins in Colonial Newspapers and the Partisan Press. On September 25, 1690, Benjamin Harris founded the first newspaper in the North American colonies, *Publick Occurrences, Both Foreign and Domestick*. In 1704, John Campbell founded the *Boston News-Letter*. In 1721, James Franklin founded the New England Courant in Boston. In 1729, Benjamin Franklin took over the Pennsylvania Gazette. By the end of 1765, the North American colonies had over 30 political and commercial newspapers. The political newspapers were the mainstay and evolved into the editorial pages of modern newspapers, while the nascent commercial newspapers became forerunners of the business sections of newspapers (Campbell et al., 2015: 272-273).

During the coexistence of political and business newspapers in North America, the "inverted pyramid structure" of journalism emerged (Itule & Anderson, 2003: 44-45), meaning this news writing method originated during the American Civil War. At that time, reporters and correspondents advocated for this concise, compact reporting style, eliminating adverbs and adjectives, and starting with the most explosive and newsworthy information. If war or disaster interrupted the transmission of a news report, the information chosen by the reporter as the beginning of the news story still had the greatest chance of being sent. The introductory paragraph of the inverted pyramid structure is located at the top of the pyramid, introducing the 5W+1H elements. Then comes the transition paragraph, and then secondary information in the middle of the text, and finally less important details at the bottom. As Michael Emery and Edwin Emery stated in *The Press and America: An Interpretive History of the Mass Media*: "The summary lead, which put the main feature of the story in the first paragraph, was developed during the war by reporters in the field who feared that their complete dispatches might not get through." (Emery & Emery, 1996: 143).

Among the series of reports on the assassination of President Lincoln in the American Civil War (1860s), the inverted-pyramid structure stood out. On the night of the day President Lincoln was assassinated, Lawrence A. Gobright, a reporter for the Associated Press, sat in the telephone room of the Washington bureau, smoking a cigar while flipping through the news from other cities. Suddenly, a friend burst in and excitedly reported to Gobright the news of Lincoln's assassination (Emery & Emery, 1996: 144). A few minutes later, Gobright sent a telegram to the Associated Press headquarters:

WASHINGTON, FRIDAY, APRIL 14, 1865—

The President was shot in a theater tonight, and perhaps mortally wounded.

This 12-word message is hailed as the prototype of the inverted-pyramid structure (Stephens, 1998: 65), but it does not fully reflect its basic characteristics.

David T. Z. Mindich believes that Edwin M. Stanton, Lincoln's Secretary of War, was the first author to use the inverted-pyramid writing method (Mindich, 1998: 66). During the emergency handling of President Lincoln's assassination, Stanton wrote an account of the entire event and its background based on facts and his own observations, and transmitted

the news to the outside world. This telegram spread to major New York newspapers and appeared in the headline of The New York Herald:

WAR DEPARTMENT, WASHINGTON, April 15 — 1:30 A.M.

To Major General Dix, New York:

This evening at about 9:30 P.M., at Ford's Theatre, the President, while sitting in his private box with Mrs. Lincoln, Mrs. Harris, and Major Rathburn, was shot by an assassin who suddenly entered the box and approached behind the President.

The assassin then leaped upon the stage, brandishing a large dagger or knife, and escaped in the rear of the theatre.

The pistol ball entered the back of the President's head and penetrated nearly through the skull. The wound is mortal.

The President has been insensible ever since it was inflicted, and is now dying.

About the same hour, an assassin (whether the same or not) entered the apartments of Secretary Seward, under pretense of having a prescription, and rushed into his bedroom, stabbing him repeatedly in the throat and then in the face.

I have seen Mr. Seward, but he and Frederick were both unconscious.

The nurse alarmed Mr. Frederick Seward, who was in an adjoining room, and he hastened to the door of his father's room, when he met the assassin, who inflicted several stabs upon him. His condition is now doubtful.

EDWIN M. STANTON, Secretary of War.

Compared to the one-sentence message of Gobright, Stanton's inverted-pyramid telegram did not follow a chronological structure. Its basic style is concise and vivid, more akin to the "inverted pyramid structure".

On April 12, 1861, New York World reporter B. S. Osbon witnessed the bombardment of Fort Sumter from the deck of a US Navy frigate and wrote a news article, one of the earliest instances of the inverted-pyramid structure:

CHARLESTON, April 12 — The ball has opened. War is inaugurated.

The batteries of Sullivan's Island, Morris Island, and other points were opened on Fort Sumter at four o'clock this morning. Fort Sumter has returned the fire, and a brisk cannonading has been kept up. (Emery & Emery, 1996: 137).

For most of the 20th century, the inverted-pyramid structure was an effective way to report news stories. News agencies worldwide used the inverted-pyramid structure to send news stories, "They had to deal with a large number of newspapers with wide-ranging political and cultural backgrounds. And news had to be 'objective'—acceptable to readers of all classes and persuasions." (Mindich, 1993). The reliance of objective news reporting on the inverted-pyramid structure signifies that journalism has transcended the tradition of political party newspapers, and the concept of objectivity became the guiding principle of modern newspapers.

2. From the Penny Press to Yellow Journalism: "Human-Interest" News and "Sensational" Investigative Reporting (1830s to Late 19th Century)

By the 1830s, the Industrial Revolution and the rise of a new middle class in Britain, America, and other European countries had led to an increase in the literacy rate of the population, laying the reader base and market demand for the penny (mass/popular) press. In 1833, Benjamin Day's New York Sun reduced the price of newspapers to one penny and eliminated subscription sales. Its publishing principle of "It shines for all" focuses on local affairs, scandals, police reports, series stories, etc (Campbell et al., 2015: 274). The notorious "Great Moon Hoax" triggered a wave of human-interest stories among the penny press and its target readers. James Gordon Bennett founded the New York Morning Herald in 1835, liberating commercial newspapers from political newspapers (Yost, 1923: 10). The "factual" reporting of crime and "human-interest" topics in the penny press ultimately surpassed political and business news, becoming prevalent in European and American countries.

In the late 19th century, "yellow journalism" emerged as a product of the development of the American penny press, marking the beginning of the yellow journalism era in American journalism. Newspaper layouts were filled with sensational stories of crime, disaster, scandal, and intrigue. The press are keen on digging up and exposing corruption, especially in business and government, providing a foundation for investigative journalism (Campbell et al., 2015: 274). There was a "yellow journalism" war between William Randolph Hearst's New York Journal and Joseph Pulitzer's New York World, featured artist R. F. Outcault's yellow kid cartoon (1895) symbolizing yellow journalism.

3. The Prevalence of Inverted-Pyramid News: "New Journalism" Based on Objective Reporting (Early 20th Century to 1930s)

At the beginning of the 20th century, the proliferation of yellow journalism attracted widespread attention in American society, which in turn gave rise to the concept of objective reporting and the prevalence of the inverted-pyramid style. In 1896, Adolph Ochs purchased The New York Times and championed the concept of objective reporting, which was diametrically opposed to yellow journalism: "It will not soil the breakfast cloth" (Campbell et al., 2015: 278): providing stock and real estate news for businessmen, court reports for judicial personnel, and official document summaries for political leaders.

In the 1920s and 1930s, reporters adopted scientific news and information gathering methods, maintained a neutral attitude towards the reported events and topics, sought balanced viewpoints from sources in news stories, and separated factual reporting from commentary. "Newspapers may print, and should print, a great deal of information that people do not want to know but need to know, and ought to know." (Yost, 1923: 10). Because the inverted-pyramid structure could best

ensure objective reporting, it has gained favor in the news industry, and the concept of objective journalism began to dominate the British and American news industry.

III. NEW REPORTING GENRES DERIVED FROM INVERTED-PYRAMID NEWS

Since the 1920s and 1930s, the inverted-pyramid structure, the most common writing style for reporting "hard news"/breaking news in English-language journalism, has held a dominant position as a news writing genre. With the development of the global journalism, English-language journalists and editors have continuously innovated news gathering and writing structures and genres based on the "inverted pyramid structure". On the one hand, the inverted pyramid often results in "triple repetition" when reporting the same news event: starting from the headline, moving to the lead, and then the body, unfolding in a three-step progressive narrative. The introduction incorporates the "5W" elements, which exposes the multiple limitations inherent in the "inverted pyramid structure" of news reporting and fostered new reporting techniques. On the other hand, the news industry has continuously developed new reporting paths and methods in response to the evolving media environment and technology.

1. *Interpretive Journalism: 1930s-1960s*

After World War I, the international situation became increasingly complex, and the limitations of the inverted-pyramid structure began to emerge. Breaking news was insufficient to explain complex domestic and international situations. "When World War I began in August 1914, the American people were shocked. They had no background of understanding foreign affairs and were unprepared for what was to come." (Clark, 1984: 47). In the 1930s and 1940s, American society and its newspaper industry re-explored the social function of news in interpreting reality. "Interpretive journalism," which sought to place social topics and news events in a broader historical or social context, gained popularity.

2. *Literary Journalism (New Journalism): Since the 1930s and 1940s*

In the 1930s and 1940s, some journalists in the United States opposed the traditional path advocated by the inverted-pyramid structure that separated fact from viewpoints in news stories. Instead, they advocated applying fictional storytelling to non-fictional news facts and in-depth reporting, leading to the so-called "literary journalism" or "new journalism." Its roots can be traced back to novelists like Mark Twain, Stephen Crane, and Theodore Dreiser, who pursued literary careers as journalists (Newfield, 1973: 63-64). Literary journalism combines reported content with literary forms¹, creating an organic fusion of "objective, truthful journalism" and "subjectively realistic" novels. "Feature writing uses perceptual and interviewing skills to obtain information and viewpoints about an event, employing witty and vivid language and writing techniques, emphasizing style and description, and valuing dialogue, setting, and psychological portrayal."

3. *The "Wall Street Journal" Formula: Since the Mid-20th Century*

Since the mid-20th century, the American Wall Street Journal has developed and refined the "Wall Street Journal Formula" news writing method, which is suitable for in-depth reporting of non-dynamic news such as feature stories (Rich, 1997: 204). The Wall Street Journal Formula often adopts a "soft news" lead, starting with a description or narrative of a specific character, scene, or event within the news story, then proceeds to an overview of the overall story. The lead is followed by a "nut graph" that narrates the gist of the news story, corresponding to the "what" and "why" of the inverted pyramid. This is followed by supporting background for the lead, narrative development (cause/effect, explanations, points of view). The conclusion uses a quote from a news figure in the lead or an anecdote as a "circle kicker" (Rich, 2016: 155).

4. *Advocacy Journalism: Since the Late 1960s*

In the late 1960s, Americans faced social issues like political assassinations, anti-war protests, the Vietnam War, drug culture, and the women's rights movement that the government found difficult to explain. Americans lost confidence in the government's ability to monitor and guide social order. Journalists rethought the traditional framework of journalism, adopting "advocacy journalism" reporting methods that guide audiences to accept a certain viewpoint or cause.

5. *Precision Journalism: Since the 1970s*

In the early 1970s, American journalism scholar and reporter Philip Meyer published Precision Journalism, systematically expounded on the concept of precision news and its writing approach. This genre pushed news reporting towards a scientific orientation. Journalists passionate about this approach applied social science methods such as questionnaires and polls to describe social reality.

6. *Postmodern Journalism: Since the 1980s*

Postmodern journalism originated in the early 1980s with the advent of electronic newspapers and color newspapers. In 1980, the *Columbus Dispatch* was among the first to transmit newspaper layouts via computer and cable. By 2004, over 1,300 American newspapers offered computerized news services. The authority of modern newspapers such as The New York Times and The Washington Post had been surpassed and replaced by so-called "news" format that blend information,

¹ In the 1960s, representative works by writers such as Tom Wolfe (*The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*), Truman Capote (*In Cold Blood*), Joan Didion (*Slouching Towards Bethlehem*), and Norman Mailer (*Miami and the Siege of Chicago*) turned to the narrative mode of New Journalism. Their reflections on social issues created a reporting style that traditional journalism could not provide.

entertainment, propaganda, and analysis. Their news authority was also challenged by talk shows, TV series, popular movies, punk music, and other so-called "news."

In the second half of the 20th century, British and American journalists and editors also innovated news writing methods, such as the "List Technique," "Pyramid Structure," and "Section Technique", based on the inverted-pyramid structure (Rich, 2016: 160-177).

In the early 1980s, American journalism scholar Roy Peter Clark advocated for the "Hourglass Structure" approach (Itule & Anderson, 2003:83) to news reporting, suitable for reporting crime, police, or disaster news. The "Hourglass Structure" lead typically presents the most important "hard news" information in the story (summary lead). Then, the reporter or editor uses a transition paragraph (Rich, 1997: 208) and begins to narrate the rest of the story in chronological order, often including an overview of the causes. Compared to the inverted-pyramid structure, the advantage of the "Hourglass Structure" lies in adding drama to news stories in the chronological narrative part. Its disadvantage is that the narrative may repeat some key information from the lead, increasing the length of the news release (Rich, 1997: 208).

Spanish scholar Canavilhas, revised the "inverted pyramid structure" based on the development of online media and proposed the "tumbled pyramid" to explain the characteristics and patterns of online news discourse. In this new system, news is organized in layers according to the amount of information, shifting from a "qualitative perspective" (importance judged by the reporter) to a "quantitative perspective" (where audiences acquire and accumulate information according to their own needs), establishing a hierarchical model for online news information where the amount of information increases progressively from small to large (Shi & Liu, 2014: 14-20) (Yang, 2008: 44-45).

In today's Internet age, newspapers remain the most important source of news for a nation-state. Portals like Yahoo and Google serve as guides for readers to access other news stories. In audiovisual news, live news has, to some extent, subverted the traditional inverted-pyramid expression. To capture audience attention and compensate for the limitations of linear expression, audiovisual media have started using "list journalism" to remind viewers of the broadcast schedule. In the new media era, multimedia reporting from every corner of the world creates a cacophony of voices. Audiences possess the ability and power to choose information independently. In this context, the inverted pyramid structure of thinking remains the "retention core" of new media, and its expression becomes more multidimensional.

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