

# Chapter 9

## First Draft as Final Draft: Student Journalism When a Campus Closes

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter describes the way that student journalists continued to produce the news professionally and with a focus on helping inform the campus community after the college announced that it would close at the end of the academic year. It explores the difficulties and challenges the students faced in terms of coverage and also in terms of dealing with their emotions and struggles during the final semester, and how they ended up doing award-winning work in their coverage of the school during its final semester.*

The top three editors sat at their workstations in the student newsroom, doing the final design adjustments and proofreading the school paper, *The Chronicle*, before we would compile all the pages as a PDF file and send it to the printer. It was a typical production day, which happened every other week—we would start about 11 a.m., and student editors would come and go as their class schedules allowed throughout the afternoon and into the evening, doing page layout, polishing stories, copy editing, and helping themselves to the snacks I always brought for them to help get them through the long hours.

It was the end-of-year issue, a paper that doubled in size as it added a full-color insert section featuring short bios of notable graduating seniors for the year, so production took more time than usual. What was unusual was this would be the last issue of *The Chronicle*, a student newspaper that had been around nearly as long as *The College of Saint Rose's* 103 years, as the school itself would be closing at the end of the semester.

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The student newspaper and student online TV newscast Saint Rose TV were not required classes, nor were they required senior seminars. They were volunteer student clubs—and both clubs demanded a lot of time—because the students believed in journalism and took great pride in what they produced in alternate weeks in both clubs. Abby, the editor-in-chief, joined the paper as the first club she had joined on campus as a freshman in fall 2020. She had stayed dedicated to The Chronicle and Saint Rose TV through Covid, through the departure of a beloved journalism faculty member who had left the journalism courses and student media advising largely rudderless, and through a few semesters in which she and another editor were the only two keeping the paper going. And she didn't even want to be a journalist after graduation.

It was getting late, but we still had plenty of time before the printer deadline as the editors knew their roles and knew what had to be done as they put the finishing touches on the pages. The newsroom was mostly dark—as much to make the screens easier to view as to hide the occasional tears that would come when the finality of what we were doing would hit us.

Journalism is said to be the first rough draft of history, but for the student journalists of The Chronicle they understood that during the college's final semester in spring 2024 that their coverage of how the school shut down would also be the final word for the close-knit campus community. The students also realized that for the nearly 2,500 students and hundreds of faculty and staff who had many unanswered questions about their futures that The Chronicle would be an important source of trusted information.

Late in the fall 2023 semester we were preparing for the final fall issue of the paper just after Thanksgiving break, which would come out the last full week of classes and just before finals began. We were planning a festive and splashy front page of Albany's upcoming Christmas tree lighting events, along with the usual mix of features, advice on studying and maintaining one's mental health during the stress of finals week, and light news stories. Before I left for campus that morning a headline from the Albany Times-Union in my email inbox caught my eye, reporting that the school was on the verge bankruptcy. I sent a link to the article to the Chronicle's Slack channel that we used, drily noting "looks like we'll need to rethink the front page for the upcoming issue."

My class later that morning happened to be an introductory journalism course, which included about nine students—my largest class at Saint Rose—ranging from incoming freshmen starting on the journalism track to seniors who simply needed to fill elective credits in their final year. As I expected, none had actually seen the Times-Union that morning, and only a couple had checked Slack and seen my message. For those who had, the concern and confusion in their eyes as they entered the classroom was palpable.

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