

Alex Weaver, BostInno staff writer

Michael O'Connell, producer, It's All Journalism

Welcome to It's All Journalism. My name is Michael O'Connell. I'm here today with Julia O'Donoghue, who did a little special report for us. Why don't you tell us about what you did?

Julia O'Donoghue, producer, It's All Journalism

So I was going to a wedding in Maine, and on my way there, I tried to — I decided to stop in Boston and try to find reporters who had covered the Boston bombing and the manhunt there. And I put something out on my graduate school's listserv in New England. Someone responded, actually a classmate of mine.

Michael O'Connell

And who is that?

Julia O'Donoghue

Alex Weaver. He works for [BostInno](#), which is a combination of Boston and Innovation. He and I went to the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern in Chicago together. He graduated, like, six months before I did, and he has been working at BostInno since the fall.

Michael O'Connell

So the first really huge story was the Boston bombing.

Julia O'Donoghue

Yeah. Yes. He didn't work, he worked in, as I remember it — hopefully I get this right Alex — he worked in like writing sort of like advertising and marketing stuff before he went to school. So this is the first, I think, journalism job he's had. I guess his organization is a start up. They're supposed to be a local news website that partially has focus on covering the tech industry in Boston as well as local news. They are really trying to break news about tech and innovation in Boston.

Michael O'Connell

OK, but they had people on the ground for the marathon and —

Julia O'Donoghue

Correct. Yeah.

Michael O'Connell

Because that's a big story locally.

Julia O'Donoghue

He does life style stuff, I think, in addition to some hard news stuff, and so they had, you know, a map and where to watch the marathon and all that sort of prep for the marathon. And then a lot of their staff was in the office the day the marathon was happening because it is such a huge story for Boston, the actual marathon going on so ...

Michael O'Connell

And I would assume also maybe did he talk a little bit about the fact that, you know, Boston is a pretty big news market anyway, but suddenly you have the whole word of news gatherers descending upon the city.

Julia O'Donoghue

Yeah, he definitely talked a little about that. I talked to him a little about, in addition to that, you know, when something like this happens, I think we know probably here in D.C., you know, you're affected too.

You know, Boston is not — It's a big city — but it's a small big city. You know, Alex's fiancée lives there. A lot of his family lives there. I assume that a lot of people in his office are in a similar position where they have, like, people who live there. So he had talked about how his, I believe, it's his editor's brother was at the finish line during the blast. And he is fine, but you know, there are other issues. Alex sort of mentioned that a lot people were trying to call him when the bomb went off.

He wasn't able to answer them because cell phone networks were jammed. There are other issues when you are covering something like this. The closest I've come, I don't know about Mike, but is probably the Virginia Tech shootings. And we weren't on site when that happened, but it's pretty awful.

Michael O'Connell

No it is. And actually, I had, I was actually working for a local newspaper in Northern Virginia when 9/11 occurred, and when the plane hit the Pentagon, that became a local news story for us. We had a photographer on the scene. It was actually on a Tuesday. We were a weekly newspaper. Tuesday was our deadline day. We were going to gather all of our news material, lay it out on the papers and send them out to be printed and we just. Everything we had written for that week just went away. We mobilized all the staffs for the papers. I went to a hospital. I went to a Metro station. I went to the Fairfax County emergency center.

Julia O'Donoghue

Sure.

Michael O'Connell

You know, when something was supposed to occur, all of the heads of the police department, fire department and everybody were there. They weren't particularly set up for having media there. When I got there, I think I was the only media person there.

They were still mobilizing units down to the Pentagon, and sort of trying to understand what that was going to mean. For us, after – I think I may have spoken about this on the podcast before – for the weeks following this, as a local newspaper, that story was really big for us because a lot of the people who were killed there lived in our communities. People knew them. You know, like there were across the country, there were memorials and bake sales and all types of things.

Julia O'Donoghue

Right.

Michael O'Connell

To tell that bigger story. When something big happens, it affects you not just in your job and in going out and writing the story, but if it is in your town, it is going to affect you as well. And your life and kind of how you are dealing with things. I think it is an interesting story. So let's stop talk about this interview you did, and actually listen to it.

Julia O'Donoghue

Yeah right.

Alex E. Weaver, staff writer, Bostinno

I'm Alex Weaver. I'm a senior lifestyle writer for BostInno.com, which is a news and lifestyle website out of Boston. The focus is on breaking news, tech, innovation and lifestyle. And I've been here since October.

Julia O'Donoghue

So how long has the site been around?

Alex E. Weaver

The site's been around since roughly 2010 and has grown exponentially since.

Julia O'Donoghue

OK. How many people work here?

Alex E. Weaver

Let's see, in Boston, I think we've got around 20 staffers. Four staff writers. I guess that might be up to six now, a handful of junior writers, a bunch of interns right now. Then, we have sales, marketing, editorial, etc.

Julia O'Donoghue

So do you all do hard news or are you mostly lifestyle stuff?

Alex E. Weaver

We definitely do hard news. The local pillar is a big one for us. So anything that's happening in Boston, in Massachusetts, that's breaking and of particular interest to our demographic, which skews younger than The Globe, we are covering always. The important note there is that our audience is more in the, like, 18 to 35 set. So discernibly younger than most of the print newspapers in the area.

Julia O'Donoghue

So is your staff mostly in that demographic too?

Alex E. Weaver

Yes. I am 28 and am an old man in this office for sure. We are. We're very young staff in general. A lot of young 20s to mid 20s.

Julia O'Donoghue

OK. So we are talking to you primarily to talk to you about the Boston marathon bombing and manhunt and how you all — or you — and maybe your publication covered that. So do you want to talk to me about, I guess, what you were doing the day of the marathon? Were you working? Or were you off?

Alex E. Weaver

We were working. The marathon trafficwise for the news website is obviously a big event. So we had an editorial calendar mapped out of how we were going to cover it — where to watch, what to expect, here are the top five people to keep an eye on, all of the typical stuff that goes along with one of the city's biggest events of the year. So we were all the in the office, here in Faneuil Hall. April 15. It was a Monday - marathon Monday. Our managing editor's brother was actually down at the finish line. So we started seeing very early ripples about something going on the finish line with the marathon. I believe this was kind of early mid-afternoonish. Twitter being kind of a forewarning as it is for most other news. We got a call from the guy we knew who was at the finish line who said a bomb just went off, people are hurt, you need to get down here now.

Julia O'Donoghue

So not someone on your staff?

Alex E. Weaver

Not someone on our staff. It was somebody related to somebody on our staff. He was fine. So that was all good there. So this was after the first explosion went off. Our managing editor and myself ran down there from here which is a mile and a

half or so — Faneuil Hall to Back Bay. So we got down there, I guess, shortly after and were en route when the second explosion went off. So we were basically going through the Boston Common and the Public Garden as the first people who had been there and witnessed it were coming the other way. So lots of horrified expressions and blood on clothing and crying and people just generally having no idea what was happening. So our goal was not to get to the blast site as soon as possible. It was to get to somebody who could tell us what was happening authoritatively as soon as possible. Like everybody else, we just didn't know what had happened and why and how many people had been hurt. So that was our initial reaction was basically to get to authority figures as quickly as possible.

Julia O'Donoghue

OK so did you think you were going to find those at the site? So you are passing a lot of people who, I am assuming, either saw what happened or heard it and are running away.

Alex E. Weaver

Right. This is the same thing we deal with on a lot of stories. Twitter has an uncanny knack of being the first thing to break news in a lot of senses.

Julia O'Donoghue

OK.

Alex E. Weaver

So we heard the first murmurs of this story. We heard them on Twitter. And Twitter is a double edged sword. It is very quick, but it's not always accurate. Our job for our readers was to get to somebody who could tell us exactly what was happening, and not rely on a bunch of people who were hearing things that had happened. We ran down and I started talking to police officers as soon as I got down there. Obviously, as respectfully as I possibly could, because this was an unprecedented for them too, but essentially we got confirmation very quickly that a bomb had gone off and a lot of people were hurt. That was basically all they were going to give us, but that alone, was solid, concrete confirmation of what everybody at that point was just fearing. So in that sense, it was very useful. Then, we stayed down there for a number of hours and our job was basically to relay photos and information back to the office where people were writing a live blog of everything that was happening. So we were the eyes on the scene and people back here were writing the story as we were feeding them information.

Julia O'Donoghue

And when you say a live blog, like a, like I think of a live blog as being one of those chats. I don't know.

Alex E. Weaver

No, so essentially a live blog, if you just think of it as a constantly updating news article. So time stamped, so you are not constantly changing an article, you are just constantly pushing the information down and adding the information on top, so I'd send a picture of 30 cops coming my way saying they are pushing us back another block. And they would say, "4:15 p.m., looks like they expanding the radius by another block, here's the update of what we know." And that's a model we used going forward, which was here's everything we know as we know it. That's something we got a lot of feedback from readers on they appreciated a lot. Our job, and I'm sure we'll touch on this later, but was not to be first and inaccurate. It was to be as quick as we possibly could, but what you are getting from us is what's actually happening, not what everybody else is saying is happening, which was incredibly hard to do in this whole scenario.

Julia O'Donoghue

OK. So you get confirmation from a police officer and then what do you do? Once you have gotten the information back here?

Alex E. Weaver

So ideally I was calling back to the office and just relaying quotes to our team. At that point, it was all hands on deck. Nobody was working on anything else. So I'd say: "Listen, I just talked to cop who confirmed a bomb had gone off, people are injured, here's this exact quote, that's all he's giving me. I asked him x, y and z. He's declined to comment." Then, they would update the post with that information. The hurdle we were running into is cell lines were essentially blocked because there were 500,000 people trying to call somebody, so it was incredibly hard to get a call through. So I was either tweeting or texting back if I could. But even those were fairly hit or miss. So it was a quick relay of information, but the sheer amount of people trying to relay information made it slower than it could have been.

Julia O'Donoghue

Were you tweeting like publicly or like specifically at people back here?

Alex E. Weaver

Publicly. So I was tweeting under the BostInno handle and "Reporter on the ground with BostInno. Boston police just said x." That's another advantage of having somebody on the ground who just went there immediately. Since the chain of command was broken by so many people trying to talk to people, I could just tweet stuff right from there, which was essentially faster than me trying to tell people back here to do it.

Julia O'Donoghue

I guess, what happened after that? .

Alex E. Weaver

I can't even say it was controlled chaos. There wasn't that much control about it. It was just utter chaos down there as you can imagine. Nobody including police and fire and SWAT had any idea what was happening at that point. This was literally minutes after these two explosions had gone off. There was a lot of confusion and a lot of the blast radius perimeter just being expanded and just pushing people just further and further back. So we were down there as long as we could be. We were told there would be a media briefing at a certain hotel. So to go there. So, we tried to go there. There were kind of bomb sniffing dogs and some sort of alert in that building specifically so the briefing was called off. So essentially, after being down there for a few hours, we powwowed at our founder and CEO's place, which was down near the bombing site, just kind of figured out a plan of attack and went our separate ways, but stayed online as soon as we got home.

Julia O'Donoghue

Oh. You went your separate ways, like you went home. And then did you guys meet back up in the morning?

Alex E. Weaver

Yup. So we had one of our writers who had written the piece during the day, everybody was keeping an eye on the news all night. So if something big came up, we were updating the piece just as we had done all day. We were back in the office at 7:30 or 8 the next morning, which was when I decided it was a good idea to have a live blog — just one piece dedicated to everything we knew and everything we were learning in real time. So I wrote that for the rest of the week. I wrote one of those a day that ended up being several thousand words each just cause there was so much information coming in. Our job at that point was to cull the information to what was accurate and not to put up what we were hearing right away. A lot of what was going on Twitter and going on CNN and going on CBS — going everywhere — wasn't, in fact, what was happening. It was just what a critical mass of people thought.

Julia O'Donoghue

Right. Yeah. A lot of people made a lot of big mistakes.

Alex E. Weaver

Yeah there was a lot of that. And there was, you know, the manhunt was when that really came to a head. So, that was what, overnight Thursday to Friday of that week.

Julia O'Donoghue

Right, so the marathon was Monday? OK. .

Alex E. Weaver

The manhunt went on all week. There was a lot — nobody knew who had done it at that point. The finish line was strategic in that, if you are going to set a bomb off, there is a ton of people huddled in one place. It was also not wise because there were hundreds of thousands of cameras trained on that place as well. So essentially as soon as it happened — it was all very hush, hush — but it was basically a call to arms to get as much video footage and camera footage as humanly possible to see who had done this. So that took a few days, just sheer volume of information. But Thursday of that week, I believe, is when the FBI released the surveillance footage of these two guys they suspected were responsible. And then, a couple of hours later, those two guys came out of the woodwork of their own volition and all hell broke loose in Boston.

Julia O'Donoghue

And you guys were all, because that happened overnight, I'm sorry — I was abroad so it was happening during the day for me — so that was happening overnight for you all. So were you guys at home — whatever you're doing, sleeping, whatever.

Alex E. Weaver

Yeah. Essentially. It happened at like I think 11ish — 10:30 or 11. So we essentially woke up to absolute chaos on the information front. So much happened overnight. These two guys had allegedly shot an MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology] police officer. They had allegedly robbed a gas station. There was a lot of allegedlys going around. They were at large. We knew who they were. We had a name — Tamerlan and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev — for both of them, which we didn't have the night before. So they'd essentially had been ID'ed and committed more crimes. One of them was dead. Tamerlan had been killed in a shoot out with police in Watertown. And his brother had fled the scene, was injured, but had fled the scene, but gotten away.

Julia O'Donoghue

Are you guys trying to cover this, in terms of your publication or website, are you guys trying to cover this remotely at that point? Because I am assuming that you all live in different places.

Alex E. Weaver

Yes. So we wake up to an email from our managing editor. At this point, Boston is on lock down. So we can't come to the office if we wanted to. So we're all working remotely, which was horrible. It was incredibly hard.

Julia O'Donoghue

Why was it hard?

Alex E. Weaver

Cause one of the best things about working in an office with everybody is that as stuff comes in you can just yell it out. And if somebody might already been on it. Somebody might say: "No, I just heard this from this source." Somebody might say, "Send me the link to that source." It is so much faster to huddle up as a team and audible information, as opposed to essentially relying on gchat and an email thread to make sure all your bases are covered. You have your writers covering what you want them to cover. No information is slipping through the cracks. Things are getting published as they come in. And, more than anything at that point, you are publishing accurate information and not inaccurate information. And the morning of the manhunt, that Friday morning, there was more inaccurate information going around than there was accurate information by exponential amounts. It wasn't even close. So half the stuff we were getting told was some Twitter handle saying they had heard something that didn't check out.

Julia O'Donoghue

So where were you trying to get your information?

Alex E. Weaver

In a situation like this, which again was unprecedented for everybody, but being a smaller, digital publication, we just don't have the head count to dispatch reporters to all of these locations. At this point, it wasn't really up to us to break a bunch of this news. We do, we're great at breaking news in our wheelhouses. Tech and innovation and startups — we break news in that capacity all the time. In something like this, for us, The Globes and the CBSes and the Foxes and the CNNs — I mean everybody was there at this point. So our job was to dispatch the right story to our readers and not just depend on trustworthy sources and what they were saying at face value. But double and triple check and make sure we were hearing it from several credible sources before anything was going on our website.

Julia O'Donoghue

Did you guy have any staff members who were living in Watertown or any of the other really affected areas?

Alex E. Weaver

We did not have any staff members in Watertown, which you know, frankly would have been nice. Because we could have had somebody get out there and obviously not be in the line of fire so to speak. But, you know, to have somebody on the scene would have been helpful, but again, we were less concerned with breaking facets of this news than we were with just telling what was actually happening.

Julia O'Donoghue

Did your traffic go up?

Alex E. Weaver

Yeah. Oh yeah. Absolutely.

Julia O'Donoghue

If you didn't feel like it was important to break news, do you feel like you lost readers because you weren't breaking news?

Alex E. Weaver

No, not at all. I think it was actually the opposite. We had, I think, one of the biggest pieces of feedback we got after the fact was that people learned to come to Boston for the facts, not for the hearsay, not for the rumors. But if you want to just understand what is actually happening to date, then people were coming to us to read that, which was great to hear for us because that was our goal. So that, in that sense, I think we supplied a lot of value and a service to our readers. You have a lot of major national publications relaying false information, which, again, it was an unprecedented event and I think to some degree, that can happen. It was happening on a pretty large scale. It hurt those publications.

Julia O'Donoghue

Can I ask you, do you feel like, was that happening with the local news organizations too? I mean I think we all famously know, I feel like it was CNN, really messed up. But was that happening with your local television affiliates and The Globe and WBUR and stuff?

Alex E. Weaver

Yup. It was. There was, I believe CNN said first that Dzhokar had been arrested and was in custody and was heading to the Moakley Federal Courthouse and The Globe picked that up pretty quickly after that and also ran that. We ran that too, but we had a big allegedly in the headline. And were very cautious in the body to say "according to these facts and that has yet to be confirmed."

At the same time, I was down at the courthouse, waiting for a suspect to show up, who didn't exist. He wasn't even in custody at all, let alone arrested. So that was a big one. The Globe did a tremendous job with their coverage. That was, I would say, a pretty small hiccup on an otherwise very impressive track record covering this whole thing. It was hard to do. I think The Globe did a good job. CNN did. Everybody did a good job. There was an unfortunate amount of misinformation flying around.

Julia O'Donoghue

Do you know if you guys have retained any of the readers or people who were coming to the site from then, now?

Alex E. Weaver

I don't know the metrics for that to be honest. I do know that we see a level increment of readers kind of month to month. My guess would be it spiked that month, and we saw more retention in readers from that month to the next than we do typically. There was no way your traffic wasn't going to spike during an event like that, especially because we're a Boston local website and this happened in our own backyard. I would think our readers spiked in that month.

Julia O'Donoghue

So what have you guys done since the big manhunt when I'm assuming most national organizations pulled out somewhat at the end of that? What have you done since then?

Alex E. Weaver

My job, since the marathon happened was to cover — I dropped everything else I was doing. My beat became the Boston marathon bombings. I personally wrote nothing but Boston marathon coverage for probably three weeks. I don't know the exact number of articles it was, but it was probably between 40 and 50.

The manhunt was essentially the beginning of this whole thing. The bombings happened. The manhunt happened. And then, who is this person? Why did he do this? That's what everybody wanted to know. He's from Cambridge. He went to school at UMass-Dartmouth. There were so many facets of this story that remained unclear that it was basically all I could do to keep up for three weeks.

There was a lot of stuff that didn't make the cut for us. That was up to my discretion and our managing editor and our other writers. Pieces of news would come up. Something about his fiancée say or his mother in Russia. Things of that nature. The Globe just ran a piece on the fiancée, what are her thoughts. It would be, should we write something about it? Should we not? And, you know, if we decided we should, then we did, and if not, I'd roll it into another piece and then move on. There was certainly no shortage of stuff to write for weeks and weeks after.

Julia O'Donoghue

I'm assuming, I know that you're from nearby, and I'm assuming other people in your office are from here. How do you balance, I mean presumably, some of you all had concerns about family members or loved ones during the manhunt or during the bombing? Do you want to talk about how you navigated that?

Alex E. Weaver

Sure. I mean, essentially, soon after the bombings happened, our director of business operations sent out an email that was basically like, is everybody accounted for? We knew there had been a couple of interns and some other people who were down near the finish line, if not right at the finish line. So first order of business was to make sure every staff member was OK and accounted

for, which we did very quickly. So it was either, you know, a couple of interns were together and one of them shot an email, you know, us three are fine. Everybody chimed in quickly so we knew everyone from the office was fine.

You know I think from personal experience, I know a lot of my friends and family were calling and texting and tweeting or trying because I was down in the middle of it all. There was a lot of, listen we heard this happened in Boston, are you OK? I hope I didn't scare anybody too much, because I couldn't respond to those as quickly as some people would have liked. But in general, I think there was a lot of quick calls, quick texts saying I'm fine, but I have a lot to do. So you it was scary and we knew that there were people down there from our office, some of them very close to the finish line. First reaction was, "Is everybody OK?" Second reaction was, "We have to get this news up as quickly as possible."

Julia O'Donoghue

So what are you, I mean I'm assuming you are still tracking stuff? What are you looking for now? This will not go up for two or three weeks so —

Alex E. Weaver

Right. Yeah. So Dzhokhar Tsarnaev is in a prison hospital in Western Massachusetts recovering.

Julia O'Donoghue

How far away is that?

Alex E. Weaver

I want to say roughly 45 minutes or so. So, you know, he is still in the area recovering. He has a probable cause hearing coming up in a couple of weeks. His family is probably going to be coming for that. He's getting a phone call once per month now I believe.

So tracking his recovery is important because he couldn't talk to begin with because of a bullet wound to the throat. So he was only writing answers immediately after capture. And now he is speaking, which is a big development obviously, for a pending case. So there's that, there's the legal side to everything. It's essentially boiling down to live in prison or a death sentence. So tracking all of that is going to be interesting.

And then the other side of this, which was a major consideration for us throughout all of this is, how much attention to we give to the bombing suspects? And how much attention do we give to the victims? It's a fine line. You have to pay them both their just attention or you're not doing your job. So that was though going forward because there was so much information from both sides. Three people were killed over 260 were injured, some grievously. There were lots of amputees, double digit amputees. A 9-year-old boy died. So tracking the human

stories behind this was the other important part of all of this coverage. And then our city officials' responses and kind of how the city as a working government responded was big. So the One Fund. Mayor [Thomas] Menino started the One Fund, which has got 30 or 40, \$45 million now. So that money and how that is going to be allocated as restitution for the families and the victims. There's a lot of pieces to the puzzle that aren't going to fall in place for a long time.

Julia O'Donoghue

Have you guys mainly been covering this through like the written word so to speak?

Alex E. Weaver

What do you mean?

Julia O'Donoghue

You said you were taking pictures when you were down there. Right. Do you continue to do that? Or is it just —

Alex E. Weaver

We will go out and take pictures when we can. So the memorial on Boylston Street is probably something we have all been down to since. We have pictures of that and various other events that have been happening around this whole thing. There have been a ton of — It's not just the One Fund. Companies and people raising money for this thing has been immense and nonstop. Just about how does a city help when something like this happens. There's a feeling of just helplessness. I feel lucky that I wasn't affected and people I love weren't affected. But now, I feel like there is something I should be doing. A lot of efforts were spawned on that front. We are out covering it when we can. If not, we're in here, working our sources, treating it like any other story.

Julia O'Donoghue

Final question, or maybe two. So you said there was maybe a lot of not so helpful information on Twitter.

Alex E. Weaver

Yup.

Julia O'Donoghue

Could you maybe talk a little bit about, did you guys use it to any advantage too? Was it mostly not helpful at all?

Alex E. Weaver

Twitter for me, and I think for us, in a lot of ways, is a really helpful early warning system. So it can, a lot of what you hear on there, is 100 percent accurate.

People who have been, who are in the media or have been in the media or know people in the media are just there. They are literally watching this first hand, when a reporter might not be there. So it's extremely helpful as a way to tune your radar toward something. For us, unless it's a locked in source of ours, we're never going to publish something because one Twitter handle says it's fact. So that I think was the biggest challenge, especially on the Friday of the manhunt. Twitter was erupting with information. I have a column in TweetDeck for my #Boston. I just had to turn it off. I had to delete it. So did everyone else in the office because it was literally going too fast to read. So Twitter was helpful in the sense that it gave us an idea of what might be happening early. The challenge was then verifying what we were hearing on Twitter from sources elsewhere to the point where we couldn't trust that it was true.

Julia O'Donoghue

The other thing I am going to ask is a little bit off topic. I am going to assume that you all don't have a paywall.

Alex E. Weaver

No.

Julia O'Donoghue

OK. Does that affect — the fact that The Globe has a paywall — does that affect how you approach things at all?

Alex E. Weaver

No. So our approach is not to worry or really think what The Globe is doing at all. That might be different if we were targeting similar audiences, but we're really not. Like I said, our readership skews much younger and it is just kind of different across the board. I am sure there is some overlap like there is everywhere. Our job is hit our readers how we hit our readers, and really not to concern ourselves with what The Globe is doing.