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CONSIDERATIONS OF THE POLITICAL CONTENT OF TELEVISION BROADCASTS
DOES THE MEDIA PROVIDE QUALITY POLITICAL CONTENT THROUGH TELEVISION BROADCASTS?

Does the media provide quality political content through television broadcasts? This is not a cumbersome question to answer. Lippman (1965) refers to the press “as a restless beacon that jumps from one episode to another. It covers events, not issues, and we should ask that it only excel at this task (p. 229).” Lippman’s argument is adroit in showing the media as a tabloid magazine that highlights scandals over hard news. I agree with him when he makes this inference. However, in opposition, I believe the modern day media is given the responsibility of providing paramount issues to the voting population, but in many cases, the public is given soft news that emphasizes stories not germane to understanding issues that impact their lives.

As the Democrats attempt to elect a candidate to oppose President Bush in November, it seems the media is busy covering stories about the candidates that at times deal more with their rhetorical miscues and choice of dress, than their political positions. For example, should Howard Dean have screamed to his supporters after his loss in the Iowa caucus? As a person who teaches classes dealing with public speaking and interpersonal communication, I would have advised Mr. Dean that this mode of presentational style would only increase the barrage of media castigation that made him a legitimate target of the media. In addition, should it matter why Wesley Clark decided to wear sweaters on the campaign trail? These type of banal examples continue to push the media to a level that caters to ratings that emphasize quantity over quality.

Therefore I will pose the question, does television broadcasting promote quality political content that informs its viewing audience? Throughout this paper, I will argue the media incorporates a burglar alarm approach, that emphasizes expedi-
ent messages that focus on news that is either trivial or scandalous, and that does not promote the civil well being of our society. In order to adequately assess the significance of quality in television broadcasting, it will be important to do the following. First, to show the current trend in television broadcasting in the areas of soft and hard news. Second, to discuss Zaller’s (2003) concept of the burglar alarm and its implication in determining news quality. Third, to analyze audience reaction and perceptions of the news. Finally, I will provide an overall analysis of the findings and some future research implications that communication scholars can explore in their potential research endeavors.

**SOFT AND HARD NEWS AS LEARNING TOOLS FOR THE AUDIENCE**

Quality in general is a difficult term to define but, in dealing with political news, it sometimes depends on the stations procedures and the importance of ratings. Most of the discussion begins with soft and hard news and their importance to quality programming. According to Tom Peterson (2004), he defines “soft news as typically more sensational, more personality centered, less time bound more practical, and more incident based than other news” (P. 4). There are numerous researchers who find Peterson’s definition to be germane and advantageous to a 21st Century population that prefers news that highlights stories of human affairs and tabloid journalism. For example, not only would the evening news be included as a form of soft news in some contexts, but such shows as *Entertainment Tonight* and *Oprah Winfrey* would be included in this category.

Political news on television is often defined as intellectual junk food, according to most of the scholarly literature dealing with this topic (Graber, 2001). However, in opposition, others feel that soft news could be employed as a pedagogical tool that enhances non participate individuals to be informed on issues, even if these issues are sensationalistic in their content and style (Baum, 2003). Since our attention span is so small, it seems the issues that will most resonate with audiences are ones that grab their attention. For example, the Janet Jackson debacle during the halftime show at the Superbowl became a front-page news story covered by both local and national telecasts. The next evening, *Nightline* spent their entire program discussing sexual messages dealing with such topics as music videos, movies, and advertising. In sum, some researchers would argue that soft news in this context enabled the media to discuss an issue of both political and ideological significance that impacts the lives of American voters. Prior (2003) informs us that “by focusing on the more entertaining, shocking, or scandalous aspects of politics, soft news offers these people an alternative that maximizes their utility because it combines entertainment and information” (p.150). Adhering to this definition, it would seem that quality in news outlets that adhere to a soft news format would not lead to an informed and intellectual voting population.

However, there are some researchers who would disagree with the above assertion—based upon the concept of ratings and audience viewership. For instance, during the ratings period of 2002, the *Oprah Winfrey Show* reached seven million viewers (Baum, 2003). In addition, other shows with high ratings include *Entertainment Tonight*, *Access Hollywood*, and *Extra*. These shows are not exhaustive, but indicative, of some of the soft news formats available to discursive audiences. I am not making the inference that the above is quality programming. It seems like the term quality in this debate is subjective depending upon the researcher defining this term.
For instance, some argue that coverage of issues on soft news outlets enabled those dealing with the travesty of 9/11 to be more well informed on the issues (Baum, 2003). Moreover, soft news is said to rely more so than traditional news on episodic, rather than thematic, framing of stories. Research in social psychology, in turn, has found that people are more likely to recall information presented in an episodic manner, because it is more vivid and episodic frames tend to have a stronger impact on individuals’ attention (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). According to Baum (2003):

My findings in this limited statistical investigation suggest that exposure to soft news does most likely have at least some effect on factual knowledge, at least with respect to those aspects of high profile issues, like foreign crises, that attract substantial soft news coverage, and at least in the short run. (p. 185).

What is not included in Baum’s research is whether this soft news can be labeled as something of quality that enhances the lives of everyday citizens. Following this paradigm, it seems the goal of the news is public attention more than public education. Therefore, even though others argue about the utility of soft news, it still seems this type of news format is more entertainment than quality. Let’s now turn to looking at hard news and its implications to quality programming.

According to Bennett (1997), “hard news may be defined as information about current public affairs and government topics (p.3.)” Even though some of the research would purport sensationalized news is the hot topic at hand, it still seems hard news is a paramount variable in informing the public about important issues. According to Prior (2003)

Soft news formats were mentioned most often as particularly disliked news format. While people like traditional formats, notably local news, and newspapers, or feel indifferent toward them, soft news seems to be loved by some, hated by others. Traditional hard news formats remain far more popular than soft news (p. 152).

There is evidence that states quality news actually sells. Some of the research illuminates the claim that quality news costs more, but is pushed away because of economic concerns (Bennett, 2003). In a society built on capitalism, it seems a final product that stresses sensationalism over substance would make sense in a world that embraces ratings over quality. The Project for Excellence in Journalism, that tracks the content and audience ratings of 146 local television news programs, finds the strongest performing stations currently are those emphasizing hard news.

However, numerous researchers would disagree with the above observation. Graber (2001, 2003) argues the media provides a plethora of examples of quality programming to their viewing audiences. According to Graber (2003):

A viewer tuned in to 30 minutes of network news on ABC, CBS, NBC for six days a week, and a 60 minute CNN newscast once a week, would get a political lesson lasting two hours and 25 minutes-longer than the weekly classroom time for many college level political science courses. The lesson would be composed of roughly 43 minutes of foreign news, 32 minutes of general domestic news, 30 minutes of
news dealing with various social issues, 24 minutes of news about the environment, and 16 minutes of economic news. Polls show the public learns from these genres of presentation: 76 percent of the respondents agreed in a nationwide 2000 Pew survey that news magazines like 60 Minutes, 20/20, or Dateline help them to understand an issue (p. 146).

Graber’s rhetoric points to a society that seems to be well informed on issues. This point will be discussed later in this analysis but for now, it will be important to look at some statistics agreeing with Graber’s assertions. It has been stated that people who like the evening news seem on average to be more educated and well informed on both local, national, and international problems. Prior states:

The percentage of Americans who say they follow network news regularly is about three to four times higher than the percentage of regular viewers of any particular talk show or entertainment news program. It is even more interesting to observe that the popularity of soft news, at least of Pew’s selection of it, did not increase noticeably over time (p. 154).

In the above instance, it would seem people who follow news that adheres to a more serious content, would be more well informed on issues not dealing with news highlighting sensationalistic journalism. Patterson (2003) espouses this point when he says “that hard news consumers” (p. 140). In sum, individuals who are regular viewers of hard news tune into the news for its information purposes rather than its entertainment function. Prior (2003) backs this up when he asserts “people with a preference for news are unlikely to enjoy formats whose mission is to entertain, shock, and scare, as well as inform-unless they also happen to have a strong preference for entertainment” (p. 156).

In the above paragraphs, information presented on both soft and hard news shows the discursive frames of reference researchers attempt to construct when arguing which type of news is productive to their viewing audiences. As one can see, both groups attempt to provide an adroit argument showing the utility for their news choices. In the following section, I will discuss how the burglar alarm makes it impossible for news to discuss political events or issues from an intellectual frame of reference.

THE SOUND OF MEDIOCRITY: THE BURGLAR ALARM’S IMPLICATIONS

Since this paper is dealing with the quality of political coverage in television broadcasting, it is probably important to note that quality political programming no longer exists in the 21st Century. I will make a broad statement and say it probably has never existed. There are some programs that don’t pander to audience ratings. However, these shows are few in number if one truly analyzes true quality. According to Bennett (2003), he says, “What has happened to the news in the past twenty years is that it has shifted in the direction of soft news and sensationalism, resulting in the continual sounding burglar alarms on any number of issues—often just because they are shocking—and turning citizens off in the bargain” (p. 131). I concur with Bennett’s observations. In fact, it seems even once serious news agencies are pandering to an audience that wants stories focusing on the lowest common denominator. For example, one
The current story in the news is the problems facing Martha Stewart. During the ABC Evening News, the story was covered three times on the February 9-11 evening broadcasts. Possibly the argument can be made that it shows white-collar crimes. However, this is not Enron, it is Martha Stewart. Should this be a topic of importance to the American people?

Some researchers argue for this type of approach. Zaller (2003) “refers to it as the burglar alarm. The key idea is that news should provide information in the manner of attention catching burglar alarms about acute problems, rather than police patrols that pose no immediate problems.” (p. 110). Zaller’s definition is interesting for several reasons. First, there is no reason to argue for this new paradigm because the news currently follows this template. Second, I tend to agree with Zaller that too many irrelevant stories such as shark attacks and violence escalate social anxiety on topics that are irrelevant to the viewing audience. However, to me, the media already is involved in both of these functions. Bennett (2003) has his own unique observation of this problem when he asserts:

This incessant ringing of alarms about dubious problems, unseemly scandals, and daily threats to health and safety discourages citizens from taking the press, politicians, and public life seriously. And the news, unlike the ideal burglar alarm in homes or businesses, sounds false alarms at an alarming rate (p. 131).

Even though I agree with Bennett’s observations, it still seems media spectacles constructed by various agencies make some audience members yearn for news that stresses entertainment over information. The news can be looked upon in comparison to a shark looking for blood in the water. Sabato (1993) says a “feeding frenzy as the press coverage attending any political event or circumstance where a critical mass of journalists leap to cover the same embarrassing or scandalous subject and pursue it intensely, often excessively, and sometimes uncontrollably” (p. 53). Defining this as quality depends on the individual defining quality in the evening news. Individuals purporting to embrace either a hard or soft news format have binary opposite frames of reference on this important topic. Some define news quality as whether news provides a sufficiently rich and engaging ration of political information to make democracy work (Zaller, 2003). If one follows the current template of soft news makers, it would seem to one the needs of an educated public are being established for their viewing population. However, in opposition, Patterson (2003) asserts that “soft news and critical journalism are weakening the foundation of democracy by diminishing the public’s information about public affairs and its information about public policy” (p. 2). Both of the above researchers seem to be in conflict with each other, but it is this disagreement that enables communication scholars to debate this important and relevant topic.

One thing is certain; there are many people who feel the burglar alarm/soft news approach is performing admirably in meeting the needs of the general public. It is said that one of the most important parts for assessing quality is it should provide the information citizens need to discharge their democratic responsibilities (Zaller, 2003). However, in opposition, some individual definitions of democracy are certainly open to interpretation. Perhaps the idea of an informed citizen is being defined in a post modern way in the 21st Century. An informed citizen would keep themselves suffi-
ciently informed so they could judge candidates and issues objectively. Scudson’s (1998) book *Good Citizen* focuses on the idea of the monitorial citizen.

From this perspective, the citizen would only look for stories requiring responses. In many ways, he is advocating for the individual to scan the headlines for the most important information. According to Scudson (1998):

> Picture parents watching small children at the community pool. They are not gathering information; they are keeping an eye on the scene. They look inactive, but they are poised for action if action is required. The monitorial citizen is not an absentee citizen but watchful, even while he or she is doing something else (p. 311).

This is an interesting scenario. However, it is troubling to me from both the perspective of the sender and receiver of the message. What is inferred in this message is that the citizen becomes passive in the process of actually participating in the news or of really understanding the most important news of the day. McManus (1992) says, “From an economic perspective, news stories which are of general interest and arouse emotional responses such as human interest stories are more likely to attract attention from the audience, although they may do little to help consumers make sense of current events” (p. 801). As a tool of pedagogy, it would seem the news and media outlets in general are more worried about ratings than quality of their broadcasts.

Bennett (2003) says, “News alarms can misrepresent the magnitude or the direction of public issues, creating impressions of crises or worsening conditions where no such conditions in fact exist” (p. 134). For instance, escalating crime in specific areas, overestimating shark attacks, or any other story focusing more on scare tactics than substantive information. The burglar alarm approach would seem to attract this type of story. Additionally, if the effect of soft news is restricted to the most entertaining stories of the soft news topics, it seems to me it would be hard to defend it on the grounds that it informs people about politics (Prior, 2003). These include the story of Monica Lewinsky interview and other types of stories that attempt to take a serious subject from an entertainment perspective therefore, negating some of the real persisting in our society. One of the paradoxes of a culture of fear is that serious problems remain widely ignored (Glassner, 1999.). Possibly, it is the cause of what Gerbner would define as the mean world syndrome. In sum, the more you view television the more you will believe we live in a more cruel place than actually exists. The above would certainly lend credence to a burglar alarm that needs to be activated in order to find the criminal and charge them for the crime. However, in the case of some stories covered by the media, the public should be informed whether the crime really needs to be told as an epidemic of large proportions or an anomaly of society.

Crime is a topic often discussed in the media. Certainly this topic has some validity. However, individuals asked in a national poll why they believe the country has a serious crime problem, 76 percent of people cited stories they had seen in the media. Only 22 percent cited personal experience (Baum, 2003). This is not negating the seriousness of crime; it is showing how the media may manipulate a problem that doesn’t effect more than 76 percent of the population. Glassner (1999) says, “The streets of America are not more dangerous than a war zone, and the media should not convey they are”
Drug abuse in some cases also falls into the above category. Whatever the category, it seems at times the media escalates the problem. Therefore, what we are receiving as a public seems to be news outlets focused more on irrelevant stories and less on stories that impact the average American.

This section attempted to show how the burglar alarm approach is examined by discursive critics. One thing is for certain; the burglar alarm approach is now a part of the mainstream media. The only question to ask is whether this approach is sounding the right alarms? This question is up for interpretation.

AUDIENCE REACTIONS TO THE NEWS

Gauging audience reactions to the news can be a cumbersome process. Some research purports audiences are satisfied with the news. However, in opposition, people who believe in a hard news format feel this is a dichotomy because they are responding to news featuring a soft news format. This section will attempt to highlight the research findings of audience perceptions to the news.

Some argue it is impossible for the general public to be interested in issues impacting their lives. (Graber, 2003). Therefore, Graber and other researchers call for soft news, which at least makes the audience attracted to current events. According to Graber (2003):

By and large, television viewers are pleased with much of current television fare. A vast variety of news, talk, and public affairs programs, available at all hours of the day and night, contain the same information about current affairs and political problems that viewers mention when asked what news offerings they would like to see (p. 3).

In addition to the above quote, some feel devoid of the hardness or softness of the issue, television provides needed information for its viewing audience, that differs both economically and educationally. Shows such as 60 Minutes or 20/20 or Nightline provides important information to their audience members. Three quarters (76 percent) of the public agreed in 2000 with the statement in a Pew Survey that news magazines like 60 Minutes, 20/20 or Dateline help me to really understand an issue (Pew, 2000). Some don't see the difference between hard and soft news. To them, news people watch, whether ideologically significant or not, provides information to a society with an aversion to learning. Some of this distaste may be based on both educational and class status. Therefore, from a soft news perspective, it would seem the vast majority of the stories in prime time news magazines feature economic and social news with an emphasis on stories relevant to average people's lives (Graber, 2003).

Most of the research I have included in this section argues most individuals are satisfied with information they receive from media outlets. However, it must be stated most of this information has been derived from media scholars who embrace a soft news perspective. According to Pew (2001):

Sixty-one percent of viewers claim to be very or fairly satisfied with news offerings. Satisfaction levels with general programming have risen four percentage points since 1994, while dropping one percentage point for news programming, when
'very' and 'fairly' satisfied ratings are combined. When asked “How good of a job does the evening news do in summing up the events of the day?” Eighteen percent of the respondents in a 2000 nationwide poll gave it an “excellent” rating and 50 percent called it “good”, while 21 percent said it was “only fair” and four percent labeled it “poor”. Seven percent gave no rating.

From my own individual perspective, I would not concur with the above information based on my preferences for more sophisticated news. However, the above information should not be taken for granted. Some individuals actually enjoy the entertaining aspect of the news. According to Graber (2001):

> Average Americans profess to cherish intellectual news that presents sophisticated analysis but, at the same time, they want it to be simple, personalized, and entertaining, though not too blatantly fluffy. They want in-dept, contextualized coverage as long as it can be crowded into snippets measured in seconds and the whole newscast does not delay them from other pursuits for more than thirty seconds (p. 22).

The above observation is troubling. It seems the people watching news want what they are already receiving. This to me is an unfortunate circumstance, even though people view these programs, they may be viewing these programs for information that only entertains and not informs. Graber argued earlier that we receive 2 hours and 25 minutes a week of news. However, if the news is delivered in the above template, it might be wise to surmise we are not receiving anything that we could define as quality news. Whatever the case, the audience seems satisfied.

**CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Defining quality is a nebulous task for anyone studying the political content of television news. To answer the thesis statement of this paper, I find that quality news does not exist in the current marketplace. If quality is defined by the number of people who tune into a broadcast, then some networks feel they are delivering quality programming to their audience members. In most cases, quality from this perspective would involve news from a soft news frame of reference. Some have argued this old/new burglar alarm approach is enhancing the learning of the viewing audience. But Baum (2003) asserts that in “contrast to hard news consumers, individuals who watch soft news shows do so primarily in search of entertainment, not enlightenment.” (p. 187) Therefore, to me, the networks have and still maintain that an audience should be entertained and not informed. But maybe the critic is more disturbed than the everyday consumer.

I am not advocating quality programming does not exist. I believe it does in certain instances. I believe quantity exists. However, quality is now being distributed evenly in such news outlets ranging from the evening news to the New York Times, to Entertainment Tonight, to Cops. This is further articulated by Patterson (2003) when he asserts “Information is a vital part of the public’s influence today. Every community needs a sizeable group of citizens who are reasonably informed about what government
and groups are doing.” (P. 141).

In some instances, some people would follow the above quote by being informed on issues. However, some of the issues presented by the media seem more interested in stories dealing with areas of entertainment. Learning does not seem to be part of the equation.

Future communication scholars need to continue to study quality programming and its impact on informing the public about important political news and events. At present, the alarm continues to sound without any emergency worth the urgency of the alarm system. The sound is not only annoying, but it is sounded too often where an emergency never existed.

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There is a new era being born, one steeped in traditions but daring enough to forge new approaches to an older genre. Radio documentary, or now more appropriately called audio documentary, finds itself in an exciting new place. It’s being revived and redefined and it’s essential to embrace the emerging new styles and models, and, most importantly, to teach them in our classrooms.

National Public Radio’s *This American Life* is partially responsible for extending the definition of what a radio/audio documentary is and can be. The stories told on this program, and others born from its style, are certainly not your father’s documentaries. Yes, the fundamentals are there: facts and intelligent opinion based on fact, strong research, and impeccable observation. But the new-era documentary has a broader definition, one born out of storytelling models and reflections on the human condition.

**MODELS OF NEW-ERA DOCUMENTARY**

To embrace the new models, one must first accept the new documentary as a broad discipline; one that has expanded to allow for new stories, new discoveries and shared experiences. One of the best places to discover and study the new models and styles of documentary is on National Public Radio. But NPR can be studied even more deeply on a website dedicated to the exchange of audio features and documentaries — [www.prx.org](http://www.prx.org). The Public Radio Exchange (PRX) describes itself on its website as an “online marketplace for distribution, review, and licensing of public radio programming. The mission of PRX is to create more opportunities for diverse programming of exceptional quality, interest, and importance to reach more listeners.” Within this broad description, one finds audio storytelling through traditional journalism-based documentary reporting, as well as stories told through the models of audio diary, journaling, reflective writing, narrative essay, and even memoir.

To illustrate this point, consider one undeniably powerful piece told through a reflective and personal journaling style:
My Lobotomy, by David Isay and Piya Kochlar. This piece is about one man’s quest to uncover the hidden story behind the lobotomy he received as a 12-year old child. This story is told through the eyes and thoughts of the main character. Instead of an observer telling the story, the details are brought into focus through the very personal approach of allowing the central figure to be the narrator.

In the piece Diary of a New York City Bike Messenger, a 10-minute documentary about the day in the life of a busy messenger, the narrator again is the central figure and the approach is audio diary. There’s a storytelling design used in this work that employs clear narrative elements – pacing, conflict, and even humor.

These are not the only examples of what might be labeled new documentary forms. There are many more. Do they always work effectively? No. But that’s true of any audio form. The significant features are the approach and the style. Each deserves recognition and consideration. Certainly, the new forms should take nothing away from traditional approaches with hard journalistic frameworks. You will continue to find effective pieces in this style on NPR, the BBC, in the work of countless independent producers, and even on-line venues like Audible.com. And certainly the strong work being done at the Salt Institute in Maine and at the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University is viable and important. But what the new forms allow are more voices to be heard, more perspectives, more stories from people who may not have thought about telling those stories, and from people intimidated by the discipline believing they had to have a hard journalism background and or education to produce good audio documentary.

ANALYZING AND USING THE NEW MODELS IN THE COLLEGE CLASSROOM

It is impossible and irresponsible to get to the truth of a story, or what may be the near-truth, without deep research, observation, and study. These key concepts remain core to the documentary discipline, but in the new-era one must allow reflection and the art of storytelling to have their place and, more importantly, permit them to drive the core focus of the documentary.

An example of a documentary that mixes traditional research-based work with reflective work is entitled Just Another Fish Story by Molly Menschel, a graduate of the Salt Institute for Documentary Studies in Portland, Maine. The piece is about the town of Lubec, Maine and the story of a 60-ton finback whale that washed up onto the beach of this coastal town. The story is told through the voices of the townspeople; there is no traditional narrator, and most importantly, it is told through observation and reflection.

Audio diary and journaling approaches are also being used more often. An example of this style is a piece entitled My Struggle with Obesity by Czerina Patel with Samr Tayeh. This is a deeply personal story that resonates for so many people who struggle with body weight or any other health issue. The style is one that allows the listener to feel as if they are entering a world where they previously had not been permitted; where the personal thoughts of the principle character are being revealed without boundaries. These are the stories found below the skin, not the investigative or journalistic approaches used to uncover social injustices and folly, but rather the deep self contemplation of human successes, failures, triumphs and tragedies, that we all share and are both unique to the individual and universal to all of us.

In the radio documentary class at Columbia College Chicago, I have been challenging my students to become storytellers and producers of their own personal stories.
Most of these students are not coming from disciplined journalism backgrounds, and although I heavily emphasize skills of research, observation, and journalistic interviewing, these students have only basic backgrounds in these skills. I insist they use them, but I emphasize the art of reflection and self-awareness in their work. I want them to tell a story of their existence that will leave a vivid impression with listeners. I want them to self-examine and find a personal story that can also become, for at least the time the piece is on the air, the listeners’ story too. This approach, at first, is met with some resistance. Many times, students don’t want to delve into personal stories. But through exercises in class and a lot of listening to and discussion of pieces using this style, the students become more comfortable and, many times, enthused about the possibilities of their stories. It’s important the students feel comfortable in the classroom setting, or they will not dig deeply enough to make an impact with their audio pieces. I suggest the faculty member tell some of his own personal stories. Take the time to show them the process of revealing stories through scaffolding; start with a small personal story and build to more intimate ones.

Here’s an example of how a Columbia College radio major moved a more traditional story into a story of authenticity.

A student wanted to tell the story on his personal preparation for running the Chicago Marathon. He wanted to take the listener through the grueling physical and mental work needed to prepare to run the 26-mile event. It was the beginning of a good idea, but I told him I needed him to go deeper.

“Why are you running this marathon?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I just want to.”

I told him that wasn’t good enough. He needed to spend time considering that question. Why is he running? I told him to think hard about it and come back to me. After a week he returned and looked me in the eye.

“I know why I’m running,” he said. “It’s my father. He’s had heart trouble. It scares me. I can’t imagine losing my best friend, and frankly, I don’t want the same health issues. I’m running, not just to be in better shape myself, but maybe I can inspire my father to work on his own health.”

Now we had a story. I told him to investigate his feelings, to interview his father and to interview himself about those feelings. I told him to journal his thoughts. He was now on his way to a better story, more authentic and impactful story.

My work with the students and their classmates gave us stories about high school girls trying to find acceptance in the world of competitive figure skating, a suburban soccer mom who devastated her family with a serious gambling addiction, and the personal story of how an Arab-American family faced discrimination after 9-11. (Portions of these pieces can be heard in the accompanying audio file.)

These stories and others came in many forms, all outside the traditional documentary style. The themes were human and universal with strong impact and legitimate purpose.

**TOOLS FOR THE CLASSROOM**

An invaluable addition to classroom instruction in this genre is the CD package *Audio Documentary 101: A Guided Listening Experience for the Classroom*. This is a three disc series produced by The Third Coast International Audio Festival and Chicago
Public Radio with funding from the Illinois Humanities Council. The series gives a wide range of examples demonstrating several documentary styles and approaches, plus there is a series of questions after each piece to help the instructor move the class through a discussion of techniques used to make good audio documentary.

Along with this CD series, I use a guided listening document. Each student is given one to help prepare them to listen to any documentary in or outside of class. It provides the student focus on certain aspects of documentary design by asking a series of questions:

1. What is the overwhelming feeling you are left with after listening to this documentary? Describe it.
2. What is the overwhelming production value or technique you recognize after listening to this documentary? Describe it.
3. How does the writing complement this documentary? How does the writing drive the piece? What narration or scripting do you particularly remember? Why?
4. Who was the main voice of the documentary? Was it one of the subjects of the piece or a traditional narrator? Describe what you liked or didn’t like about the main storyteller of this documentary.

Also, in and outside class, students are asked to write short essays about the subjects of their documentary work. They are given prompts designed to help them discover deeper meaning and more authentic elements about their subject matter.

Here are some examples:

1. Write an essay describing to your mother or father, or another member of your family, and tell why it would be important for people to hear about that person.
2. Write a short essay describing what emotional elements your documentary may evoke.
3. Write a one-page essay about what you believe makes good audio, creates deep impressions and leaves behind strong memories. How do you accomplish this?
4. Write a one-page essay about a significant time in your childhood. What emotions did you feel, why do you still remember this, and what were the details surrounding this event/incident?

These prompts are meant to help the student move closer to real human experiences, authentic experiences, that are the heart of good documentary work.

Another employed in class is designed to prompt students to consider new ways of telling stories and unique ways to use sound. I ask the students to record three different ambient or natural sounds with their sound equipment, but I am careful not to tell them why I am asking them to do this. When they return to the classroom, I assign this task: Create a one-minute non-fiction audio story out of these three sounds. You may use writing and narration, but must also use all three sounds in the piece. No other sound elements can be used.

I find this exercise gives students an opportunity to be creative within a certain boundary and to take risks without consequences. I encourage them to analyze what they discovered in this exercise and to think about using techniques that were successful in the exercise and then attempt to incorporate those successes in their final documentary development.
For the first time in many years, audio/radio documentary has new life. The genre is important again, but only if we permit new and even unusual approaches to its style, presentation, and subject matter. Memorable radio documentary is about good stories that take the listener on a journey of experience. We must teach our students that stories can leave strong, lasting impressions and can come from almost anywhere, even from deep inside their own lives. This is not only the basis of good audio documentary, it is good teaching.

**AUDIO FOR REVIEW**

All are selected segments from student written and produced short audio documentaries. They can be access at this Web site: [http://www.columcast.com/blog/?page_id=19](http://www.columcast.com/blog/?page_id=19)

1. “Gambling Mom” by Peter Kasper, senior, Columbia College Chicago
2. “Songwriting” by Katie Vinopal, senior, Columbia College Chicago
3. “Middle Eastern Delight” by Adam Abdula, senior, Columbia College Chicago
THE STATE OF ETHICS

This time each year, about 1,000 journalists get together to discuss journalism ethics.
Yes, journalism ethics.
As humorous as that may sound to some, these news gatherers — attendees of the Society of Professional Journalists’ annual national conference — are serious. SPJ, the nation’s largest journalism-advocacy organization, is the guardian of an ethics code widely considered the news industry’s gold standard.

The code is a guide aimed at helping journalists practice their trade ethically and responsibly. Those who honor it do so voluntarily. They believe trust in journalism starts with journalists’ commitment to ethical news production, which is, above all, accurate, fair and independent of special interests.

The Society doesn’t conduct hearings about code violations, much less issue sanctions. Its leaders believe everyone is qualified to interpret the code — not just journalists.

It was in the spirit of educating the public and helping journalists make more ethical decisions that SPJ’s top ethicists — a committee composed of members representing a variety of media, journalism specialties and experience levels — reviewed ethical lapses that occurred since September 2006 and stirred some of the most passionate debate within the industry.

The committee grouped lapses into larger categories where journalists appear to have had the most trouble. For the first time, the committee is publicizing its findings. The categories, supported by specific examples, are listed here in no particular order and may be viewed fully at www.spj.org/ethics:

POLITICAL ACTIVISM

A commendable MSNBC.com investigation revealed that at least 140 journalists contributed to political parties, movements or candidates. SPJ’s ethics code states that journalists should “remain free of associations and activities that may compromise integrity or damage credibility.” The code also encourages journalists to shun “… political involvement, public office and service in community organizations if they compromise journalistic integrity.”

JOURNALIST/SOURCE RELATIONSHIPS

Journalists must maintain a healthy distance from people they cover.
A former Telemundo anchorwoman reported about Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa’s marital difficulties without mentioning that she was dating him.

Getting too close to sources sorely compromises a journalist’s ability to “act independently,” as SPJ’s code instructs.

**PLAGIARISM**

It’s unclear whether the number of violations of this fundamental of responsible journalism is on the rise — or if technology is making plagiarism easier to find. In a video segment on her blog, CBS News anchor Katie Couric read an essay after it was ripped off from The Wall Street Journal. A CBS producer wrote the item for Couric, who read the piece as if sharing her personal thoughts. That’s worth questioning, too.

**NEWS/ADVERTISING RELATIONSHIPS**

Times are tough economically for the news industry, and many organizations are responding with problematic news-advertising hybrids. For example, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* runs a business column under a Citizens Bank label. Though the paper says the bank won’t have a say in the column’s content, the appearance suggests otherwise. “Avoid conflicts of interest, real or perceived,” the code states.

**FAIRNESS**

Last year, SPJ awarded several journalists at the *Santa Barbara (Calif.) News-Press* an ethics award for resigning in protest of co-publisher Wendy McCaw’s influence on news content. That battle reached a new low when the newspaper ran an unsigned front-page story implying that the paper’s former editor downloaded child pornography on his office computer. The story fell far short of an airtight case and appeared to be bent on attacking the former editor more than serving readers with truth. “Test the accuracy of information from all sources, and exercise care to avoid inadvertent error,” the code instructs.

**PHOTO MANIPULATION**

After the shootings at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, news organizations may have thought they were doing the right thing by altering photos that appeared to show a wounded student’s genitals. They weren’t. The image organizations edited out was actually a tourniquet. Photographs should be respected as a form of truth. “Never distort the content of news photos or video,” the code instructs. “Image enhancement for technical clarity is always permissible.”

**THE BLUR OF NEWS AND ENTERTAINMENT**

NBC’s *To Catch a Predator* series is fraught with ethical problems, such as the hiring of a crusading nonprofit group to set up stings. “Avoid … staged news events,” the code states. It also urges journalists to “deny favored treatment to … special interests and resist their pressure to influence news coverage.” While these problem areas are cause for concern, they are, thankfully, exceptions to the rule. Thousands of journalists make ethics a top concern, and we commend them.
It is hard not to notice the rise of Apple over the past six years. The creation of the iPod ushered in a new era of portable media. In 2001, one could store and play 1,000 songs on a unit the size of a cassette tape. Today, one can store and play 150,000 songs or 150 hours of video on a unit slightly smaller than a cassette tape. Also, this unit can be hooked up to a television set and play the videos stored on the iPod. However, what made the iPod a success and continues to help Apple sell iPods is the distribution model Apple uses for its media content. Many, if not all, of the iPods sold use iTunes as the program to download music from CDs to the computer, organize playlists and libraries on the computer and the iPod. More importantly, it has a built in music store, that increases the profitability of the iPod and brings in new revenue to Apple. This integrated system between the iPod and iTunes gives Apple a bridge between consumers and artists. Artists can sell their songs and videos on the main music and video pages and connect with their fans through a series of podcasts (digital audio recording distributed through a Really Simple Syndication (RSS) program, such as iTunes). Integrated distribution models not only impact Apple, but have and will continue to impact the recording industry and television networks.

According to Jeff Howe, a writer for Time Magazine, there are four key themes that dominate this mediated landscape: user-generated content (the media itself), folksonomy (how the media and users are organized), crowdsourcing (the workforce behind this new media) and the long tail model of business (all creators of media can find their niche in this new market). All of these themes factor into the grander picture of this new Web 2.0. Bigger media businesses seek out successes in the nexus between the entertainers, the toolmakers, and the gatherers on the World Wide Web. Where the iTunes/iPod model fits into these four key...
themes is that Apple created a network that reflects all four of these themes. Podcasts and vodcasts (video podcasts) on iTunes Music Store are dominated by the amateur artists/educators/critics/experts/whomever, rather than a professional podcasters. Many of the podcasts are free. The folksonomy occurs in the form of a rating system of user-generated content and reviewing others content. Individual users within the system are identified with their review(s) and are judged on their review(s). The user-generated content on iTunes acts as a portfolio for the artist and those artists can post a link to their website, thus generating those artists work. Finally, due to the vast amount of subject matter that can be explored, experts rise from the ranks of users and create their own niche of material. This narrow-narrow casting allows creators of media to find their audience, no matter how small it is.

The creation of new distribution models must expand beyond traditional media content or even the new digital user-generated content; it must be sensitive of emerging trends in new media technologies. Web 2.0, along with the different pieces of software and hardware, allows for the creation of websites and software services dedicated to the exposure of the avant-garde. These websites explore new topics framed in the context of these new media sources. For example, interactive technologies can exist within the confines of Web 2.0 as long as those designing the website/distribution model understand the competencies of their audience. It must allow individual users a way of playing within the environment of the website. This is why most developers create a sandbox within the system as a way of teaching new users how to manipulate content. The sandbox is nothing more than a node on the system that allows user to make edits to a node without impacting the entire network.

The sandbox function is a learning tool the basic user to the network can use to manipulate their environment. Sandboxes represent the virtual starting point within the network. They are the canvas for users to generate new content. This also marks a change in the traditional approach to creating mediated content. The level of experience is not a barrier to create new media within the sandbox model. It is also for the advanced user as a safe place to experiment and push the limits of the network. It is through this experimentation that helps the user create new interactive and non-sequential media products. Once finished and posted onto the network, sandboxes can be linked with other finished projects. These linkages help inspire new users to create and explore media with the confines of the distribution model.

There will be two major issues that will define the discussion of media distribution models. The first is the conflict between the demands of consumers for free to low-cost media products and the need for artists to make money for their creative works. Napster and KaZaa could arguably be some of the first successful models of digital distribution. These models operated in favor of the consumer. Then the artists rallied for compensation. Thus, the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA) gained ground, that begat the rise of the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) power, that begat rounds and rounds of lawsuits filled by lawyers representing the RIAA. This motion will reach a critical mass forcing lawmakers to step in and provide rights for the consumers. The pendulum of power will swing back and forth between these two ideals.

The second issue is the role of users inside and outside the distribution model. The first group of users would be the artists creating content for the network. The second group is those actively consuming the media present on the network. It is the symbi-
otic relationship that maintains the network and the distribution of the content on the network. The last two groups are less connected to the newer distribution models. The third group would be those who feel information overload and choose to wean themselves away from the media and limit media consumption. Finally, there are those who are unconnected to the digital spectrum; either through a lack of access, a lack of motivation, a lack of skills and/or a lack of a sense of agency. It is this disconnect to network that displays key digital-divide issues. To be a success in this long tail business model, businesses must be flexible enough to handle the emerging media technologies while meeting the needs of those using traditional media. With these considerations, not only will the emerging technologies affect distribution models, distribution models will affect emerging technologies. The lesson learned from Apple demonstrates this circular relationship and will be the true impact of future media.

ENDNOTES


ii One could buy third party software to transfer songs from the computer to the iPod and back again, several companies exist that have created such software and posted it online.


TURNING THE TABLES

The following was presented during the CCA Swap Shop Panel at the 2007 BEA Conference. Phil Bremen (pbremen@bsu.edu) from Ball State University made the presentation and offers the following outline and student comments.

1. Exercise title: Turning the Tables

2. Subject area: News (reporting, writing)

3. Description:
Each student speaks briefly about himself or herself to the entire class. Probing that student’s revelations, the student seated next to him or her finds a story of interest to a general audience. Outside class, each student writes that story, then submits it to the instructor and to the student featured in that story.

4. Exercise purposes:
   a. Putting students on the receiving end of questions and the subsequent news story.
   b. Giving students supervised practice in finding and framing the story.

5. Learning objectives:
   a. Listening intently.
   b. Persisting tactfully. (People don’t always volunteer all the facts you need.)
   c. Zeroing in on the facts that count. (Dull, incomplete information makes a dull, incomplete story.)
   d. Obtaining and using contact information to follow up after class.
   e. Experience answering questions as well as asking them. (Empathy matters.)
   f. Experience seeing your story told by someone else. (Especially when he or she gets facts wrong or misses your point.)
   g. Finding a compelling lead and supporting it.

5a. What I get out of it:
   a. A better understanding of what each student needs from the course.
   b. A sense of each student as three-dimensional.
   c. A relationship that’s more collaborative and less didactic.

6. Where executed: In-class exercise; out-of-class follow-up, writing

7. Exercise directions:
   a. Students introduce themselves with six types of facts.
      1) Name.
      2) Age and year in school.
3) Hometown.
4) Academic emphasis.
5) Career goal.
6) Something distinctive about themselves that they don't mind sharing.

b. The student seated next to him or her follows up with a few questions to flesh out a story of interest to a general audience.
c. Other class members and the instructor may ask questions, too.
d. The instructor may guide the questioning, suggesting a focus.
e. If the interviewee discloses embarrassing information, the instructor suggests how to handle both that information and the interviewee’s feelings.
f. Each interviewer arranges to contact his or her interviewee later to follow up.
g. Outside class, each interviewer wraps up his or her interview.
h. Then each student writes a short news story about his or her interviewee.
i. Finally, each student submits that story to both the interviewee and the instructor.
j. A follow-up assignment – for extra credit – asks each interviewee to evaluate the experience.

8. Grading.
a. Is it fair, interesting, clear, accurate?
b. In particular, has the writer found and presented a story that’s relevant and engaging to a general audience?

9. Typical outcomes:
a. This is my most popular reporting assignment.
b. Students love to learn more about each other.
c. It focuses on their world. It's about them!
d. They discover new dimensions to people who had been with them in previous classes.
e. More importantly, they appreciate the hands-on practice in interviewing and focusing.
f. They experience an interview as a conversation, not an interrogation.
g. Most figure out the central point – taking care to do justice to the person in the story.

10. Tips for running the exercise:
a. Some students have more interesting stories to tell than their classmates do.
b. Both types require probing – to flesh out a strong story or just to find a marginal one.
c. Students get upset if time runs short by the time we get around to them.
d. So I try to hold most interviews to a time limit, determined by the size of the class.

11. Experience level of students:
a. Sophomores, juniors and seniors.
b. Either their first or second semester of reporting.

12. Time needed to run exercise: For 15-20 students, two full 75-minute class periods.

13. Facilities used: Any old room will do.

14. Equipment used:
   a. A circular seating arrangement. (I sit, too, adding to the collegial feel.)
   b. Dry-erase board listing the six points each student will cover in introduction.

15. Materials provided: Seats.

16. Student provided supplies/tools: Pen or pencil and paper.

17. Additional information:
   a. Some stories are simply interesting:
      1) A lone female in the male domain of video gaming.
      2) A young woman resolving that she doesn’t need a man to be complete – because her grandmother wouldn’t even open a can for herself.
   b. I urge students not to reveal any information that makes them uncomfortable.
   c. But some disclosures are riveting. Each of these is from a different student:
      1) Becoming shocked and saddened while volunteering at a shelter for victims of domestic violence. That disclosure prompted the next student to reveal:
         2) Being beaten regularly by her mother for the first seven years of her life – and being emotionally abused, along with her siblings, ever since.
         3) At the age of 20, getting a clean bill of health after battling cancer for years.
         4) Defending a beloved brother who is gay – after their small town, and part of their family, turned against him.
         5) Having two close friends who were raped and murdered, the first when my student was only 12 years old.
         6) Being told by her teachers that she would never make it through middle school. That’s because of a severe learning disability, which she had tried desperately to hide throughout her college career. Later she wrote this about this exercise:
            “My whole life, I have looked at my learning disability as a horrible affliction. When I was reading the news story, I was surprised how that horrible affliction wasn’t so horrible after all.”
   d. These make the best stories, of course.
   e. They also provide great teachable moments.
      1) Are you sure you’re okay talking about this?
      2) Are you sure you’re okay with my reporting on this?
      3) Polite people at these moments typically scramble to change the
subject.
4) But a good reporter follows the facts wherever they lead – with delicacy.
5) We don’t have to report everything we know – but we can’t report what we don’t
know.
6) A single story may have a lasting impact on the subject’s life.
7) For the reporter, on the other hand, it’s just a story.
8) This sensitivity is especially important when the subject is not a public figure.
f. After any troubling disclosure, I touch base one-on-one and recommend the
university’s free – and compassionate – counseling services. I also follow up later.

18. A few student responses:
“As a journalist, I am used to asking other people questions. When the tables were
turned and it was me answering questions, I found that I felt awkward and uncomfort-
able.”

“It really put me in other people’s shoes. I have never really had a story done on me
before.”

“I can see how careful reporters need to be, because the whole time I read it, I was
just hoping that my words weren’t skewed and that the right message got across. I said
some other things in my interview that may have been more pertinent to the story
(than what was written).”

“I did not like the story written about me…. I know that some of the facts were
backwards and, for a news story, facts have to be accurate.”

“Once I read what ***** wrote about me…. I was a little disappointed, to be
honest.”
“Reading a story about me was a little overwhelming. Everything that she wrote
about me was true…. The story reminded me of why I am here at Ball State and why I
do what I do.”
“It was a little weird to see my thoughts and quotes put together by someone else. I
was a little worried to see how everything came out but it was put together very well.”
“It was interesting to see how someone perceives what you say….”

“I learned to start building a focus while asking questions during an interview.”

“This assignment taught me more about interviewing and where to focus my ques-
tions.”

“I learned to go deeper when asking questions. You have to try and get some good
details that the readers may be able to relate to.”

“This assignment taught me how to be completely aware of the individual that I am
interviewing. In order to get a complete and factual story I needed to use all of my
senses. I had to watch *****’s body language…..”
“I learned how to be sensitive to an interviewee while still getting the story.”

“The students in the class made it very evident that each individual is different and each has many different layers, which may be pulled back to find both beauty and darkness.”
NAB/BEA ANNOUNCE FUTURE CONFERENCE DATES

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BEA INTEREST DIVISIONS

BEA’s interest divisions are a great opportunity to become an active member in the Association. Each division offers newsletters, paper competitions with cash awards and networking for research, curriculum and job opportunities. Leadership in the divisions provide visibility for your own work to other BEA members and to the electronic media industry. The following links take you to a information about each division and a listing of leadership you can contact if you would like more information.

Visit [http://www.beaweb.org/divisions.html](http://www.beaweb.org/divisions.html) to see information on each division.

Interest division bylaws (requires PDF reader):

- **Courses, Curricula and Administration**
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- **International**
- **Law and Policy**
- **Management and Sales**
- **Multicultural**
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- **Production, Aesthetics & Criticism**
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Journal of Radio Studies

FEEDBACK INDEX
Feedback's index is now in Microsoft Word format. It is available by clicking on the link below:
http://www.beaweab.org/feedback/feedbackindex0907.doc

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Cablevision  
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College Music Journal (CMJ)  
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EQ Magazine  
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SUNY - Oswego
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