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Civic Engagement Through Multicamera Studio Production

Peter Gregg

University of St. Thomas, pgregg@stthomas.edu

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Overview

I developed this project as a final, advanced production in a multicamera studio production course taught in a Communication Studies department. Students taking it already had some experience working with scripted dramatic and public service announcement-style multicamera production methods, and while I felt that students understood the basics of production, they had not yet turned their eyes toward a real audience outside the classroom. To move students in that direction, I designed a project for a series of live, multicamera interviews of recruited community experts on a social problem. After reflecting on community issues that were important to them, students would produce a public affairs-style interview program that they would stream live.

The semi-scripted and unscripted production method is more common to talk shows or news discussion programming, and when it comes to community engagement, there is still a place for “local origination programming” in all markets on broadcast and cable access. Local news and discussion programs rely heavily on multicamera production methods (live or recorded) to reach and engage their audiences. In this production method, multiple cameras shoot the interview and a video switcher is used to select which camera will be recorded or sent out over the air live, changing shots or adding graphics in the course of the interview, as in a news or interview program.

In this assignment teams brainstorm and identify issues in the community relevant to their lives, being sure to situate themselves as engaged, politically involved citizens. They then research these issues, including looking at both the local press and any academic scholarship relevant to the issues and interviewing community members. They identify and approach at least one member of the on- or near-campus community, being sure that the potential subject had an investment in the issue, expertise or set of relevant experiences, and be someone who would bring a unique or particular angle to the problem area. They perform a preliminary, off-air interview with that subject, and then produce a live shoot with a lead student interviewing the guest and streaming it live.

The total number of interviews produced by the class of about twenty varies from about six to ten, with two interview shoots per 75 minute class period. The lead students (in my class it was students working on their capstone) act as producers and hosts for their individual segment, and the other students take production positions for each shoot day. On a given shoot day, there were four or five key personnel (director, assistant director, floor director, technical director, and audio) who were allocated to that producer as “production teams,” with the rest of the class filling in the other roles. Each student belonged to one production team primarily, and assisted other teams as well.

Rationale

One of the most enjoyable and rewarding parts of media production pedagogy for me is its strong connection to Dewey's (1910) call for practice as a fundamental part of education, with theory applied to and reflective of action. As the overview indicates, this course addresses many of the concerns expressed by Kellner (1998), Kellner and Share (2007), and Bragg (2002) who frame production pedagogy in terms of critical media literacy. Specifically, this project approaches media in a democratic fashion, it links the pleasure of making a production to critical analysis of it, focuses on the connection between production, education, and ideology, and perhaps most importantly uses media to empower students and other community members who might not otherwise have a voice.

The class project resonates with Dalton and Ingram's (2004) discussion of service learning via media production. They argue that a key advantage of production coursework is that students become authors of their own "texts," and with that authorship students feel a strong degree of engagement and commitment. When coupled with a community-centered production, students feel they are using the media to communicate with others about something that is important to them and that will make a difference. The result is a transformative experience that uses and demonstrates the power of the media.

Jocson (2015) connects collaboration, participation, and distributed expertise as key components of media production and participatory politics. One of the key advantages of a multicamera studio production is that because production teams are larger, it requires very precise and distributed duties. That gives a high degree of collaboration and participation from the top of the power-chain to the bottom.

The assignment also connects strongly with Sheppard's (2009) emphases on crafting media content for audiences. Sheppard argues that in production classes, production assignments frequently focus too much on technical skill, and so she frames production as a persuasive or rhetorical act. This assignment balances approaches to audience, purpose, and media expertise (p. 124). Students must address the rhetorical concerns, including media type, audience needs, and context (p. 125). Finally, students must be multimodal communicators who use multiple literacies in rhetorically meaningful ways (p. 127). In sum, students are asked to reflect on how they can use the medium to inform and persuade a particular audience situated in a specific historical moment.

As Edwards (2001) points out, there is a tension in many media production courses and departments that offer them in a liberal arts context between professional experience and the broader needs of a liberal arts education. The key for this assignment is that it's not just the "end product" but the entire process that is crucial to the learning. On face, media production courses and their assignments tend to look technical, but when you talk through the process and educational context, you see that they develop "critical thinking, leadership and management abilities, aesthetic sensibility, communication, and problem solving skills" (p. 11). The research, writing, and reporting components of this assignment aim to make those elements clear.

Timeline

This timeline is for a 15 week semester, with the final two weeks dedicated to the productions. In the gaps, there is work related to other aspects of the course.

Week 2, Day 1 – Project Overview

Week 4, Day 2 – “Problem Area and Topic Salience” report due

Week 6, Day 2 – “About the Guest” report due

Week 8, Day 2 – “Pre-visit Screening Interview” report due. Interview dates scheduled.

Week 9, Day 1 – Teams are formed.

Week 9, Day 2 – In-class reports on topics and guests

Week 10, Day 1 – Lecture and exercise: Shooting semi-scripted

Week 10, Day 2 – Lecture and exercise: Production and civic engagement

Week 11, Day 1 – Hosts and directors plan communication goals.

Week 11, Day 2 – Sit down meeting for directors and hosts with instructor.

Week 12 – Set is designed and laid out.

Week 13 – Interview questions submitted to guests. Hosts rehearse intros and asking questions.

Week 14-15 – Production days

FINALS – “Final Assessment and Review” report due

Lesson Plan and Assignment Instructions

Week 2, Day 1 – Project Overview

Discuss key differences between scripted and semi-scripted production. This assignment means that students need to consider public viewing experience. What does the audience expect? How are you going to either fulfill those expectations or establish a new viewing terrain? Students will need to be able to listen actively and make real-time decisions. On both sides of the camera, students need to be engaged and be present- and future-oriented thinkers. What is being said? Where can you go with that? How might people be reacting to or thinking about what is being said?

This is about making a difference in the real world. When you’re working in the mass media, you have an obligation to think about how what you’re doing contributes to the lives of the people who watch your content or interact with people who do. How are you using

these tools to make the world a better place? What are your obligations to yourself, your audience, and your community?

Exercise:

Get into groups of three or four. Assign a note-taker. As a group, brainstorm potential community-centered topics or problem areas. Then, edit that list down to one that we'll discuss in class. Briefly set up the problem area and who in the community it affects. As a class, we'll frame this problem area in terms of what sorts of areas we may need to explore to have a handle on this issue, including salience (consider the public viewing experience,) potential research (consider questions that need to be answered,) and a call-to-action (consider how we can persuade the audience to be engaged in the community.)

Week 9, Day 2 – In-class reports on topics and guests

Student-producers will issue their in-class reports. As leaders on their individual shoot days, the student producers should come in ready to lead a discussion about their problem area and the guest. Students should be actively considering what challenges this topic might have, and how they need to be managed or handled by the production team. Student-producers will lead discussions. Since there are between 6 to 8 shoots over the two-week shoot window, discussions may need to be managed by the instructor.

Week 10, Day 1 – Lecture and exercise: Shooting semi-scripted

What does it mean to shoot semi-scripted? You have a framework of how you're going to shoot the intro and conclusion, you know what shots you'll be having, and you know a basic sense of the flow of the day, including what questions are going to be asked and in what order. You listen, reflect on what is being said, and use the shots to convey the story.

Exercise:

Let's set up the studio for a generic 2-person interview-style shoot. I'll hand out the topics notes from Week 2 and you'll get back into those groups. As a class, let's take turns watching the group in an "interview" format. Be yourself and talk candidly about the issue. What sticks out to you? Where do they seem weakest? What is coming across as effective? How well are they representing the issues in the community?

Note to instructor: A key part of this is to demonstrate how important preparation and subject-matter knowledge is, and to connect that to social responsibility of producers. The emphasis here is less on the technical practice of the interview, but more on the experience of being a host and carrying on a mediated interview.

Week 10, Day 2 – Lecture and exercise: Production and civic engagement

Explain civic engagement is about working to make a difference in the civic life of the community. Its goal is the improvement of the quality of life in the community. Our productions are a form of civic engagement, and an outcome our work is that audiences

will get engaged in the community as well. What are some examples of community resources? Discuss the issues surrounding access to or support of those resources.

Discuss: What does media production have to do with civic engagement?

- Way to reach people quickly and effectively.
- Way to record and keep track of reasons/explanations/choices
- Way to get people involved in the discussion by actually producing content (this class, types of community programming).

Discuss: Why is it important?

We have an ethical component to the work that we're doing in this class. The questions we focus on concern "How did this happen," "What should we do," and "Why does this matter?"

Exercise:

For the class as a whole, producers will talk through the shows they're producing. What is the problem area? Who are the guests? What is the expected angle or approach the interview will take? Let's discuss how our roles fit into this, and what obligations we have as ethical communicators.

Week 11, Day 1 – Producers and directors plan communication goals.

Producers will meet with their directors and key production personnel. The groups should discuss the principles of working professionally in the studio. Building off the ideas from last week, focus on the fact that the process of the shoot is also a function of being an ethical communicator. What concerns might the guest have about coming on camera, how comfortable might they be, and how can we manage that? What sorts of ideas do we want the guests to communicate? How are we going to shoot or emphasize those points?

Week 11, Day 2 – Sit down meeting for directors and hosts with instructor.

Discuss:

How well are the hosts and directors prepared? Do they know the subject? Do they know the approach the interview will take? What contingencies might there be? How open to taking new directions in the interview live are there? How structured should the interview be? How comfortable do you think the guest will be? How can we make them more comfortable going into the shoot? What things need to be emphasized? At a broad level, what are our communication goals?

Week 12 – Set is designed and laid out.

Bring in shoot design paperwork and set up the studio space. Use classmates as stand-ins. Verify the set, lighting, and camera angles are what you all want. How well do they align with what we've said about presentation of the subject to the audience? That's the true test of the quality of your work. For example, if the guest is looking at the host, do you have a strong shot when they are making an important point? (Remember that normally we can

see the face somewhat squarely at points like this.) Do you have a more neutral angle for appropriate moments? Does the lighting draw attention to the people on camera or the set? Does the lighting feel too dramatic or too upbeat for the content? Imagine you are a member of your audience. What are you communicating to them about the kind of show they are watching?

Written and Oral Assignments

These assignments are distributed to the class as a part of the production assignment. In my class, most of the earlier papers were the responsibility of the student-producers and/or the production teams. You may wish to have all students prepare preliminary reports and then the class can select which interviews to pursue.

Report 1: Problem Area and Topic Salience Report

Write a short research paper outlining a problem area in the community, including why it is significant, who is affected, and who should learn about it. Discuss how you can present the issue to the target audience. Include a tentative list of 2-3 people who you could interview on-air regarding this matter. You will need to confirm their willingness to be interviewed informally by you at a later date and also interviewed formally on-air. This person should be an affected member of the community, an expert who is not normally included in discussions of the problem area, or a relevant participant in the issue.

Report 2: "About the Guests" Report

Write a brief analytical paper connecting the problem area and salience to the potential guest. Consider how this person adds a new voice or dimension to our understanding of the problem area and what people can or should be doing about it. Why would the audience want to hear from them? What do you think the audience's attitudes toward them are? What do they bring to the subject?

Report 3: Pre-Screening Interview Report

Interview the potential guests about the problem and to get a feel for their expertise and personality. Consider what the audience needs to know, what their attitudes are, and what outcomes you have for the audience watching the show. Consider the extent to which this person will be an appropriate guest, too. Write up your findings.

Oral Report 1: Getting to Know the Guests

Producers will give an oral report to the class, outlining the problem area, its salience to the target audience, the guest and their relation to the problem area, and give a sense of "what's in store" for the show when you interview them. What questions are you likely to ask and what are their likely answers? What follow-up questions will you have?

Oral Report 2: Team Meeting

Producers will meet with the directors and their teams to plan your communication goals for the project. Given your understanding of the problem area, the guest, and the audience, what ethical obligations do you have? What do you want to communicate to your audience? What are the questions and approaches you should take? How can we get the audience to

feel committed to the issue if they are not already? Do you have a call to action? What should be the order or emphasis? What do you think the guest will be saying to each of the questions you ask?

Producer Questions Submission:

Submit your final interview questions to me and to your guests. You should have enough material to hear them speak for about 5-10 minutes. Consider your pre-screening interview and relationship with the guests to resolve how many questions you should have for them. When crafting your questions, consider the roles you play as an ethical communicator, in terms of your relationship to the person you are interviewing, the people watching the production, and yourself as a member of the community. Your questions should be the culmination of the research and interviews you've done to this point and the discussions we've had in production teams and as a class.

Final Compilation paper:

Compose a final paper, drawing on your earlier drafts and building on them. In this paper, you will explain and detail the problem area, connect it to the target audience in terms of relevance and salience, and present an argument for future work or growth in the community as it pertains to the problem area. What more should the audience know? What should we do in the future? Would it work? What proof do you have? How did you situate yourself as an engaged, civic participant, and how might that have influence the audience? What ethical questions were raised and how did you handle them?

The Production Assignment Handout

PRODUCTION: SEMISCRIPED PRODUCTION PROJECT

Summary

This is a long-term project that culminates in a series of community-centered, civically-engaged interviews that we will stream live to our audiences. As a class, we will research and discuss our communication goals, our ethical positions, and our expected (and even our ideal) outcomes. Then in production teams we will produce 6 to 8 interviews running anywhere between 5 and 10 minutes. Student producers who are taking this class with the additional capstone credit will take point on interviewing and producing the final videos.

The Program Objective

There are important things happening in your community and you should know about what they are and who is doing them. At a less abstract level, the objective of the show is to unpack for the audience a problem area or salient topic in the community and bring in an expert or individual related to this area or topic and help the audience learn more about the issue.

Evaluation

Civic Engagement: These productions should be focusing on the ways that you engage your audience, present the guest, frame the problem area, and how you manage or reflect the ethical terrains we've discussed in class to this point. Even things like the title sequence,

the set design, the choice to stay wide or to go close in a shot (and when) affects the message of the production. The questions regarding obligations to and expectations of all the participants in the production (the teams, the hosts, the people or areas discussed, and the audience) all should be held in mind as we go forward.

Engagement Criteria:

- Appropriateness of production techniques/choices relative to message
- Framing of issue
- Framing of call to action
- Presentation of program and host

Techniques: The technical side of the production constitutes an important part of the project, since the way it looks and how the process comes together contributes directly to the outcome goals of the project.

Technical criteria:

- Quality of production process
- Production matches class-determined house style
- Quality of lighting, audio, and shot composition
- Quality of shoot paperwork

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Biography

Dr. Peter B. Gregg
University of St. Thomas

Dr. Peter B. Gregg is an Assistant Professor at the University of St. Thomas. His work has been published in *Communication Monographs*, *Death Studies*, the *Journal of Popular Culture*, and the *Journal of Homosexuality*. He has contributed chapters to books on Michael Moore and media effects. He produced a local origination-program called “Critical Response” that brought in academics to discuss contemporary issues accessibly. His audio drama “Forsythia” was an official selection of the HEAR Now audio festival and won an Audio Verse Award, and his web series of the same name showed at the LA Web Fest.