

Reassessing Journalistic Pedagogy

Howard University's Broadcast Coverage during the 2014 Midterm Election

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Abstract

In the challenge of preparing broadcast journalism students for the realities of a high-pressured newsroom during an actual political news event, journalism programmes must embrace new pedagogies while underscoring the fundamentals of journalism. This commentary examines the challenges and practical and instructional opportunities for broadcast journalism students of Howard University's Department of Media, Journalism and Film, while covering the 2014 US Midterm Election. The author explains how her individual experience as a veteran news industry professional-turned journalism academic, influenced and informed processes, practices and outcomes for student journalists who lacked experience and in some cases interest in the political process. The students witnessed first-hand the plethora of challenges facing modern-day newsrooms during a major news event, which served as a reminder of the uncertainties of the profession while emphasizing the value of preparedness. Findings suggest the compelling need to focus on deadline management, develop students' ability to successfully master ever-present ethical encounters and re-evaluate approaches for addressing the mutable realities of teaching millennium journalism students. Finally, an analysis of the realities of working in a classroom-turned-broadcast newsroom is offered.

Keywords

Broadcast journalism, pedagogies, news media, election, politics

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During my 27 years as a broadcast journalist and now a university academic, a quote by philosopher George Santayana has been my guiding force: 'The great difficulty of education is to get experience out of ideas' (Santayana & Smith, 1920, p. 9). This was personified by the 2014 United States Midterm Election Project at Howard University. As a news producer, juggling constantly moving objects on a major news day was par for the course; covering a presidential or midterm election became second nature. The first presidential election I covered was in 1992 as a field producer. Since then I have covered a number of political campaigns, national conventions and inaugurations. In 2013, I was appointed broadcast journalism professor at Howard University. When the prospect came to direct Howard University's broadcast journalism coverage of the national 2014 Midterm Election, I was initially quite confident, until the enormity of the task hit home. I could not simply rest on my laurels and share personal stories of how I worked as a journalist covering past presidential elections. This new era of broadcast journalism with various new media required new approaches, such as, constructivism as an active pedagogy for journalism students in the twenty-first century.

Active pedagogy involves creating a learning environment for the students (Moser & Hanson, n.d., para. 2), while the constructivist approach emphasizes the active learner who discusses, questions and investigates topics to reach a better understanding of the information (Lattuca, 2005, p. 355).

These methodologies were useful as the students strived to professionally analyze, question and report on real-time topics and issues. Teaching today's millennials who may not have a genuine interest or thorough understanding of politics, and underlining the fundamentals and nuances of journalism while staying abreast of technological advances and standing guard to new forms of journalism in the evolving media ecology is a challenge (Ward, n.d., para. 3). This new media revolution includes tweeters, bloggers, citizen journalists and other social media users (Ward, n.d., para. 2). These factors underscore the need to prepare new journalists for an industry where being first, not getting it right the first time, is sadly becoming the driving factor. Millennials, those born between 1982 and 2004 (Horovitz, 2013), utilize these new media more than older adults. Studies suggest this type of news sharing will help define how news is distributed (Bobkowski, 2015, p. 320).

This commentary studies the intricate processes, variables and results of the Howard University News Service's '2014 Midterm Election Project'; namely, the broadcast journalism component. It analyzes how my personal experience, as a veteran news producer covering political events, informed my method of teaching millennials who had little or no experience. Weighted by the desire for instant consumption and increase in 'produsage' (Bruno, 2008), coupled with competition from mainstream news and social media outlets, the task to produce quality content with student journalists and limited resources proved difficult. We were charged with reporting a variety of local and national news stories without the standard resources afforded a national news organization; working in a university classroom that would transform into a non-traditional newsroom where all aspects of newsgathering would take place; sending student journalists

into the hotbed of politics; working under real-time deadlines with unexpected occurrences; genuinely engaged in the issues and results of their work; and doing all of this with the realization that the final product would not be broadcast via the traditional method of appearing on an evening newscast. The experience would prove a vital lesson for this journalist-turned academic and underscore the importance of having students who are well prepared for the realities of a constantly changing industry.

Background

The 2014 Midterm Election Project was the third national election covered by the Howard University News Service (HUNS), a collaboration of Howard University's Department of Media, Journalism and Film. Phil Dixon, then Journalism Department Chair, Journalism professor Yanick Lamb, and Ron Harris, adjunct lecturer at that time, initiated the project during the historic 2008 Presidential Election and Inauguration. Howard University, a major research university and Historically Black College and University (HBCU), is located in the nation's capital of Washington, DC, and it provides the idyllic location for reporting on politics and issues on a national and international scale.

Howard University also offers a number of outlets for students in the journalism concentration of the department of media, journalism and film, including the nationally recognized student-run newspaper, *The Hilltop*, student-produced news content, 'NewsVision' on the university's PBS station, WHUT TV, HUNS, *District Chronicles* community paper, and the online *101 Magazine*. Radio outlets include the university-owned WHUR commercial radio station, student-run WHBC radio on 96.3 HD3, Glasshouseradio.com, WHUR World on 96.3 HD2, HBCU SiriusXM Channel 142 and H.U.R. VOICES on SiriusXM Channel 141. In preparation for the project, students attended several mandatory faculty-led meetings, where there were in-depth discussions focused on previous coverage, and current expectations. Boot camps were held on camera production, audio, editing and using Teradek encoder devices for reporter live shots. Students were given general assignments and instructed to conduct research.

Preparation and Political Journalism

The project involved more than 10 full-time and adjunct academic staff and approximately 80 students, including print, digital, photography and broadcast (which included video and radio). The students received hands-on training and covered all aspects of campaigning and the election process. They detailed the candidates, issues and events leading up to and on 4 November 2014, the day of general election. The students would also write, shoot, edit and report their own stories, as well as conduct live reports on election night. Their work was shared with 200 media partners including the National Newspaper Publishers Association and its member affiliates, and *The Hilltop* (print and online).

The day was divided into several segments, commencing when the polls opened. The broadcast students were from three courses: Broadcast Journalism I, Broadcast Journalism II and the senior capstone class, NewsVision Lab. These sequences comprise the three core classes of the broadcast journalism concentration. Unlike national news reporters who have developed a certain level of expertise, the level of professional acumen, internships, writing ability and network of resources varied greatly between each course and each individual. These factors came into play when assigning specific stories—namely, trying to manipulate students' strengths with stories they would cover, coupled with the level of previously shown responsibility in class. Another challenge was taking into consideration the students' physical locations of their dormitories or residences in relation to assigned locations. It took several days and multiple reorganizations to complete the final Election Day assignment list.

To have the most realistic experience of covering a national election, it was decided that the broadcast students would report on 'advance' topics and issues prior to the election. I selected topics relevant to the issues in both the local Washington, DC, area, as well as those on the national level. Students in the Broadcast Journalism II course were assigned advance stories on related midterm election topics, such as, immigration, health care and terrorism, as well as reports explaining what was at stake in Congressional elections. Election Day stories ranged from topics, such as, voter suppression and apathy, negative campaign ads, the legalization of marijuana and covering the midterm election from the student journalists' perspective.

Classroom discussions were held on what society and the students considered as news, and how that changing definition was affected by social media and the rise of citizen journalism. As an undergraduate at Howard University during the 1980s, I learned the definition of news as 'anything that affects the status quo'. Most of the students agreed that the interpretation of the status quo was blurred by what was dominant in the general media or trending online. While somewhat distressing, it is not surprising. A survey by the Pew Research Center on Social and Demographic Trends (Pew) refers to these young adults as 'Digital Natives', because they have seized on utilizing the platforms of the digital era—the Internet, mobile technology, social media—to construct personalized networks of friends, colleagues and affinity groups (Millennials in Adulthood | Pew Research Center, 2013). In addition, the survey shows that most millennials identify themselves as democratic and have liberal views on social and political topics such as same-sex marriage and the legalization of marijuana (Pew, 2013). I took these factors into consideration while assigning and discussing election-related stories.

In addition to traditional broadcast reports, our coverage also included radio.

Ahead of the Election Day, Broadcast Journalism I (which focuses on radio journalism) students created 4–5 minute podcasts that contained original reporting. The topics ranged from reaction to the various political ads to voter apathy among African Americans. The students were organized into groups of four and served in various roles from producer and editor to reporter and anchor. The result included

interesting interviews and topics, such as, negative campaign advertisements and apathy among young adults.

Ethical Implications

Journalists learn their best lessons in the field through experience. However, when it comes to ethical implications, the classroom is an ideal precursor. Students were introduced to this topic through a group game in which they discussed ethical dilemmas they may encounter as journalists. The game involved actual cases that I or my colleagues have faced, such as, being offered gifts or ‘payola’ from potential interviewees, deciding how to handle ‘inside information’ on a story from a friend who did not intend to be a source, or being assigned to do a ‘hard news’ story on a well-known personality who was actually an acquaintance. The lively game routinely ended in an engaging discussion about the recurring issue of ethical dilemmas in journalism.

By using applied ethics cases, the students discover the balance between theory and practice (Day, 1990, p. 5). Prior to the Election Day, lectures were also held on ethical concepts of privacy and responsibility. The students were reminded that journalists must examine their motives and ensure their personal feelings and emotions do not condition what they report, and that they are staying true to the Society of Professional Journalists’ (SPJ) Code of Ethics principles to ‘seek truth and report it, minimize harm, act independently, and be accountable and transparent’ (SPJ Code of Ethics | Society of Professional Journalists | Improving and protecting journalism since 1909, 2014). In the Broadcast Journalism II course, students were assigned various election topics, such as, congressional consequences of the election, ‘Initiative 71’ on legalizing marijuana and the issue of terrorism. Each student was required to lead a class discussion covering all angles of their stories. Their colleagues were encouraged to take an antagonistic approach, and the concept of ‘balance’ highlighted the discussion. Another ethical issue emphasized was how to demonstrate ‘fairness’ when reporting on controversial issues. I shared my experiences and discussed ways in which journalists can separate their personal interests from their reporting. This heuristic technique would prove beneficial.

On the Election Day, some of the students faced the typical scenario of news crews strong arming for positions on the media platform. Others met subtle issues, such as, voters asking them to which party they belonged. One candidate’s supporter even asked a student reporter to remove her shoes in order to view its designer label. For experienced journalists, these are situations that would be handled without a second thought. However, to a 21-year-old who still sees adults as authority figures, it was formidable. These students drew on their lectures and classroom discussions when considering how to handle such issues. The classroom discourses also became teachable moments for students who covered the Washington, DC, mayor’s race. When the African American female candidate won the race, revellers offered the young reporters champagne at the victory party and invited them to share in the celebration. The students politely declined. Again the active pedagogical and constructivist approaches were useful.

From Classroom to Newsroom

Election Day is always a heart-thumping, chaotic and stimulating time for a journalist who is helping to relay history while adhering to facts, deadlines, accuracy and balance. However, we producers and reporters have considerable support—from assignment editors, editors and photographers, to associate producers, graphic artists and writers. The assignment editor or executive producer made assignments after the day's morning meeting concluded, and the news producer would 'build' or 'stack' the rundown. Our project required the same end result produced by a professional newsroom, but with a fraction of the supporting personnel. The Midterm Election Project workspace was divided into different areas within the School of Communications. The main space was the Converged Media Lab, which housed the computers and faculty personnel overseeing the print and digital area. One of the digital classrooms became an editing area for print and digital, while one of the broadcast classrooms was equipped with editing software and printer. Our students operated from this area. The students worked in groups of two or three, or individually as multimedia journalists (MMJs). Unlike a conventional operation, the students were not afforded the luxury of a company vehicle, nor were they able to remotely edit and feed their video via satellite transmission to meet deadlines. They recorded video on T5i cameras and carried handheld or rode microphones and tripods or used handheld portable digital recorders. The vast majority of the students did not have vehicles. They used public transportation, taxis or rideshare services to make it to their assignments before the polls opened at 7 a.m. and back to base (the university classroom) to edit and upload their stories.

The students' pieces adhered to both broadcast and digital standards. Visually, reports needed closer shots as opposed to wide shots. Each story needed a succinct 'slug/headline' and needed to deliver a 'front page promise' and effective 'tags' to yield 'search engine optimization' (Tompkins, 2012, p. 176). While in the field, the student journalists had to shoot photographs that would be used for the HUNS' website, as well as its YouTube channel. They were encouraged to post Instagram photos and Tweets with the hashtag #HUNSElections. Once the student journalists returned from their assignments, their scripts had to be approved and fact checked before they were able to lay audio track and edit their packages by deadline. One student stayed in the converted classroom, serving as an associate producer—checking the digital feeds and social media, and monitoring elections results. There were also five broadcast faculty staff who helped supervise the editing and digital process in our newsroom and then accompanied the students for the live election coverage results.

Another opportunity which enabled students to replicate professional broadcast experience involved 'live reports'. A handful of student journalists were assigned to report from four of the major election night watch party locations as polls closed and results filtered in. Instead of having the standard broadcast live trucks that would feed audio and video via satellite, our student crews used video and audio equipment from the School of Communications, and Teradek wireless streaming video encoders, which utilized wireless or Ethernet connections. The encoders allowed for the live streaming of the signal back to the converged

media laboratory for live broadcast. There was no producer operating from a control room, nor an engineering technician, or producer communicating through headsets to check the quality of the live shot and audio prior to the live shot. There was just a cell phone from the faculty advisor on location to the faculty advisor at the university reviewing the shot. The live streams were up simultaneously, which did not allow reporters the usual routine of practising in front of the camera before their live shots. The students did not have a teleprompter from which to operate. Instead, they relied upon notes. There were technical issues: audio that was severely over-modulated, insufficient lighting and several encoders that malfunctioned. Those who were not able to go live due to technical issues instead submitted reporter packages from the scene and interviewed the US congressional representatives, campaign officials and revellers. The student journalists noted how their professional colleagues assisted them with lightening and camera positions. They said that while they were in the field, they recalled lectures on what was referred to as the three P's for broadcast journalists: (be) 'polite', 'professional' and 'prepared'.

They also learned first-hand another rule of thumb: 'Always have a plan B'. This notably proved true for a team covering one of the major candidates in the Washington, DC, mayoral race. As results were trickling in, the faculty advisor left and the students, just a couple of miles from campus, stayed behind with the rest of the press corps. When the candidate finally approached the podium to concede defeat, the students realized the batteries in their camera had died. Knowing they had to return with sound and video, they quickly went to plan B—pulled out their smart phones, recorded the concessional speech and crowd reaction and conducted a reporter stand-up. Arriving after midnight, the pair was the last to return to home base. One team member presented me with a script, while the other began downloading video. Within 30 minutes the duo had an approved reporter package and sound on tape (SOT) from the speech—both which were quickly uploaded onto the HUNS' site for broadcast.

Our broadcast students produced more than 50 stories in total, most of which were distributed electronically to newspapers and websites nationwide. These results exceeded more than those of a typical professional television newsroom—but with a fraction of the typical newsroom resources.

Lessons Learned

This is a critical time for the journalism industry, as it was 20 years ago for the media industry (Finberg, 2012). Now more than ever, students must be allowed to do the work in real time, with real consequences. Students must have this hands-on experience in addition to classroom discourses to demonstrate their ability and adequately prepare them for the real world. As Joseph Pulitzer stated, 'the journalist out of touch with practical affairs lacks an essential qualification' (as cited in Ochs, 1906, p. 51). Journalism lecturers often struggle with putting the realities of the business into an evolving context. We are well aware of the impact journalism has in sharing and shaping history, and the challenge of trying to encapsulate the plethora of obligatory attributes of journalism to be impactful at a time when the craft and profession are being challenged. As a journalist-turned



Figure 1. Howard University broadcast journalists write and edit Election Day assignments on deadline after returning from the field.

academic, it is important to recognize that sometimes going back to the basics is the most effective approach. Journalism is first and foremost an ‘institution for the production and transmission of factual news’ (Ruhl, 2004, p. 4). It is also the avenue by which the public is informed and history is shared.

When student journalists who are on the brink of their careers have the opportunity to not just witness, but to participate in an historical event, and experience first-hand the realities of deadline management and professional acumen at work, it is like a high school student who suddenly comprehends the concepts of unified geometry; the *ah ha* moment arises, and the self-actualization of the importance of the craft hits home. The impact of journalism goes beyond what they hear in lectures. Now the student understands a key objective for the journalism course, learning by doing—testimony that lessons learned will resonate throughout their careers.

The student work can be accessed at: URL: <http://howarduniversityelectionproject.com/>

Images of Howard University broadcast journalism students on Election Day are shown in Figure 1

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Author's bio-sketch

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