

Habitat for Humanity of Madison County: A Working Example of Advocacy Journalism

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INTRODUCTION

Journalism is the collection and editing of news presentation through the media. (Merriam-Webster's, 2011) From the moment the first newspaper rolled off of the presses, journalism has been an advocacy profession. That's because the primary goal of journalism is to act as a watchdog. Watchdog journalism is investigative reporting aimed at finding hidden evidence of social ills, official deception and institutional corruption. (Overholser, & Jamieson, 2005)

Media advocacy tries to work through the news to put the spotlight on selected social and health issues, focus the light on policy-oriented solutions, and hold the light in place over time. This three-step process: setting the agenda, framing or shaping the issue, and advancing a specific solution or policy, is the core of media advocacy. (Tulloch & Lupton, 1997)

Advocacy journalism is journalism that advocates a cause or expresses a viewpoint. (Merriam-Webster's, 2011) Therefore, advocacy journalism is often seen as a watchdog to help the disenfranchised and at-risk.

Advocacy journalism also extends beyond holding others accountable to actually being a proactive player in bringing about change by investigating and bringing to light

social ills. This project is the highlighting of a social ill in the name of social justice. Social justice is about creating a society believing that human beings deserve equality and solidarity in opportunity. (Zalda, Majhanovich, & Rust, 2006) The journalist cannot be objective and at the same time be working to create a different society. Objectivity is about presenting what is, but advocacy is about changing what will be. The journalist must switch from an objective role to an advocacy role in order to increase the audience's knowledge of social justice ills and in order to work with the audience to correct those ills.

This creative project takes an advocacy approach with the nonprofit Habitat for Humanity. It focuses specifically on the Madison County affiliate of the organization.

My background in relief work initially drew me to this organization. I spent my last spring break offering Hurricane Ike relief in Galveston, Texas. After working to demolish buildings, I decided I wanted to see the other side: the construction of buildings.

Habitat for Humanity is a Christian nonprofit organization that seeks to create affordable and sustainable homes for lower income families. It's a worldwide organization that works with local organizations and government agencies to monitor public policies related to housing, community and international development. (Habitat, 2011)

Millard Fuller and his wife, Linda, founded the organization in 1976. The organization has built more than 400,000 since then. (Habitat, 2011) The Madison County affiliate started in 1988 and has built about 25 homes in its 23 years of operation.

The organization strives to build homes that meet community standards and that families can reasonably maintain on their own. Houses in Madison County typically have

three bedrooms, a large combination kitchen-living room and two bathrooms. The houses also often include a front porch, storage barn and side-entry deck. When at all possible, the organization strives to use energy efficient windows, furnaces and appliances.

While many people believe Habitat just gives houses away, there actually is an application, building and purchasing process involved. Entering into a loan contract with Habitat is not as stringent as with a bank. The homes are financed at 0 percent interest and the mortgage payments can be adjusted based on a family's circumstances. One example would be extending the length of the loan if an unforeseen repair popped up that necessitated the family using part of their mortgage payment to pay for repairs.

Prospective homeowners must meet several criteria before they can become partner families. There must be a need for a home, ability to pay and willingness to cooperate with the process. They must be citizens or legal residents, prove stable income, have good credit, fall between income minimums and maximums for their region and have a savings account for a period of time. (Habitat, 2011)

Partner families must pay a down payment, make monthly payments, attend homeowner classes and put in 200 hours of sweat equity. (Habitat, 2011) Sweat equity means the homeowners must help build their homes or help on other homeowner's homes to show that they are really committed to the process.

Once a family moves in, Habitat for Humanity will take care of the taxes and insurance but the family must make timely mortgage payments. The family must keep up with maintenance and repairs. The foreclosure rate on Habitat homes is less than 2 percent. (Habitat, 2011)

I reached out to Habitat for Humanity of Madison County, they didn't contact me. When I told the director about my idea to produce a short video that they could use to recruit homeowners, donations and volunteers, he remarked, "that is just what we need." This project would not be considered advocacy journalism if Habitat for Humanity of Madison County had contacted me, provided any of the equipment or tried to control the story. Instead, they responded to my proposal, gave me creative license and were very hopeful this project would help promote their organization.

Madison County's affiliate has struggled to get the word out about how they can help families. Part of that is due to a lack of publicity and part of that is due to the stigma attached to what is perceived to be a handout. Many prospective homeowners do not pursue Habitat because they are embarrassed they cannot purchase a home through normal channels. By showing partner families who have found the process to be life changing, the stigma of low-income status fades as the reality of the American dream is realized.

Habitat for Humanity of Madison County has also struggled to lure new volunteers because many people in the community are already committed to organizations like the Salvation Army. By showing the relationships volunteers make with each other and with partner families, more people may begin a long-term relationship with Habitat.

My career goal is to tell the stories of the less fortunate in order to bring about change. I want to be the microphone for those without a voice. This, in my opinion, is what advocacy journalism is all about. I feel my creative project does more than reach

this goal. It tells the story of an organization struggling to find families and struggling to find support while still providing a community with a much-needed service.

I also understand with my chosen field that I will be required to perform technically. I decided to be intimately involved with every part of the process so that I could easily adapt to the ‘one-man-band’ atmosphere news is adopting. I wanted to conceptualize, shoot, interview, and edit the entire piece so I would be forced to recognize my strengths and my weaknesses. This experience will allow me to work on my weaknesses.

The year 2011 marks the 35th year of Habitat for Humanity so it is definitely a newsworthy topic. The recent economic downturn has left many people unable to pay for homes so it is important that the public is informed about this organization. The most interesting news value in this creative project is that Habitat for Humanity of Madison County will celebrate its first paid off mortgage this year.

The Madison County affiliate of Habitat for Humanity will be able to use this creative project to further their agenda. The product will detail their biggest accomplishment thus far and highlight their future goals. It will be a promotional tool to keep this affiliate moving forward. The creative project will help educate the public about the need for volunteers and funding as well as educate the public about a resource for low-income families in Madison County.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The term advocacy journalism does not have a concrete definition. Advocacy journalism, civic journalism, participatory journalism – all have been used to describe work that highlights and proposes some sort of action rather than a work that is objective. It is one of the two founding strains in modern journalism. (Sterling, 2009) While these terms have been used interchangeably, there are some key differences between them.

Advocacy journalism is a genre of journalism that adopts for the sake of advocating on behalf of a social, business, or religious purpose. It is journalism with an intentional and transparent bias. (Driscoll, 2010)

“While still rooted in gathering, organizing, and presenting reliable information, the advocacy journalist is openly trying to make a case, rather than affecting objectivity.” (Sterling, 2009)

While mainstream advocacy presses have fallen, their presence has grown online. (Sterling, 2009) An example of an advocacy press both in broadcasting and online is *Dateline NBC: To Catch a Predator*.

Dateline NBC is journalistic in nature, employing journalists to produce, write and deliver the information, yet *To Catch a Predator* was produced, written and delivered

with an agenda; an agenda to forward the message that the umbrella organization was trying to communicate.

“They are not spectators who are giving us an active report of what is going on but they are active citizens, they are engaged subjects and agents in trying to make the world a better place.” (West, 2004)

Dateline NBC: To Catch a Predator was an ongoing undercover investigation into online sex predators from 2004-2007. *Dateline*'s Chris Hansen plays the part of advocate. Along with a team of undercover detectives, Hansen uncovers grown men searching for sex with underage girls online. Those men are then prosecuted for their alleged crimes. *To Catch a Predator* highlights and then addresses the issue of online predators.

To Catch a Predator is an example where "you can be objective and still take on an issue that is important to society and to you personally," Kennedy says. (D. Kennedy as cited by P. Johnson, "2007")

Many have urged more interactive and action-oriented coverage as one approach that might serve as a vehicle for rebuilding the public sphere. (Sterling, 2009)

Advocacy is different from promotion or public relations in that the journalist does not benefit monetarily.

There is a difference between citizen journalism and advocacy journalism as well. Citizen journalism is created by citizens and not journalists. John C. Dvorak summarizes the problem with citizen journalists with the following metaphor:

“You can't play professional baseball just because you think the Seattle Mariners stink. You're not a good enough ballplayer.” (Dvorak, 2006)

Citizen journalism is not the best type of journalism to get the story of Habitat for Humanity out. It does not have enough power to produce change.

“Today, many journalists see themselves as some combination of informer, interpreter and advocate.” (Wahl-Jorgensen, & Hanitzsch, 2009) That is how I see myself and how I see advocacy journalism. Coupled with the aforementioned understanding of what advocacy is the technical aspect of delivery.

Video is the best way to communicate the story of Habitat for Humanity of Madison County because it plays on multiple senses. People retain only 20% of what they hear, 30% of what they see but 50% of what they see and hear. (Glasser, 1984) This project combines digital story telling in both an auditory and visual fashion.

Non-profit consultants often suggest organizations create videos to visually show their mission instead of just telling about the mission through pamphlets and word of mouth. Video “helps create a connection that could be easily lost with a long, strongly worded paragraph.” (Wasseluk, 2011)

“Video more than any other medium, can tell powerful, emotional stories that move supporters and donors to take action. Instead of simply telling potential donors about the organization’s...work, it can show them the people it helps and allow them to hear volunteers and those they help in their own words” (S. Rosenberg as cited by P. Panepento, “n.d.”)

While this Habitat affiliate employs several promotional techniques such as cold calling, word-of-mouth and pamphlets, they do not have a video. While several other affiliates such as the Lexington, Kentucky branch, do have promotional videos, there is

no systematic process under the Habitat for Humanity International umbrella for each affiliate to talk about their unique experiences or accomplishments.

Habitat for Humanity International does have a few public service announcement type commercials on its website, but there is not a specific video about Madison County. Without this creative project, the Madison County chapter of Habitat would have to hope they fall under the evergreen promotional materials HFH International has. The research and interviews conducted in this creative process prove that the stories of these individuals and the accomplishments of this branch would go untold without this piece.

METHOD

The reason I did this project is because I like to tell stories and I am also a fan of nonprofits. I saw this as an opportunity to mesh the two. My goal was to create a product that not only I could use professionally but also that Habitat could use to further their mission.

The method was a combination of a traditional journalism skill set paired with the technology available to produce a 10-minute advocacy video.

This creative project is an extended news piece designed to be used in a promotional and persuasive way. More than 20 hours of footage was captured over a 10-month period using a professional grade Sony PD 150 camcorder.

The creative project was captured in standard definition with a 16:9 ratio. It has the ability to be bumped up to High Definition for publication online and as part of a broadcast production.

The footage was digitized using a Sony mini-DV tape deck into Final Cut Pro 7.03. It was edited together using Final Cut Pro 7.03 and then exported in a QuickTime format. Standard definition was utilized because it satisfied the basic requirements needed to get the message out. This project was not designed to be a feature film so

advanced equipment was not necessary. The aforementioned technological choices were made based on what was available.

I decided to cover all parts in the process to provide context for the audience by telling them about the many aspects of the story. A prospective homeowner was interviewed as she was waiting to hear if she would receive a home. Another set of homeowners were in the process of working on their home. Another homeowner had just moved in and had just had her home dedicated. The final homeowner was the one who is going to pay off the mortgage.

Each homeowner represents a different part of the process: the selection process, the building and sweat equity requirement, the house dedication and finally, the final homeowner who is about to fulfill the financial obligation to the organization.

This method allows the creative project to fulfill five of the seven commonly accepted news values: impact, timeliness, prominence and proximity. (Curtis, 2011)

News has to meet certain criteria in order to be effective. Among those are the previously listed values. This project hits on each of those to some degree. By fulfilling the requirements of these journalistic standards, this creative project is proven valid and useful for fulfillment of a master's degree and use by this nonprofit organization.

The key to measuring if a story is even necessary is to evaluate its potential impact. Impact says many people will be impacted or affected by the work. Many people are not able to pursue the purchase of a home through normal means because of their low-income status. If more people were educated about how to pursue Habitat as a means to getting a home, the "American dream", then the project will satisfy the impact criteria. If you have impact then there's a need to tell the story.

The year 2011 marks the 35th year for the organization. Because this story is going on now, it is timely. Successfully equipping low-income families with the opportunity to earn home ownership for three decades is no easy feat. Beyond the benchmark anniversary, Habitat for Humanity of Madison County is celebrating the first paid in full mortgage in 2011. That event will never happen again so it is especially unique and timely. Without this creative project, the story of this one-time event would be lost.

Prominence involves a well-known person or organization. Habitat for Humanity has been an established organization for 35 years. It has built more than 400,000 homes and helped place more than two million people in homes. (Habitat, 2011) Former President Jimmy Carter has been an essential part of the organization since 1984 (Habitat, 2011). His celebrity adds to the prominence of Habitat. While Habitat is widely known, there are still some things that are not fully understood. Many people believe that Habitat just gives homes away. That's not the case. This creative project seeks to fulfill the need for more information by providing a human interest and advocacy focused angle.

Journalism was designed to educate the public for that public's benefit. By telling a unique story, this creative project has the potential to shape society in Madison County. Not only will Habitat for Humanity of Madison County have their story archived, but journalism as a whole will have another example of advocacy to continue to change society for the better.

Habitat for Humanity of Madison County was selected because of its newsworthiness and the creative license they provided me. Their willingness to give creative freedom was the biggest factor in the coverage. While there were a few instances

where production had to be curtailed due to specific privacy concerns, everything else was fair game. Their willingness to open their doors and to schedule events conducive to a shooting schedule greatly added to their attractiveness as a subject.

Interview subjects were chosen in a similar fashion. There were a few subjects uninterested in sharing their story but there were far more who were willing to share.

This creative project sought to fulfill the needs of any story. Beginning, middle, end – all are things every story must include. The beginning of this project is an introduction to the organization. The middle of the project focuses on the operations, homeowners and volunteers. The end includes a call to action for prospective homeowners from the director and the homeowners.

I wanted to show each part of the process through a different person's eyes so that the audience could connect with the project. If the audience saw themselves as one of the homebuyers, then perhaps that might motivate them to seek out Habitat as a resource, or perhaps, even donating to help Habitat serve as a resource. If the audience didn't see themselves as a prospective homebuyer, then perhaps they could see themselves as a philanthropist called to volunteer with this organization. If not working as a volunteer, then perhaps being just another voice for a worthy cause would be an option. By using different people for the different sections, I felt there would be a greater opportunity for the audience to connect with the piece. I feel that is the goal of storytelling: to create something so that the audience can take something meaningful away.

The story itself has to provide meaning but so too does the way that the story is presented. As far as technicalities are concerned, this creative project attempted to model common broadcast techniques. These included the use of sequences, framing of subjects

and use of background footage. I learned much more about production and other techniques as the project progressed. These other techniques and their use will be discussed in the Results and Discussion section.

Moving back to broadcast technique, though, sequencing refers to wide, medium and tight shots. The purpose of this in broadcasting is to continue to advance the story in a visually interesting way. The different shots create a series that constitute a complete unit of action.

Wide shots work to establish context. A wide shot of an incomplete house in this project, for example, establishes that the story somehow involves the house. The shot establishes that the action is inside this house. Medium shots work to narrow the focus from the big picture to the actual subject. Moving from a wide shot of a house to the medium shot of someone installing a wall in that home moves the story forward and focuses the storyline on the construction of the home. A tight shot of someone driving the nails into that wall brings more detail to the storyline.

The audience can see the shots are creating a message that this person is working piece-by-piece on a large house. The audience therefore becomes interested in the story that all these details help to tell. I employed these techniques over and over again to try to add interest and meaning.

Background footage, b-roll, is secondary footage that also helps to add interest. B-roll helps give context. Once an interview is established, the footage cuts away to show something else. Background footage often shows what a subject is talking about. It can be used not only to establish interest but to hide flaws, as was most often the case in this creative project.

The sequences and interviews were shot and then edited together to be a long-form news piece keeping with the definition of advocacy journalism.

The completed project was exported onto a DVD for use in meetings and presentations with prospective homeowners, donors and volunteers.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

There were several issues that arose during this creative project. These difficulties impacted the overall result. They could be classified into three categories: logistics, technical issues and limitations.

Logistically, some families who were more than willing to be a part of the project had difficulties meeting their Habitat for Humanity requirements. The biggest issue was families not getting in all of their sweat equity hours. Sweat equity is the time and effort families put into building on their own homes. Much of the b-roll and sequences lack families actually working on their homes because our schedules did not often coordinate.

Another logistical issue that affected this project was my own schedule. Many of the Habitat meetings, dedications and move-ins were during weeknight hours when I worked. Not having some of this footage means the majority of the background footage is just people hammering on houses. To have had a more diverse selection of footage would have given a fuller picture of the organization as a whole.

Moving on to technical issues, the biggest one to impact this project was the issue of blank tapes. Two tapes I shot came back blank. Those tapes of course were the digging and pouring of the foundation. I am disappointed that some of the first tapes I shot are not

in my final piece, but I am also somewhat relieved as my technique improved as this project surged forward.

Other technical issues fell more into a technique issue category. One such came issue from using multiple cameras. One camera had a hood on it that I did not know how to adjust; so much of the video shot using it was unusable. There were also several instances when I forgot to double-check the camera's settings and wound up with footage that lacked sound or was shot in a 4:3 instead of a 16:9 aspect ratio. I had to compensate for these issues by using the crop function and exporting audio into a third party software editor.

My ignorance of certain production techniques definitely came into play in this creative project. They will be discussed further under the things I learned section.

Not every aspect during this creative process was challenging. Several things did go right. They included reasonable creative freedom, a compelling story and a broadcast outlet.

As previously mentioned, the Madison County chapter of Habitat for Humanity was more than willing to give me reasonable creative freedom. They were very helpful in suggesting interview subjects, letting me know about non-building activities and letting me decide how their story would be told. The only time they told me no was when I wanted to shoot video of the interview process to select eligible families. They explained the reason was due to the financial nature of the interviews. They didn't want to risk my accidentally taping an interview where someone disclosed any financial, employment or social security information. That seemed reasonable to me.

The board went above creative freedom to actually facilitate the storyline. They introduced me to the family who was paying off their mortgage. They provided phone numbers, pre-called subjects and forwarded my contact information to subjects who had lost it. They also suggested a volunteer who had been shot and decided to give back by working on the homes.

Their willingness to brainstorm along with me really added to this project's completion. Their support made it easier to work with prospective interview subjects and it allowed me the freedom to tell their story to outsiders.

Empowering people to capture their dreams is nothing short of moving, in my opinion. People moving from abject and unsafe poverty to home ownership, something often considered part of the "American dream", is inherently a good story. What I uncovered in the production phase of this project were recurring themes and individual experiences that greatly contributed to the story.

An example of a common theme was that of going from homelessness to homeownership. Homelessness in this sense is not the lack of a shelter, but the lack of a safe shelter where a family can put their roots down and build toward a better future. Again and again, homeowners and prospective homeowners spoke of how their lives have changed or would change because of this organization. This common theme is what this project is built around.

Individual experiences that were unearthed during this project included the vicious cycle of sickness and poverty. Several homeowners and their children had illnesses such as asthma and epilepsy that required large portions of their income to treat. Because of that, they were forced to pay for sub-standard housing that often had black mold and

ventilation issues that exacerbated their conditions, requiring more medical care that in turn, kept them in sub-standard housing.

Another positive of this creative project was the families and their willingness to participate. It was as though homeownership gave them a freedom that they wanted others to experience. As they worked on their homes, they were empowered to let go of the shame many of them seemed to carry when the interviewing process first began. From a mother forced to live on her brother's couch following a relationship's end to a couple who married very young and had three children in a short amount of time. They all seemed to reach the conclusion that despite the poor decisions they made, the decision to follow the Habitat for Humanity process was one of the best they had ever made.

A great story meets a less than ideal technique to produce an example of advocacy journalism. While the end product isn't Oscar-worthy, the experience and what I learned make this creative project a valid one. I learned a lot both about Habitat for Humanity, but more importantly about what digital storytelling is truly about. The areas of my education encompass pre-planning, pre-preparing, executing and seeking feedback and adjusting.

The majority of my work prior to this project consisted of 1:15-2:00 pieces that I was able to conceive, shoot and edit together quickly. I approached this project the same way and ended up paying for it in the long run. I've learned that I need to pre-plan what message I want to tell BEFORE going out and shooting. I need to be purposeful in figuring out what pieces need to be shot and what order I want them to appear before I start collecting footage. I shot without a purpose for much of my project.

Pre-planning should also include pre-planning interviews. I was very guilty of just showing up and getting lucky on several of the interviews. I did pre-plan a few of them and those interviews I feel were more productive than the ones where I just grabbed someone and said 'hey, can I ask you a few questions'. As my project progressed, I began to realize I needed to have a goal with everything I was doing because I was wasting too much of my time collecting things I didn't need while neglecting to collect the things I did need.

In the projects that I've begun post-creative project, I definitely see myself being more mindful of figuring out the who, what, why, where, when and how BEFORE beginning the project than I did with this creative project.

Pre-preparing may sound like a synonym for pre-planning, but it isn't. Pre-preparing refers to setting myself up for success technically speaking. I reserved equipment for a crucial interview but neglected to check it before leaving for the interview. When I went to shoot, I got a blue error screen and was unable to continue. I had to waste more than an hour driving back and forth to get a new camera. I was still able to get the interview but it had a negative impact on my credibility and my focus. I've learned to double-check that equipment is functioning properly before leaving equipment checkout instead of right before interviews.

Pre-preparing is also required even with working equipment. There were a few instances where I forgot to check the aspect ratio, where I forgot to white balance, where I forgot to adjust audio levels. Neglecting to do these things before shooting meant I had a lot of things to correct in post-production. It wasted a lot of time and caused a lot of frustration.

I also neglected to pre-plan footage sequences that could be used to cover video. This meant I had several sequences of just medium and tight and not wide, medium and tight. It also meant I struggled to cover many parts of the project. I had to leave talking heads up longer than I wanted to in some instances simply because I ran out of footage. If I had been more purposeful, if I had let the camera linger on record mode, and if I had the technical aspects correct I would have had a lot more to work with than I did.

Another area where I grew because of my mistakes was in the execution of the project. Execution here refers to post-production. Because I made mistakes, I was forced to learn the ins and outs of Final Cut Pro trying to sweeten my footage. I learned about audio filters, video filters, motion and graphics. It was not a pleasant experience but I feel more prepared should I have another instance of negligence in pre-planning and pre-preparing.

I also learned how to use Soundtrack Pro. While I am no master, I at least know how to apply different filters that Final Cut Pro doesn't have.

I have learned not to shoot and shoot and shoot hours and hours of footage and THEN digitize. Digitizing more than an hour at a time is a painful, mind-numbing task. Digitizing immediately after a shoot better allows you to know what you have, correct the mistakes you made the next time you go out and be able to edit everything together at once.

If I could go back in time, I would seek more feedback from my committee. If I had done that more, I think I probably would have had less mistakes and greater improvements.

Should another student or another advocacy journalist wish further study on this topic, I would recommend developing a game plan before touching equipment, organizing a team to accomplish such a feat, handling tasks as they present themselves and moving publication online.

I wish I could have extended this project to include online publication as I feel that is where the industry is moving, but there has not been as much research done in regards to nonprofits, yet. Following this story online and seeing the amount of volunteers, homeowners and money that comes following such publication would really be interesting. A study such as that would help practitioners quantify the merit of coupling digital storytelling and advocacy journalism.

This study could also be furthered in individual Habitat for Humanity affiliates. Capturing each affiliate's unique histories, challenges and accomplishments would be a worthwhile task as technology continues to change. It could even present interesting comparisons between different countries and time periods of Habitat for Humanity as a whole.

FINAL OVERVIEW

Should I ever be asked if I can conceptualize, produce, execute and publish a story digitally ever again, I will be able to confidently answer in the affirmative because of this creative project. The goal was to create a compelling story with a beginning, middle and end using digital tools for digital transmission. I have successfully accomplished this goal and met this definition of digital storytelling.

Habitat for Humanity of Madison County now has a tool that will help them tell their story in a way that captures the minds, hearts and hopefully the support of its audience because of this project. Ball State University will be able to use this project as yet another example of a student using the tools available to tell a story digitally. Advocacy journalism will be able to use this project as an example of a journalist taking a biased, yet transparent, focus to highlight a very real issue that exists in that journalist's community.

While this creative project did not mirror the technical genius of say an award-winning film, it did mirror the hallmarks of an effective advocacy story. It has research, emotion and a call to action.

This project helped me learn what it means to learn. I will never know all there is to know about digital storytelling both from a technological and from a basic storytelling standpoint, but I have been taught how to continue to learn and more importantly, to desire to continue to learn.

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