

AN HONORS PROJECT
IN
PUBLIC AFFAIRS RADIO

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I suppose the first order of business is to explain how I got involved in this project in the first place. Being a radio and television major, and never having been a regular staff member of WBST, the Ball State University radio station, I decided in September to volunteer for any job available. As it turned out, the available job was actually two jobs. The News Department was in need of staff members to write, report, and read news and the Public Affairs Department was in need of people, period.

As time passed, I found myself gravitating more and more toward public affairs. As in many stations, WBST's Public Affairs Department is the "ugly stepsister." Although there is a lot to do, not as many people are motivated to work there. In my opinion, this is because other departments, such as news, sports and announcing have immediate rewards. When you find a good news story, you write it up, read it over the air, and possibly get your name on the Associated Press wire. Quite a few people know and recognize the individuals who call play-by-play sports events. But researching a public affairs documentary is a longer process, and except for a brief credit on the program, there is little glory involved. This makes it one of the less desirable areas to work if you are interested in fast results, which most beginners are.

By the end of September I had volunteered to research my first "Studio D." "Studio D" is a continuing series of public affairs programs produced by WBST, each thirty minutes in length and exploring problems of interest, significance and importance to the community. The format includes a combination of researched narrative with people involved in those problems presenting their opinions or solutions. Not really knowing what I was getting into, I offered to start on the problem of rising

housing costs in Delaware County. What I envisioned as a relatively easy, short project stretched out to a five-and-a-half week ordeal. In successive productions the process did get easier, but it was never easy. What the "outsider" doesn't realize is that for every minute of a program such as "Studio D" in actual airtime, there has been anywhere from fifteen minutes to an hour of hard work put in during production.

There are quite a few steps involved in making a "Studio D" program. The Public Affairs staff is relatively small; Jack McQuate is Public Affairs Director; Chuck Knapp is Associate Producer; Karen Brown and Pete Thompson work in technical production; and I am Assistant to the Director. Several others come in to work on individual projects on occasion, but we are the core of the staff. As a result, it is possible for one person to do everything but the final aired script of the program, a script which is read by Don McGonegle, the program's host.

These are the steps we go through to produce a "Studio D:"

A.) SELECTING A TOPIC This sounds easy, doesn't it? Almost anyone could sit down and think of a subject for a public affairs program, couldn't he? Wrong. Radio stations are licensed to "serve in the public interest, convenience and necessity. Finding a topic that interests the public, or at least a good part of it, and also has some substantial significance isn't all that easy. The topic must also be one that can feasibly be worked into a program. It must be general enough to interest a large audience, yet specific enough to be concisely covered in thirty minutes. Some topics are seasonal--tornado safety in spring, a special Christmas show, etc. Some topics come as a result of an event such as energy conservation this winter and an informative program on ERA early this year. An article in a newspaper may spark discussion that leads to a program.

Other than "pet projects" that one of us decides to try, most topics are brought up in staff sessions where we throw out ideas and try to come up with the best ones. It's amazing how many of those ideas seem much less feasible once you talk them over with others.

B.) RESEARCH This may take fifteen minutes or several days. Once you have chosen a topic, you need to know some background material in order to define the problems and issues and write a script, and to ask intelligent interview questions. Some topics you may know quite a bit about from prior experience or knowledge; others you have to research and learn about. We keep a vast file of newspaper articles and magazines in the office for research on current topics. Both the Bracken Library and the Muncie Public Library are always willing to help out when needed.

C.) DECIDING WHO TO INTERVIEW This is another place where the feasibility of a program comes in. If the only expert on your proposed topic lives in Anchorage, Alaska, it is obvious that it is going to be quite difficult to get an interview with her. Fortunately, a college the size of Ball State can offer experts in many fields of knowledge. Both professors and people from the community are usually quite willing to be interviewed. Some people will even come from other parts of the state on their own time to help out if they want publicity for their company, group, cause or organization. But the easiest policy to follow is to find the most knowledgeable source in east central Indiana. This cuts both expense and delay. In some situations it is necessary to ask whether more than one opinion is necessary. In a program with controversial content it might be necessary to present people for and against the issue to balance out the program.

D.) SCHEDULING This is the one step where the staff member has very little control. Live interviews at WRST can be done only before noon. Taped remote interviews via telephone can be done at any time. Frequently you have to pack up thirty pounds of sophisticated electronic gear and travel to interviews as far as Indianapolis or further to get an essential interview. In some cases interviews can be worked in as part of the station's daily afternoon talk show, "Discologues." But whenever an interview is scheduled it must be at the convenience of the subject. Occasionally when a vital interview isn't possible when you want it and no one else can give you the information, a nearly completed program may sit days or even weeks while you wait for an essential interview.

E.) FINDING QUESTIONS TO ASK Questions usually come fairly easily once you have researched a topic and found the people you wish to interview. There are certain things you want to know from that individual which fall into a natural order. From that you can get a list of questions which you try to memorize or at least shorten so you don't have to carry a sheaf of papers into the control room. Usually after I have thought of every possible question to ask someone, I show the list to another staff member to see if they can come up with additional questions. This is a good way to get other ideas. You must be sufficiently prepared to be able to follow up on an unexpected line of questions if the interview responses take an unanticipated (but frequently valuable) turn. Occasionally I will even stop the tape in an interview and ask the subject if they feel I have left any part of the topic uncovered. Once in a while you can get a whole new insight into the subject this way.

F.) THE INTERVIEW Doing the actual interview is probably the shortest step in the entire project. It is a rather simple process of acquainting yourself with the person you are interviewing, having someone turn on a tape recorder, or turning it on yourself, and asking the questions. Some

care must be exercised to put the subject at ease if he is nervous.

Otherwise the interview is probably the most relaxed and enjoyable part of the entire process.

G.) PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER. Here's where the fun begins. After all your research is done and all your interviews are finished, there you are with a pile of notes and tapes in front of you that must be made into a program. One of the first steps is to "cart" the interviews. This involves putting statements and responses from the individuals interviewed on cartridge tapes, which resemble eight track tapes in size and shape, and range from 40 seconds to 5 minutes in length. You pick the information that you want, time it, and put each statement on its own tape cartridge. You then arrange the entire sequence in logical order and proceed to write the narrative continuity (voice line) around it.

H.) WRITING...and rewriting...and writing again. It's amazing how difficult finding exactly the right words to tie together about twenty-five minutes worth of tape can be. And when you are limited to a precise number of minutes and seconds, every word has to be the right one. Not only that, but people around you soon think you are ready for "the hatch," because you must read all this out loud as you type to make sure it sounds right and comes out rather precisely in terms of minutes and seconds. Quite a few statements appear to be excellent on paper but sound really stupid when read aloud. Once I am finished writing the whole mess, I type three copies. One goes to the technical person who will produce the show, one goes to Chuck Knapp, who in addition to everything else he does, supervises scripts for stylistic continuity, and the third goes to Don McGonegle, the show's host. Each of them is free to make any editorial changes he feels would improve the program. Most changes are minor, such as changing

the position of a cartridge tape or changing a phrase for more logical sequence or smoother flow.

I.) TAPING This is almost the final stage of the process. At this point I am not usually involved; indeed by this time I am usually off in my corner again working on another show. The cartridge tapes, the script, Mr. McGonegle, and the production crew are assembled in the studio and control room. After the theme music is played, Mr. McGonegle reads the narration and the cartridge tapes are inserted at the proper time, and all is recorded on one reel of tape in steady and continuous sequence as if the program were being broadcast at the time.

J. BROADCAST Now the audience finally hears everything you have done on the program. I must admit it is pleasant to turn on my radio and know that I had a hand in producing what is being played.

These, then, are the steps that go into producing one program. It takes an average of fifteen hours to produce a thirty minute show. Usually we have anywhere from two to five shows in various stages of production. Naturally this does make the Public Affairs office a very busy place. We're always grateful for extra help. But, back to business. In the rest of my paper, I will explain the four programs (tapes on file in the Honors House) that I produced.

HOUSING

They always say the first try is the hardest, and this was a good illustration. I didn't realize the complexity of the subject until I got into it. There were four separate interviews to be done, two of them remote (away from the station) which meant carrying thirty pounds of recording equipment. To cover all the angles of home financing, I talked to:

Lowell Williams, head of home loans for Merchant's Bank, Muncie, who explained mortgages and the different types available, loans, veteran's benefits and interest payments and other angles of financing with which the bank is concerned.

John Barnard, realtor, Ed McKibben and Co., who told me about the job of the realtor and the worth, average price, square footage, etc. of most homes in the Muncie market today.

Richard Fisher, County Assessor, who explained how property assessments were made and what a homeowner could expect to pay.

Charles Staton of Staton Homes, who contributed information on the number of homes built in the county, what they cost, why they cost what they did, how they were built, and gave some cost predictions for the future.

Charles Sappenfield, Dean of the College of Architecture, who talked about trends in housing and newer developments in condominiums, mobile homes and other alternatives to the single family dwelling.

I learned more working on this show than on any other. It was a very good experience and I hope I will use what I learned (and hopefully taught others) to get the most out of my money in a few years when I start looking for a house (or whatever I choose to live in.) After this program, I'm not sure it will be a single family house!

EQUAL RIGHTS AMENDMENT

This program was a topical one produced about the same time the ERA passed in Indiana, explaining the legal aspects of the amendment and views of those for and against it. We talked to:

Sharon Hannum, associate professor of history, Ball State University, who has done quite a bit of research on women's rights, suffrage, etc, including a long treatise on the Fourteenth Amendment.

Mary Louise Baker, a Muncie lawyer and Deputy Prosecutor for Delaware County, who briefed us on the legal aspects of the amendment and what it theoretically could and couldn't do. Both of these women took a fairly positive position on the amendment. To offset this, we talked to:

Miriam Walsh, treasurer of the STOP ERA newsletter, a housewife and mother who fears for her security as a non-working woman if the ERA is passed nationally.

Mary Judy, a Muncie resident and an older woman who at that time raised some very good questions on social security benefits (which have been somewhat defined now by the courts.)

This is the only show that I did which was topical. Any other could be rebroadcast and still be valid. This one made several time references that made it a one-time-only program.

STERILIZATION

This program examined the subject of voluntary sterilization among adults. It was prompted by a number of articles I had read in newspapers and magazines about the number of people choosing sterilization as a form of birth control. It was an easier show to produce than I had expected, though rather time consuming. Usually doctors are some of the hardest people to get committed for an interview. Fortunately in this case both Planned Parenthood and Dr. Gert Voss were more than happy to talk to me. For the program I interviewed:

Dennis Alexander and Marge Enochs of Planned Parenthood. Dennis and Marge are trained staff members of Planned Parenthood of Delaware County and one of their jobs is counseling people who want to be sterilized, both before and after the process takes place. They explained the counseling that goes on to inform the patient of procedures, and to make sure the patient knows what he or she is getting into when they choose an irreversible method of birth control. Dennis also explained the procedures of a vasectomy.

Dr. Gert Voss, a leading Muncie gynecologist, explained the process(es) that can be used in female sterilization and also discussed the feelings of women after the operation.

Dr. Bill Crankshaw, professor of biology, Ball State, is also a vasectomy patient. He explained the process he went through during and after the surgery, and discussed his personal feelings on sterilization.

This was one of our "first you, then you do that" programs. We made no moral judgement of sterilization, except to point out that some religions did not favor it and that it was a very permanent procedure. Our main point, though, was to define the process used and explain the cost, drawbacks, advantages and so on.

MENTAL RETARDATION

This program explored the options open for the mentally handicapped adult in Delaware County. It was probably the easiest of the four for me to produce because I already knew two of the interview subjects, and it was easier to get the information I needed, and to schedule interviews. The people I interviewed were:

Robert Harbin, Director of the Association for Retarded Citizens, Muncie.

Mr. Harbin is a very good speaker who gave me a great deal of information on the ARC and Cannon Industries, their sheltered workshop program.

Ron Rucker, Community Relations Director, ARC. Ron is also very friendly and knowledgeable. He gave me an insight into some of the day-to-day activities with the ARC and the home and family life of their "clients."

Don Heady, professor of theatre, Ball State. Dr. Heady is the director of a drama program at Cannon Industries, including the Human Tree Players, who have traveled all over the midwest performing plays that they have worked out themselves.

This program was different because all three of my guests were in the studio at the same time, and could add to each other's statements and comments. It made the show much more cohesive and it needed very little narration to explain any of the statements.