

21st Century Script

Welcome to 30 Brave Minutes, a podcast of the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of North Carolina Pembroke. In 30 Brave Minutes we'll give you something interesting to think about. Joining the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, Jeff Frederick, are colleagues from around the university. With him are Emilia Bak, Judy Curtis, and George Harrison from the Department of Mass Communication, and Justin Smith from the Chancellor's Office. Their topic is 21st Century Media. Get ready for 30 Brave Minutes!

FREDERICK: A quick glance at the FCC database indicates that some 33,000 radio and television stations exist in the United States today as part of an industry that generates an excess of one trillion dollars each year, and climbing. In a country of 320 million plus, 118 million households are considered 'television households.' The average American spends 32 hours per week watching TV, or approximately 19% of their week. An additional 13 hours per week are spent listening to radio and another 20 hours per week on line, including work use of internet. A full 65 hours then are spent consuming or creating digital content in one form or another. The days of Walter Cronkite ruling the nightly news with his crewcut and 'father-figure' disposition are long gone and they aren't returning any time soon. Too top that off, let's offer a quote from that sage philosopher of all things American Culture, Bruce Springsteen: "I bought a bourgeois house in the Hollywood hills with a truckload of hundred thousand dollar bills. Man came by to hook up my cable TV. We settled in for the night, my baby and me. We switched round and round till half past dawn. There were 57 channels and nothin' on." We're hooked. A typical cell phone user touches their phone an average of 2,600 times per day. 21st century media has changed the way we do almost everything in our lives. This is far beyond the realization that most Americans no longer walk out to their driveway before breakfast to get the morning edition of their local paper in order to start their day. Instead, while we are still in our pajamas, we fire up our laptops, iPad, tablets and phones to check out our twitter feeds, to look at new posts on Instagram or Snapchat, to sort through Facebook, to pull up our favorite blog or website, to pick up the latest curated block of news, sports and pop-culture stories, heavily tailored to fit our previous reading and viewing habits. While this is an American development, whose effects are visible every day, it is more accurately a global development. 974 million twitter accounts have been created, though to be fair one study indicated that only 44% of them have actually ever issued a tweet. Famously, some among us, including certain residents of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, do tweet relentlessly, so I do guess that it all balances out. Facebook has over 2 billion accounts and climbing. These pages can be used to do everything from post pictures of your lunch, champion your favorite conspiracy theory, sell a product or service your company makes, or reconnect with that lab partner from 10th grade biology. Media in all its forms clearly appears to be more influential and post-modern conceptualizations suggest that developments in digital technology and applications now make style so much more important than substance, impact more critical than objectivity, or perhaps even news value. And reality television, a wholly unrealistic and contrived platform of shaped outcomes has become more essential than reality. Our topic for today: 21st Century Media, the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly. Joining us today are Emilia Bak, Judy Curtis, George Harrison, and Justin Smith. Marshall McLuhan, back in 1958 and later in print, noted famously that the medium is the message, because the medium that shapes and controls the scale in form of human association and action. Emilia, what did he mean? Was he right? And is it still true today in 2018?

BAK: Well, I'll kind of start with your last question. I definitely am a fan of Marshall McLuhan and this idea that the medium is the message. I think when we talk about media we tend to privilege talking about content. What are the messages that are being said? What do they mean? What are their effects? We always get really caught up in looking at that, and he was trying to point out that we also need to look at the mediums themselves. The kind of famous example is before the television went into American homes, your living room was organized for conversation. So you had couches and chairs that were organized so that you would face each other and have conversation in the evening. Then we get television and we are very concerned with what is it saying? What are the effects on kids? Look at the effect on how it structures our lives. Now your living room is probably organized around your digital television. I think this theoretical concept is very important for us now with digital technology and portable technology. When you look on campus, students walk around now all the time with their phones out and looking down at their phones. So, it's just not important that we look at content, but we look at the mediums themselves.

FREDERICK: I think it is really interesting how many of us have walked into our houses, seen that the power is off, and yet we still subconsciously reach for the remote to get our time at home started, even though we know it is not going to work. What about the rest of you all? Is the medium the message?

CURTIS: Well, Marshall McLuhan was during the television era. He was when television was coming in, and of course now we have the internet that has replaced television. So he is a post-modernist, definitely, and the idea that technology, in the words of one researcher, "can stretch the ways we know and experience the world" is true, but I still think the core of mass communication research goes back to the ability to look at many different facets of mass communication. We can look at what Laswell said. Who said what to whom and what channel with what affect, so we can concentrate on any of those things. The who, as the professional communicator and in today's world, anyone can be a content creator as you pointed out. Says what is the content, of course. To whom is the audience, and what channel is definitely the medium used. Then with what effect. I think McLewan is still sort of an alternate paradigm in the big history of research in mass communication and one other thing that he mentioned was the idea of the global village and so people are thinking, wow, he really predicted the internet, but an alternative view to that is the idea that yes, we are connected now, like a global village but one researcher says we don't really talk with people in other countries. We are more sight-seers than engaged. So maybe instead of one global village connected we are actually small villages that are connected now, but we only visit them occasionally.

FREDERICK: George?

HARRISON: Yeah. I would add to this discussion by saying to me it is true that the medium that you use to convey a message absolutely matters in the message acceptance and the way it is accepted by the audience. As an example, we have what we call rich-media and lean-media. The complexity of the message should determine, theoretically, what medium you use. So you've got a complex message that is fraught with emotion or has the potential to be fraught with emotion and has the potential to be misunderstood or misconstrued in some way. Do you tweet that? We see evidences, I think, as you might have pointed out, that we have a famous tweeter that is

pretty good at tweeting complex messages, and that has caused some problems. So if the message is complex and has the potential to be divisive or emotional among your audiences, then, generally speaking you want to make that a face to face communication. The meeting would be face to face; it would not necessarily be digitized. We see in e-mails, you know, e-mails are great if the message is simple like "the meeting is going to start tomorrow at 2 a.m. in room 205."

FREDERICK: None of us will be there if it is 2 a.m. (everyone laughs)

HARRISON: Did I say 2 a.m.? How about 2 p.m. then? (More laughing) Again, I think you get the point that the message needs to be very specific.

FREDERICK: Justin, what do you think?

SMITH: So, I worked in local TV news up until about two years ago in Wilmington, and had the opportunity to be there as the station, and corporate-wide, the company was really emphasizing the importance of telling stories across platforms. It was really interesting because you would pitch a story in the morning at the assignment meeting and you would have to talk about how you would tackle that on air, but also, maybe additional details in context that you could provide in your web version of the story that would be available on line. Then, you get into different flavors of web stories because there is the version that someone might pull up on a desktop computer and then there is the version that someone may pull up on their mobile phone. You can put primary documents on the web story. You know you can provide a link to a pdf of that town budget on the web story, but nobody is going to go through that on their phone. Now that same TV station, they're also doing what we are experiencing right now. They are in the podcasting business and they are also creating content over the top content for your Roku and that sort of thing. So it is really interesting to see even at the local level media organizations embracing the different platforms and figuring out really how they can leverage that.

FREDERICK: There is so much going on in the twenty-first century, and the developments and the changes are coming so rapidly; portability, everyone is a content creator, social media, there are just dozens of developments. Which do you think, without a value judgement of good or bad - we might get to that later - which have been most influential?

BAK: I think for me I would definitely have to say portability, because you know I think the instinct is to say social media. It has changed all of our jobs, it has changed how we get our news, and how we interact with each other, but really social media doesn't kind of like blow up and get as popular and impactful until we get the iPhone. So Facebook comes out in 2004 and you know, I was in college when it came out. We had to check it on our desktop and our laptop computer. So it was like checking your e-mail. You went and you read it and you engaged with it, but it didn't really gain the traction that it has until you could take it with you. Some of the most popular platforms like Instagram and Snap Chat, they rely on portability to be relevant at all.

CURTIS: I think I would say the instant access to content. Now that Google has become a verb I think everyone 'googles' and we can google anything we want to know and get instant

instructions or instant response so I think the instantaneous access to content is really what has changed our world.

FREDERICK: I think it also, in some sense allowed us to be collectors of information because it used to be if you had to go to the library and sit in the stacks and read through all of these things, the process of acquiring the information took forever. Then, as you are acquiring it, the analysis is forming in your head. Now we collect information so quickly, I wonder if there is another development that is coming to help us make some sense of the information that we have acquired. I wonder if it has somehow lost its value because it is so easy to get now. Influential changes? What would you all say? Justin? George?

HARRISON: I tend to agree with my colleagues here in saying that the access to content is very impactful. I would think that what may be impactful for one person or group in society may not be the same thing that is impactful to another person or group in society. I think that is what we in mass media have to wrestle with is that notion. You know, what may be impacting an elderly person, and the forms of media that may be impacting, and the access, the ways that an elderly person may access content is oftentimes, I would think, very different than the way a young millennial will access content. So, we have to take that into consideration as well.

FREDERICK: If something breaks, an electronic device in your life breaks, the best way to fix it is to find an eight-year-old kid because they sort of intuitively understand how it works. Justin, influence?

SMITH: I agree that it is portability, but I think that George raises an interesting point about how that is going to differ, maybe depending on where you are in your life. I mean for me it is portability, no doubt, and I will admit as the father of a two-year-old daughter, we pull out the phone at restaurants and we find Daniel Tiger's neighborhood on YouTube or on the PBS Kids app and she watches it oftentimes while we eat. So, for us, portability is a tremendous blessing.

***We'll return to our panel in just a moment. UNC Pembroke and the College of Arts and Sciences are changing lives through education. To learn more about our 16 departments, college highlights and news, as well as to find past episodes of 30 Brave Minutes and our digital journal Bravery, explore our website. You can also support our academic programs by clicking on the donate button. Additional news and events may be found by following us on Facebook at UNCP College of Arts and Sciences. Remember wherever you go, and whatever you plan to do, you can get there from here.

FREDERICK: Well, let's change the topic for a minute. One of the things that has been in the news an awful lot in the last couple of years is knowledge of sexual assault and discrimination in all quarters of American life, but in particular, and perhaps most noteworthy, in media life. Discuss conditions today for women in the mass media business. Is it still an old boy's club? Does the fact that we are hearing about these things give us reason to be encouraged?

BAK: I guess you are going to let the women weigh in first? You know, I think that this year and this past year, with the movement, like the 'Me, Too' movement, really show, unfortunately in the media industry, as in many industries, that it is still a man's world, but I do think that with

gains women have made, that that is changing and now women are at a place because of some economic gains that they have made, some gains that they have made in social life, they are able and willing to speak up about things like sexual harassment in the workplace and sexual assault, and stuff like that. I do have to say, as a women though, seeing the Me, Too movement unfold, that for me it was not surprising. Even though I was born into a generation where I could go to college and I could vote and I could be anything that I wanted to be, I still have lived a much gendered experience, in terms of having dealt with things like sexual harassment in my life. So, I still think that we have a long way to go and you see it really in media content, too. On the one hand, yeah, we have women's sports and women heroes, and we have Wonder Woman, but we still have women being objectified in content all the time, so we still have a ways to go.

HARRISON: You asked is it still pervasive. My response would be it very much is, as recent cases have pointed out. Interestingly, NPR last week discussed this very question. In the interview they were mentioning that a couple of years ago a male columnist from the Atlantic decided to assess what percentage of his sources for his articles were female and what percentage were male. Twenty-five percent of his sources were women. This information alarmed him and made him realize that this statistic meant that something's wrong. So, he made a conscious effort to correct that statistic. He has succeeded. He purposefully now insures that approximately 50% of his sources are women. It is kind of interesting the way he does this. The way he does it is that he changed his opening pitch to females. He used to say something like "Hi Jane. Can I come and talk to you about a story I am writing about XYZ? The response many times would be "Well, I think you ought to go talk to John, who is the expert in that subject." So he changed his pitch to say, "Hey Jane, Can I come talk to you for your expertise in XYZ?" Just that little nuance of the pitch has allowed him to get about 50% of women becoming his sources. It was interesting because NPR did their own assessment just recently about how many of their sources are female. About 25%. So the point is, yes, it is still an old boy's club.

FREDERICK: There is a lot of process questions to be changed in order to make more than a little bit of headway.

HARRISON: Yeah.

FREDERICK: Old boys club? Do you still see it?

SMITH: So, obviously there are issues around gender that need to be addressed to media, but one thing that is concerning to me in addition to that, when we look at the type of people who are going into media, and especially from my perspective with, again, local journalism. I am concerned that maybe we don't have a broad socio-economic representation. I wonder how much of that we can attribute to the generally abysmal salaries that many young journalists are receiving. Not young, but early career. You just sort of trace that out and if someone comes from a low-income family, or even a middle-income family, that can't support them much through college. They are leaving college often with thousands of dollars in student loan debt and then going and working as a reporter somewhere for not much more than minimum wage probably is not very appealing to them, or is it an option altogether. So I think that we need to look at the wage issue, as well, and see how that affects women, also people of color and other folks who are under-represented.

BAK: Most of the world's poor are women, so I think that by looking at that issue you can also help have more women's voices as well.

FREDERICK: Judy, does it seem different in the newspaper business than in say, TV?

CURTIS: Well, the newspaper business is less-well-paid than the TV business, and public relations is even better paid than that. But I wanted to bring some support to the idea of the pay inequality. I think that is across all industries including higher education, if I may say that. Also, I think as far as the sexual harassment goes, I think it is good that the new generation coming up is not willing to accept what the older generations put up with. We put up with it, and we didn't like it, but as Emilia said, we have all experienced it, where the newer generation of women coming up is saying, "No, I'm not going to just accept that that is the way it is going to be." So I think that is positive. As far as opportunities, I would point out that the anchors on NBC, CBS, and ABC nightly news are still men. We have some advancement there with Lester Holt being a minority, but it is still a man's world.

FREDERICK: We see making content individually constantly, right? Occasionally walking into a tree by looking at their phone and taking a picture and posting it somewhere, but let's think a little bit more broadly about an institutional approach. How are institutions, corporations, government entities, universities, for that matter, using media in a more savvy way in the 21st century to create influence and impact?

HARRISON: I guess I could start the discussion with a thought. You know, some government voices are clearly demonizing mainstream media. Perhaps Fox News is not being demonized as much as some others. They are demonizing it by calling their news the mainstream media news Fake News. You know there is a book out recently called How Democracies Die. I want to read that book and I think we probably all should be reading that book. The author points out that this is one way that democracies die and that we have been in the throes of this for some time now. Certainly there is an attack on the fourth estate and the freedom of the press and that sort of thing is a critical issue for all of us.

FREDERICK: Let me just throw out a different perspective. If my preference is to get the news from one particular point of view, is it an attack on the other point of view as much as it is a specific endorsement that the market has created an ability for me to consume the product I want to consume and I have identified what that product is, is there an argument that it is less an attack on something else and more an endorsement of the market which has created this option and I prefer to buy this product?

CURTIS: That is not really an equal option if you say the other product is false, so we don't allow for deceptive advertising and false claims. So rather than saying, well this is our point of view and that is that point of view and you make up your own mind which you want. If you say my point of the view is the only true point of view and everything else is false, then I don't think it is really giving you an equal choice.

HARRISON: I mean it is okay to say we hear what we want to hear. That is part of being human, I think in some ways. We tend to cognitive dissonance, that notion of saying we hear what we

want to hear, but as Judy just pointed out, that is different than calling educated, professional journalists, fake.

FREDERICK: Twentieth century editors and producers made those decisions for most of the content-consuming people. Now people are making some of those decisions for themselves. Is that a positive development? You mentioned the negative side effects on working journalists who are attempting to shoot down the middle and call it as they see it. Are there other negative developments associated with twenty-first century media changes?

CURTIS: Well, the speed is a negative if you don't take care to make sure that it is accurate. Accuracy and unintentional errors are different I think from what George was discussing and the label of Fake News implies intentional deception. I don't think that we have intentional deception in the media. The desire, even more than in the past. There always was a desire to be first with the news but the idea that it has to get up on the web the instant it happens before you even verify the sources or verify that it actually did happen, I think is a negative of today's media world.

SMITH: I would say that another negative, which can also be a positive, but is barrier to entry, or lack thereof, because there was something to be said for the big institutions, whether they be newspapers or TV stations, or radio stations. Back in the day there was the barrier to entry, but there was also the profit margin for them to be able to fund quality journalism. Especially concerned at the local level, what happens when that newspaper is no longer there? Who is going to cover the county commissioners meeting? Who is going to cover the school board? To George's point, is that when democracy dies? I hope not.

BAK: Yeah, and because those topics aren't necessarily the things that citizen journalists want to cover all the time. I think with every new technology we get pros and cons. Stuff is going to change and is going to bring things that are good for society and also things that we have to work through. Some of the other cons, I guess of the 21st century media era are things that we have seen like cyber-bullying, the ability to jump on the bandwagon, digitally, and bully people. We see that a lot with middle schools and high schools. Then, a little bit lighter, but it can be more serious is catfishing. Do we all know what catfishing is? (Silence) The idea of making a fake profile and trying to get money out of people, so the ability to have the mob mentality on the web or to trick people and get money out of them. That is a con.

FREDERICK: We have a very savvy audience here at Thirty Brave Minutes, so they are anti-catfishing all the way.

BAK: So they've been cat fished and now they know better.

FREDERICK: Let's turn the glass of water to half empty. Make the case that this is the most alive, best time to be a journalist in recent history because of all the tools, because of all the opportunity, because some of the crusty old saws of the industry have given way to more enlightened feeling. Help make the case that this is a really exciting time.

CURTIS: Well, there is always going to be a need for information and I think because there is so many ways to access information now there is a need for even more people who are able to gather news and package it and deliver it. So, I do think that it is a wonderful opportunity for people coming into the news business, that it is a growing business that is changing. I like to say to my students that they are living through the revolution. That the internet is changing everything and they are still in on the ground floor.

HARRISON: I think there is a tremendous opportunity, an exciting opportunity for young journalists to help solve society's problems. I think that will always be true. You know, there is a saying that if it bleeds, it leads. It means that stories of tragedy and horror and crime will always be considered newsworthy. That says something about us as human beings, I think, but media does a good job of pointing out societies problems. What I think is the opportunity and the exciting opportunity for young journalists would be to find a responsibility and embrace the responsibility of also pointing out the solutions to those problems. Don't tell me that seventeen high schools students were mass-murdered in Florida by a deranged gunman, a mentally ill person. Tell me what society is doing and what the solutions are to mass murder and I think that is what the responsibility that journalists have. Otherwise, we are all going to be feeling like...we are all going to be really depressed, right? And that can be how democracies can die, as well, I guess.

FREDERICK: People do tune in to watch tragedies and I can't count the number of times that I have watched Jim Cantore from the weather channel tell me about a hurricane or a tornado. I got a whole new perspective during Hurricane Matthew when he was in my neighborhood and I decided it wasn't quite so cool to have Jim Cantore fifteen yards from me. Justin, tell me why a young, excited journalist should be excited to go through J school or jump into a radio-TV-broadcasting career?

SMITH: Well, from a very practical standpoint the technology has really opened so many doors in terms of what a journalist can do in an autonomous way, right? There is no longer the big crew, especially at the local level. It is you. You are a one person band. You are it. You are the videographer, you are the writer, you are the editor and there is so much agency with that. You have so much control and it is really hard to think of another field that is rewarding in the same way. The technology that used to take an entire live truck to go live from a location now is done from a book bag, or even on your cell phone, for that matter. I was able to report from the capitol in Washington, just through the backpack in the back of the station van. I drove up there and did it myself. Previously you would have to book satellite time and work with the network to get a photographer and all of that, so there is just so much that you can do these days.

FREDERICK: What a time to be alive! Thank you all for a really fun and fast-moving discussion on something we effortlessly look at every day, but maybe don't always think about. Thank you all for listening to 30 Brave Minutes. Tune in next time for another interesting discussion.

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