A Primer for the Student of the Electronic Media

Abstract

This paper is intended for an audience of first term students in the field of Electronic Media, Telecommunications, Media Studies, Broadcasting, etc. In the spirit of the *primers* of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the purpose is to provide a "guidebook" for the new student. Included are expectations of faculty and employers, advice and recommendations about course work, suggestions for maximizing the college experience. Topics include: importance of networking, internships/externships, dealing with criticism, value of general education requirements (e.g. mathematics), importance of communication skills and aesthetics.

So, you want to study electronic media? Well, good for you! (And despite what you may have heard,) you made a good decision. Oh sure your parents, or your friends, might advise you to major in accounting, or business, or maybe computers because those "traditional" majors which lead to "traditional" careers are more tangible and legitimate to them. And, after all (*they* say) isn't college all about getting a job?

Good news! There are careers in this field, too. Traditionally students have pursued this field to seek careers in the radio or television industries, which are arguably the most conspicuous extensions of this discipline. In fact, when we look only at broadcast outlets, the number of facilities is so large that it gives the appearance of a huge industry. According to the National Association of Broadcasters, there are about 1500 television stations, and 11,000 radio stations in the U.S., some of those outlets employing dozens, or even hundreds, of people. Those are just the *broadcast stations*.

A staggering variety and number of support industries sustain these outlets. Production houses, syndicators, news services, recording studios, research companies, film studios, tape and equipment manufacturers, advertising agencies, and talent agencies are just *some* of the enterprises employing thousands of creative, technical and administrative staff. Engineers, producers, directors, writers, performers, animators, technicians, managers, administrators,

salespeople and clerical personnel are just *some* of the positions available in the field.

And, while this discipline can certainly prepare you for a career in the broadcasting industry, it can also effectively prepare for you a wide range of careers in other related industries: cable, recording, advertising, multi-media, broadcast journalism, public relations, industrial media, corporate communications, bio-medical communication, and institutional media. In fact, if you define this discipline as part of the "information" economy, then it is part of the largest sector of the U. S. economy.

So what you have here, in the following pages, are some kernels of wisdom that just might make your education more meaningful or less troublesome. You will find advice that can help you now in making the most of the time you spend in this institution of higher education, and perhaps help you much later as you begin your career in your chosen profession. You will find what faculty and employers expect from you. You will find out something about what you are in for, educationally and professionally. What you will find is the kind of information we all wish we had when we were beginning our careers.

"Be a Team Player"

This is *not* a solitary endeavor. It is difficult, if not impossible, to master all the skills necessary to execute a production project alone. No one is an expert at

everything. Someone who writes well may not have the visualization ability to bring the story to the screen. Similarly, a great videographer may lack the sensitivity to nuances in timing to be a great editor.

Take a look through the classified ads at the job listings. Note the number of times you see things like "must be a team player" in those ads. The team management concept virtually permeates the American business culture. And in this discipline, all you need to do is watch the credits of any film or TV show to see the vast number of specialized artists and craftspersons required to bring those projects to fruition.

During your education you will likely be required to participate in group projects. And, for some students that is pure hell. That means relying on someone else to do something. That means your success or failure *depends* on someone else. Conversely, it also means that someone is relying on you and his or her success or failure depends on *you.*

Group work is not easy. It will require that you learn and use a range of interpersonal skills like listening, communicating, motivating, negotiating, arbitrating and compromising. These are skills as essential to your success as the writing, recording, lighting and editing skills in which you may find more satisfaction.

As faculty, we realize that group work is difficult, and fraught with problems. Coordinating busy schedules that include classes, work, social activities, family and friends becomes even more complicated as the size of the group increases. But the benefits derived from learning to manage and work in a team to accomplish a single task are so valuable to your future success in the media profession, that group projects are an integral part of this discipline. If you cannot adapt to work in a group setting, then consider now whether this is the appropriate field for you.

And, finally, if you still need convincing that working effectively in a group is essential, then refer to the section titled *"Never Burn Your Bridges."*

"Never Burn Your Bridges"

The size of this industry is deceiving; perhaps making this simple axiom one of the most important lessons that can be imparted to you. In spite of the apparent vastness of this business, it is at the same time a small coterie. Regardless of how long you are in the field, you will be amazed at the frequency with which the same people "re-surface." Even when contact is lost for several years, it is not uncommon to bump into classmates from undergraduate alma maters. With startling regularity you find that the people you knew in college are now the people you know in business. Scores of people report that they have observed this phenomenon, sometimes in rather sensational ways.

"Two years ago as I was strolling through the trade show floor at a convention of the National Association of Broadcasters, I heard a voice call out my name. As I turned, I saw a beaming and familiar face heading toward me. A former student and advisee offered me his hand and business card in a practiced gesture, invited me to check out his booth, and handed me an invitation to his company's private party at one of the Las Vegas casino's ballrooms.

I asked him how he happened to get into the particular aspect of the industry that he is in (selling production music and jingle packages). He told me that he had learned of the position through a fraternity brother who worked at a broadcast station that was a client of the music house. But, stranger yet, when he was called for an interview, it was with a woman who had graduated from the same institution a few years before he had attended. I knew her as well." -Assistant professor, southern community college.

Very few of us can predict the future.

"Twenty years ago, as I completed my undergraduate education, and contemplated the various career options open to me, teaching was the furthest thing from my mind. But, faculty members who I assumed I would only see at homecoming or reunions ten years hence, became valuable contacts when I did make the decision to become an educator. Some even served as members of my graduate committee, guiding me through the graduate school process.

Of all the teachers I encountered in college, one professor had a profound effect on my undergraduate education, and then later served as the chair of my graduate committee, a mentor of sorts. But perhaps even more remarkable, ten years after that, when I was serving as the chairman of the Mass Media department at a small liberal arts college, I hired him to teach in the department, and ultimately he succeed me as chair." -Chair, media department, eastern university.

It may sound evangelical to you, but you really should treat *everyone* by the "Golden Rule." That dogmatic professor who completely misses your point, or will not concede your answer on the test could be correct, just might be the one who writes you a letter of recommendation for a job or grad school. Or, that

loser who talks in class and annoys you now, just might be the personnel director at the studio where you are applying for a position five years from now.

And even if it is not something as dramatic as the foregoing examples, there is a strong likelihood that you will cross paths with many of the people who are now sitting in classes with you. Use that to your advantage. In the business world, that is called *networking*.

"Check Your Ego at the Door"

As a student of the media, your work will be critiqued. Your work will be compared to that which is accepted as "industry standard." This allows you to understand and apply the conventions, or production values, that have evolved in our profession over many years and define what is "excellent." If you continue in this field, and ultimately become a media professional, your work will be critiqued by your clients. They will not be gentle. They will not hesitate to tell you that your work is trash in very harsh terms. Now is a good time to start to learn to deal with criticism, and to understand that it is not criticism of you.

The root of this dilemma is that you become so close to your work, through hours of planning and execution, that you just cannot view your efforts objectively. Even if you know it is not your best work, you defend it aggressively. And sometimes, you may even be right. Your vision may be "better" than that of your client. But, in our industry success depends upon producing materials that meet

the *client's* definition of excellent, even though our professional opinion may differ.

Critique of your academic projects also sometimes appears to be a negative process. A process of being told what is *wrong* with your work. Good instructors will also tell you what is right with your work. The process should be viewed as an accumulation of knowledge, with each project building upon the preceding project, with a concurrent refinement of your abilities. Hopefully, each assignment will move you closer to a level of understanding that allows you to view your own work with a critical eye.

"Seeing it MTV Doesn't Make it 'Right'"

Most students of Electronic Media will take, or must take, production courses at some point. In those courses, students are taught production values and conventions that have been widely accepted in the field. In video production, for example, we are taught to adhere to the "rule-of-thirds" when composing a shot. We are taught to use a tripod, to be steady and smooth in camera movement, to assemble shots from the general to the specific, from the wide to the narrow, etc. Similarly, we are taught that television is at its best when it combines movement, color and sound. We are taught that good television consists of audio and video that compliment one another.

But, inevitably, we are confronted with images from commercial television that are in total conflict with what we are taught. Highly acclaimed productions violate every "rule" we are taught. Cameras without tripods, cameras that bob and weave, color that is distorted and inaccurate, scenes that are not in focus or poorly lit, pictures without sound, video which features only script on the screen, and audio with no video.

So why do we teach the conventions? Perhaps it is because they are that: conventions. They are the accepted practices, customs, protocols or formalities. They are rules. Like all rules, they are meant to be broken, but not until you have learned them, and understand them, and know when and why to break them.

The power of the media lies in part in the audience. The audience has expectations that have been internalized from years of exposure. The audience feels the tension that comes from fast-paced editing, or the discomfort that comes from the extreme close-up, or the anxiety created by the juxtaposition of certain images. They do not necessarily know why they feel these things, or have the vocabulary to describe them. But, the feelings are very real to them.

So, it is through the use of the appropriate production techniques at the appropriate time that you elicit the desired emotional response from the audience. Technique, as much as content, conveys *meaning* to the audience. Conversely, using a technique that seems to conflict with the message confuses

the audience, and obscures the meaning. For most "commercial" (versus "experimental" or "artistic") productions, technique and message need to compliment each other to achieve the desired result: effective communication.

Once you have learned to apply these techniques in the traditional sense, then you should begin to experiment. Then you will be better able to judge the effectiveness of using an unconventional technique to achieve your intended result. But rarely, even in the realm of artistic expression, do producers arbitrarily ignore the accepted production standards without regard to its effect.

"Talk the Talk"

College is an excellent opportunity to begin forging your *strategic alliances.* One of the best connections you can make in college is with student chapters of the professional organizations that proliferate in our industry. Regardless of what part of this profession you plan to specialize in, there is a professional association, craft guild, or trade union attached to it.

These organizations publish regular journals, magazines or newsletters, and maintain sites on the Internet. The publications and web sites are a vital source of information on the changes that take place with an ever-increasing pace in our discipline. The publications often include classified advertising for employment in the field. These associations hold regular conferences at the regional and

national levels. Their meetings provide opportunities for you to see the newest

innovations and hear about the most topical issues.

Attending association meetings, conferences, and seminars allows you to get

acquainted with people *in* your chosen field of work. These people are contacts

for internships and employment. Remember: *networking.*

Here are a just a few of the trade and professional organizations, some with
active student divisions:

> **AES** (The Audio Engineering Society, 60 East 42nd Street, Room
> 2520 New York, NY 10165-2520, USA, www.aes.org),
> **BEA** (The Broadcast Education Association, 1771 N Street NW,
> Washington, DC 20036-2891, www.beaweb.org),
> **DGA** (Directors' Guild of America, 7920 Sunset Boulevard, Los
> Angeles, CA 90046, www.dga.org),
> **ITVA** (The International Television Association, 6311 N. O'Conner
> Road, Suite 230, Irving, Texas 75039, www.itva.org),
> **NAB** (National Association of Broadcasters, 1771 N. St, NW
> Washington, DC 20036, www.nab.org) ,
> **RTNDA** (The Radio Television News Director's Association, 1000
> Connecticut Ave., Suite 615, Washington, DC 20036,
> www.rtnda.org),
> **WGA** (Writer's Guild of America, 7000 West Third Street, Los
> Angeles, CA 90048, www.wga.org),
> **AFTRA** (American Federation of Television and Radio Artists, 260
> Madison Avenue, 7th Floor, New York, NY 10016, www.aftra.org),
> **NABET** (National Association of Broadcast Engineers and
> Technicians, URL: www.nabet.org),

Your familiarity with these organizations sends a signal to the professional

members, which is that you are serious about being in this business.

"Walk the walk"

One of the things that employers look for more and more on resumes is an internship. And, since most employers offer them in some form, it is definitely in your best interest to include an internship in your college preparation. Admittedly, not all internships are created equal. The range of experience can be anywhere on the spectrum, from being only permitted to watch and observe (as in the case of some union shops), to being a full-time employee with commensurate responsibilities and duties.

Even a "bad" internship, one in which you are a "gopher" or clerk, does have some benefit. It shows that you are interested enough in the field to have sought out the experience. Seeing the internship on your resume indicates to employers that you are more serious and more aggressive than are the students who have not included an internship in their education. And, it just might provide a valuable contact. Many students have found their first employment in the same organization with which they interned.

One very conspicuous example of this involves NBC news anchor Matt Lauer. Lauer was a student at Ohio University's Athens campus when he was offered an internship at a television station in the Charleston, West Virginia market. The station's news management was so impressed with his work they told that he had a job "waiting for him" when he finished his studies. Now, it is *not* recommended you do what Lauer did next. He left OU with just four credit hours

remaining to complete his bachelor's degree, and he took the job as news

reporter in Charleston. And the rest, as they say, is broadcast history.   But this

does demonstrate just how important an internship can be to your career.

> *"When I am screening resumes, if I can put a face with the name, I will always bring that person in for an interview. I look for internships more and more, because they show me initiative." - General Manager, broadcast television station.*

Co-curricular activities can also be the something extra on your resume that

helps you stand out in the crowd.   Work at the campus radio station, or volunteer

to help put together a videotape for some local non-profit agency. While this type

of experience may not carry the rewards of college credit, or money, it is a

positive indicator of how serious you are about your education, and your career.

Almost any "extra" experience you can add to your repertoire is going to make

you more marketable. A prospective employer may be thoroughly impressed

with a single item on your resume. A one-day seminar could be the key factor in

getting an interview. It may give you a slight edge. While everyone else who

graduated with the same degree had the same coursework, you have a little

something extra.

> *"My first job out of college was doing video production for a hospital. After I had been there for a couple of years, my supervisor told me that the sole reason I had been interviewed was a single item on my resume. I had taken a workshop in 'desk-top video,' which was something they wanted to get into." -Corporate media manager.*

"Murphy's Law"

Everyone has heard of Murphy's Law: "When something *can* go wrong, it will."
If you have not already figured this out, let me be the first one to tell you that in
this field Murphy's Law, and every one of its corollaries applies. Things will go
wrong, they will go wrong at the worst possible time, and the more heavily you
are relying on something, the more likely it will go wrong.

Thus, the importance of planning. Your best hedge against disaster is to *over*
plan every aspect of a production. Make lists, make drawings, make lists of your
drawings. Build in redundancy. If you are going to need a microphone, cable
and tape machine, make sure that you have *two* microphones and *two* cables,
and test everything before you leave the equipment room.

Too many of us learn this the hard way: travelling sixty or eighty miles to tape a
radio interview, only to discover that the only microphone cable on the location
had a broken connection; arriving at a location, unloading the equipment only to
find that the tripod was the one without the knurled bolt that holds the camera on
the tripod, or all the camera batteries were discharged.

"The only thing you really need to learn"

Perhaps you have heard the expression "the only thing that remains constant is
change." Nowhere is that more true than in the field of electronic media. Not
only does the technology change continually, but the rate at which it changes is

accelerating so rapidly that innovations are replaced by newer versions in a period of a few *months*, not a few *years* as once was the case.

Consequently, the technologies with which you work in college will probably be outdated and supplanted by something new and improved by the time you graduate and begin your first job. Moreover, with the increasing numbers and diversity of systems on the market, it is very unlikely that you will encounter exactly the same equipment, configured in exactly the same way in any two facilities. Therefore, if you were only to learn operating skills, they would not transfer to another location, anyway.

So, what is it you should be learning? The answer is simple: learning. Yes, there you have it. Learn to learn. The current catch phrase for this philosophy is *"life-long learning."* Clearly, it could be no more appropriate in any other field of study than this one. Because we know that change is constant, occurring ever more rapidly, you will be constantly learning if you are to succeed in the electronic media.

"A room full of monkeys…"

Students of production sometimes get so caught up in the never-ending barrage of new equipment and software, they believe that understanding what all of the buttons, faders and switches do, or how to drag and drop or point and click is the goal of media education.

New means of capturing, storing and transmitting sound and pictures are being introduced to the marketplace on a monthly basis. Obviously, this presents a dilemma for you and for the institution. As a practical matter, there is no way for most educational institutions to update their facilities as each new innovation arrives. It is just too expensive. Instead we try to strike a balance. We embrace and acquire new technologies that are *representative* of those most common in the marketplace, and those which will accommodate updating.

And, we still use "old" technology as a teaching tool.   Students often worry and complain that they are learning outdated techniques when they must use analog audiotape, or use low-end consumer VHS camcorders and simple cuts-only linear videotape editors. But, again, the goal is not to learn to operate specific machinery. The goal is to learn the *theories* or principles of editing, (or recording, or whatever production skill is in question).

> *"What we are looking for in prospective employees is an understanding of non-linear editing. I don't care whether they learned on the Avid™, Final Cut™, or Premiere™. We'll teach them our systems." -Operations Manager, mid-west production house.*

By understanding when to use a certain technique, or why you use it, you can control the technology to achieve your desired result. Or to put it another way, given a roomful of monkeys, and enough time and equipment, one of the monkeys could probably be trained to run the editor. It is a skill: pushing the right buttons in the right sequence.   But that monkey probably cannot be taught to be a communicator, to tell stories with pictures.

"Do the Math"

Over the years, through the process of offering academic advice to hundreds of students of the electronic media, the one immutable trend that has emerged is this: we do not like mathematics. Media students will procrastinate in fulfilling their math requirement, or try to avoid it altogether.

We are often quicker to accept other pedagogical trends in education such as "writing across the curriculum," through which we learn that clear and concise writing is important to any discipline; or "critical thinking" through which we learn to question everything we see and hear. Most of us will accept the importance of public speaking as a key facet of our training, for we may be asked to make presentations regardless of our job. But, mathematics is a hard sell.

While you may never acquire an appreciation for the breadth and beauty of the field of mathematics, one thing is clear: *math is unavoidable.* Some students may believe that if they are not going into the sales or engineering facets of the profession, math skills are not required of them. This is not true. In fact it is difficult to try to imagine a part of the media industry in which mathematics is not involved.

Calculating budgets, timing sequences, filing expense reports, converting seconds to frames, figuring mark-ups and discounts, or separating the lunch check; they all require mathematics. Aside from being one of the components of

a sound liberal arts education, math permeates the field of electronic media.

Even a writer needs to know if the commission check is correct.

> *"Even when I was in undergrad school, I knew I would be a recording engineer and producer. I concentrated completely on learning everything I could about audio and music. The only math I learned was in that context. In my major, you could take math <u>or</u> science. Now that I own my own studio, my geology courses don't help me as much as a couple of math courses could have." -Owner, recording studio and jingle house.*

And so it is hoped that something in the foregoing pages will prove to be of some value to you. Whether in formulating your academic plans, understanding the expectations your faculty, peers and future employers may have of you, or gaining insight into the requirements made of you, this is the kind of information many of us refer to as: ***"I wish I knew then what I know now."***