

# Environmental risk reporting: Hypotheticals teach skills

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Teaching the art — or at least the act — of reporting is as difficult as teaching writing and editing. But while students come to journalism programs with a long history of trying to write for school, most come with very little experience in reporting.

Journalism teachers have their special bag of tricks — often hypothetical exercises — designed to help students figure out for themselves how to track down a story. The advantage of hypothetical exercises, of course, is that they are more engrossing and involving than traditional classroom work, yet more controllable than, say, a laboratory newspaper. Students get a chance to make and learn from their mistakes, while the teacher determines the hypothetical situation and thus the mistakes — and lessons — that are most likely to occur.

Working journalists are even less willing than students to sit still for a lecture on reporting. While professionals will come to a journalism seminar, they expect to participate actively, and if this is not possible, they expect at a minimum to participate vicariously. This is, of course, the secret of the success of television game shows — that the audience, even those sitting at home, feel a part of the action. Teachers can learn from television: like game shows, hypothetical exercises are much more involving than talking heads.

Fred Friendly's Columbia University programs for public television are a case in point. A famous lawyer with a set of hypothetical incidents in hand strides back and forth asking government officials, journalists and other

notables to play out the roles of the President, Supreme Court justices or network management as the hypotheticals unfold. These little dramas not only clarify the substantive issues involved, but they also give insight into the decision-making processes of both journalists and government officials.

## Environmental Risk Reporting

This model of teaching through hypothetical incidents was adopted by the Environmental Risk Reporting Project (a joint effort of Rutgers and the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey — Robert Wood Johnson Medical School) for its program of continuing education on risk assessment for print and broadcast journalists. Since 1985, the project has conducted five such workshops for journalists.

An Environmental Risk Reporting workshop is actually quite different from the original Columbia model. Instead of an enormous semicircle of unbriefed celebrities, Environmental Risk Reporting brings its own panel of scientific experts, who have been thoroughly prepared to act out every element of the hypothetical incident, and sets this panel against the journalists attending.

This panel includes a government official, a corporate representative, an activist, a physician and a scientist. As the story unfolds, members of the expert panel play any potential source that the journalists attending decide they want to interview — police, emergency response personnel, corporate executives, university toxicologists, etc.

With very large groups it is necessary for staging purposes to select a half dozen journalists (including broadcasters and newspaper reporters and editors) to question the experts, but this game has worked very well with as many as two dozen actively participating journalists quizzing a single panel of experts.

The Environmental Risk Reporting Project has produced a one-hour television program of its first presentation, conducted in 1985 for the

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New Jersey Professional Chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists, Sigma Delta Chi. The project's videotape, "Covering An Environmental Accident," was cablecast on the New Jersey Cable Television Network (CTN), and more than 30 copies of the tape were distributed for educational use to journalism schools and other institutions.

Feedback has been so positive that the sponsoring organization, the Hazardous Substance Management Research Center at the New Jersey Institute of Technology, is supporting the distribution of 100 additional copies of the videotape to journalism schools nationwide.

### Creating hypotheticals

The Environmental Risk Reporting formula can be used by any journalism school or organization to prepare reporters to cover all kinds of specialized news issues (or to prepare news sources and public relations practitioners to respond). For example, a hypothetical medical scenario might involve AIDS on campus, bringing to the classroom a Department of Health official, an AIDS medical researcher, and AIDS rights activist, a university spokesperson (either to reveal information or to protect privacy) and a professor (playing the role of the AIDS victim). These experts would play all the relevant sources, from the president of the university to the head of the local hospital, and the students would play roles as well, acting as various kinds of print and broadcast journalists.

The session would begin with a simple statement: "You have learned that a prominent professor is no longer teaching his classes. The widespread rumor is AIDS." The students would decide which news sources to interview and what to include in the story and how to play it. Should the professor's name be revealed? Should the university be faulted for refusing to provide data concerning the extent of AIDS on campus?

Such a scenario can be drawn in a dozen different ways. For example, the professor might wish to preserve his privacy, or he might wish to step forward in public protest against having been forced out of his classroom. The experts would have worked out the specific scenario in advance, and it would be up to the student jour-

nalists to track down the story by interviewing relevant participants.

A thorough discussion should take place at the end of the role-playing exercise. Such a debriefing gives the experts the chance to discuss the scenario and comment on the questions asked by the students. Were the right people interviewed? Were the right questions asked? Were all the important issues covered? And it gives the students the chance to discuss what they might have done differently.

This technique can also work in reverse, as a teaching tool for news sources or public relations students. For such a program, a panel of journalists would question the assembled news sources or students, and the discussion afterwards would focus on how to answer reporters' questions, rather than on what questions should be asked.

The Environmental Risk Reporting formula should work equally well with a local transportation problem, a housing story, an economic issue (such as the stock market or the value of the dollar), or any question involving journalism ethics. It works particularly well with any kind of breaking news story, from a natural disaster to a medical emergency or an environmental accident.

### An environmental accident

Environmental Risk Reporting's first program began with the moderator reading this statement: "A call comes into the newsroom late Friday morning from a local resident. He's very upset, but he manages to explain that a large tanker truck has had an accident near a drainage ditch that runs in front of his home. He lives in the center of a small community in your circulation district. He says the truck is spilling a foul-smelling liquid into the ditch. Although he is greatly distressed, he has thought to call the police."

Seven experienced journalists then began interviewing the six experts who were playing the news sources. The journalists quickly zeroed in on the identity of the substance spilled. Several reporters were already well informed as to the legal requirements for labeling cargoes and were also familiar with the Environmental Protection Agency's coding scheme.

Once reporters had determined that the

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## The program gives insight into substantive issues and decision-making by journalists and sources.

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substance was chlordane (a chemical that in this case did not pose a real airborne hazard), they were concerned as to whether spill officials were containing the substance from contaminating the water supply; whether local residents were being quickly evacuated from possibly dangerous residential and nearby school areas; and that information was available so that residents could be cautioned correctly as to the risks involved in the exposed area.

The moderator applied strict deadline pressure ("You have five minutes until deadline..."), and the interviews on the hypothetical were appropriately cut off with plenty of time left to involve the participants and the more than 50 audience members in a wide-ranging discussion of what the reporters missed — what other news sources should have been interviewed and what other issues should have been pursued — and how the media should handle toxic accidents. The key question was, "How can the press adequately assess environmental risk?"

The scenario had been purposefully designed so that the incident was actually a very common one, a fact that was missed by at least one editor, who said he would run the story — if it was really a local story — with a front-page banner head. For the educational goals of the Environmental Risk Reporting Project, it was essential to keep the scenario focused on a *potentially* serious hazard.

Experienced journalists know how to cope with disasters, and they know how to ignore trivia. But the "what-if" nature of risk, the technical complexity of environmental risk assessment and the powerful fear of chemicals constitute a special challenge to journalism. The expert panel was carefully instructed not to allow the scenario to end in disaster or insignificance.

Audience evaluations of the program were uniformly excellent, although some journalists in the audience wished they had been able to participate as panelists. In two later sessions, an invitational conference and a workshop for *The*

*Record* of Hackensack, N.J., every journalist present was indeed a panelist, but for large audiences like a Society of Professional Journalists regional conference and a New Jersey Press Association conference, variations of the formula used for the first program were most effective. Furthermore, this formula, with its clearly identified journalists and news sources, worked well as a television program.

### Evaluating the videotape

Just how well it worked as educational television was determined by distributing the videotape to more than 30 journalism schools and other institutions for use and evaluation. Of these, 23 chronicled their use of the tape for a 1-semester or 4-month time period and responded to a 13-question form at the end of the time period.

Almost all responses were positive. At the respondent institutions, more than 70 percent of the faculty, students and professionals who viewed the videotape rated it either good or very good in terms of both interest and usefulness; close to 80 percent of those who showed it planned to show it again; and more than 90 percent said that they would recommend it to others.

The responses demonstrate the videotape's substantial value in a wide range of journalism courses, from basic newsgathering and reporting to graduate-level science writing. Moreover, responses suggest that the videotape might prove equally useful in professional, corporate or other non-academic settings. Fully two-thirds of the respondents thought the videotape would be useful or very useful for training technical sources to deal with reporters during an environmental emergency.

"Covering An Environmental Accident" also received an excellent review in *Scipbers*, Vol. 7 No. 1 (1986), the publication of the Science Writers Educators Group of AEJMC. Professor Sharon Dunwoody of Wisconsin wrote: "I've finally encountered a videotape  
(Please turn to page 77.)"

faculty members on top of their course load. In that case, students may be supervised by their academic adviser or a faculty member with expertise in the students' area of interest. Not surprisingly, some of the complaints about internships were directed at this method of assignment.

The third most common method of supervising internships is to assign the job to an administrator. In some cases, the departmental chairperson supervises all internships, while in other cases the chairperson assigns the job to an assistant chair or a similar administrative person. Several schools reported that internships were handled by their cooperative education office, by graduate students or by staff members.

Several methods are used to build internship supervision into a faculty member's teaching load. If the faculty member coordinates all internships, the typical pattern is to reduce the load by one course per term. In some cases a faculty member must supervise a specified number of interns before being given release time. One school, for instance, reduces the load by one course when an individual supervises 10 or more interns. Other plans reduce the load by credit hour. Supervising three interns, for example, may equal one credit of the faculty member's assignment.

Do broadcast educators feel that internships lead to exploitation of students as cheap labor, perhaps to the detriment of academic work? Three-fourths of the respondents said internships do not take advantage of students. Many said close faculty supervision keeps the problem to a minimum, and others felt there is no exploitation when students are paid. Several who

said there is exploitation felt that the job experience makes for a fair tradeoff.

## Problems

Faculty members identified a number of problems with internship programs. The problem most frequently mentioned was the variation of the quality of internships, a direct reference to the amount of planning, or lack of it, by stations. Respondents also noted the lack of feedback from stations, the tendency to place interns in low-level, routine jobs and conflicts with labor unions.

While there are occasional problems with internship programs, the predominant feeling among respondents is that the advantages to the students, schools and employers outweigh any problems.

Internship programs vary in structure, a fact that might be a problem, especially to broadcasters who must deal with several sets of guidelines and requirements when accepting interns from more than one school. It is unlikely, however, that schools will adopt any uniform structure. Each program is shaped by the beliefs and experiences of its own faculty, and variations in structure result. This means that faculty supervisors must be alert to variations in the marketplace and be careful to educate industry supervisors to the requirements of their own program.

<sup>1</sup> Roger Hadley, "Policies and Practices: Internship Programs Across the Country," *Feedback*, 24 (1983), 14-16.

<sup>2</sup> John M. Hyde, Jr. and Alfred W. Owens, "Interns: The Ivory Tower At Work," *Communication Education*, 33 (1984), 374.

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that really is a useful tool . . . What makes this videotape so useful is that it offers up to students a realistic illustration of a process . . . Journalism students . . . can gain much from watching this videotape."

Like the original Columbia formula, the Environmental Risk Reporting program provides

insight not only into substantive issues but also into the decision-making processes of journalists and news sources, and thus it is a useful tool for teaching the elusive art of reporting. But perhaps the videotape's most important use is as a model for designing classroom or workshop programs of one's own.