IN OUR OWN IMAGE: SHAPING ATTITUDES ABOUT SOCIAL WORK THROUGH TELEVISION PRODUCTION

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Social work has an image problem in the popular media. Historically, social workers abdicated control for shaping public opinion to media producers who had no investment in the future of the profession. Since 1992, this author, colleagues, and students from the University of Nevada, Reno, School of Social Work, have been producing independent television documentaries for broadcast purposes. A systematic approach to media instruction has evolved. This article promotes the inclusion of such content in the traditional social work curriculum as an innovative educational approach.

Social work is a noble undertaking, but defamatory images of the profession are commonplace, especially in the popular media. Brawley (1995) has suggested that lack of positive media attention is the reason that social work is "not uniformly known and endorsed by the public" (p. 1676). Practitioners and educators have a duty to inform people about social issues that are important in their communities. Moreover, social workers are responsible for debunking myths when the public is misinformed about the profession and the people served by it. Despite the positive contribution of innumerable practitioners, social workers are often placed in a "defensive posture in relation to the media" because they are seldom recognized "unless they’re in trouble" (Brawley & Martinez-Brawley, 1982, p. 77). Teaching students to shape the public image of social work through effective use of popular media is an educational innovation that will address this problem and help fulfill the profession’s mission in the 21st century.

If social work is dissatisfied with its image in television, movies, and popular literature, it must cease its dependency on people outside of the profession to portray it fairly. It is neither too costly nor difficult for social workers to produce their own media projects. By doing so, social workers can create realistic and useful tools for communication and publicity. Social work educators are in exactly the right position to set an example for future practitioners by promoting greater "media consciousness" (Altheide & Snow, 1991, p. 13). This may be accomplished through a variety of pedagogical approaches. Content on the use of various media may be presented routinely.

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Journal of Social Work Education Vol. 36, No. 3 (Fall 2000). © by the Council on Social Work Education, Inc. All rights reserved.
within core practice and policy courses. Media projects are valuable group exercises and may also be used as part of individual students' comprehensive projects or theses. This article examines the development of a specific course on the media and social work with an emphasis on the production of broadcast-quality television programs. To fit this class into an already overburdened curriculum, the University of Nevada, Reno (UNR) currently offers it to social work students as an elective course.

Developing Media Consciousness

It is important for social work educators to teach about the use of "post-journalism" media to help students learn to influence social change (Altheide & Snow, 1991, p. 1). Massive television and telecommunication networks are "the dominant institutions in contemporary society" (p. 8). Understanding the structures, practices, and motivating factors behind various forms of media is necessary if social workers hope to reshape attitudes and increase public knowledge of the profession.

Social workers commonly use the local (or narrowcast) media to promote their programs and special events. Newspaper reports and editorials, public service announcements, community-access television, and non-syndicated radio programs are examples of this type of local media attention. Although it is certainly valuable to continue to use these forms of publicity, they are insufficient for making sweeping changes in the profession's public image. To do that, practitioners and educators, individually and collectively, must learn to use the major broadcast media (e.g., public, commercial, and cable television, films, videos) to showcase the profession and to explore issues from social work's perspective.

Many scholars are working vigorously to ensure social work's presence in the newest technologies, including computer online services and other forms of telecommunication (Coe & Menon, 2000). Website development, computer-based training, multi-media techniques (smart classroom), and distance education are popular topics in the current literature and at professional conferences. These exciting advancements are certain to have an impact on the future of social work education.

In reviewing the profession's body of knowledge, however, it appears that social workers skipped a step in their evolution of media consciousness. Information about using the popular broadcast media, particularly television, for social work purposes is rare within the scholarly literature. The paucity of information is surprising given that television is the predominant medium of communication within American society. Low-income single mothers and their children comprise the largest viewing group (Lazar, 1994). Among children in general, including those with computers, television continues to be their medium of choice (Dorr & Kunkel, 1990). Research shows that when people in poverty receive conflicting information from television, radio, and newspaper reports, they are more likely to believe television (Slowik & Paquette, 1982). Lazar has asserted that television represents a "window to the world" for the most vulnerable and oppressed Americans (1994, p. 4).

The evidence is compelling that social workers should be using television if they hope to increase knowledge and change attitudes about the profession and its constituents. Altheide and Snow (1991) have concluded that "what emerges as knowledge in contemporary society is, to a significant extent, the result of media consciousness" (p. 15).
Is the Public Image Problem Real?

At a recent Annual Program Meeting of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), Freeman and Valentine (1999) presented excerpts from their content analysis of 47 films spanning the past 60 years. Each movie had a social work character (i.e., either explicitly identified or implied, such as a “counselor”). In nearly all cases, the portrayals were grossly inaccurate, unethical, and demeaning. The clichés and stereotypes reflect widespread disapproval of the profession. Additional evidence concerning the prevalence of negative attitudes toward social workers has also been reported by other researchers (Kaufman & Raymond, 1995/1996; Tower, in press). Such negativity is likely to have far-reaching consequences for social workers.

According to Vogt (1994), human beings are motivated to make changes on a group’s behalf only if they like them. Tolerance or mere passive acceptance is not enough; change demands approval. Attitude theorists have asserted for generations that as long as stigmatized groups (like social workers and their clients) are negatively perceived within American society, people will not act to end discriminatory practices or obstructive policies (Allport, 1935; Linton, 1945).

The media, of course, cannot be blamed for all of the stereotypical attitudes that the public holds toward social workers. Many Americans disapprove of social work’s clientele and the media simply reflects their disdain. The profession’s values and goals are often at odds with those in power and social work objectives are generally unpopular campaign platforms. However, the absence of a voice in television, the nation’s most influential medium, results in political impotence. It is crucial for social workers to understand that “the future of democracy may be influenced by the way the media choose to inform the American public” (Stay, 1999, p. 89). Developing media savvy enables social workers, in collaboration with their clients, to promote social change by using some of the same tools wielded by wealthy and powerful individuals or institutions.

Surrendering Control for Social Work’s Image

Until recently, media producers and their corporate sponsors have done little to promote the perception of social work. The 1999 debut of The Norm Show made such a mockery of the profession that the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) picketed ABC’s New York headquarters (“Norm Show mocks real ethical norms,” 1999). The outrage and disappointment was understandable, given that it had been three decades since a television network created a popular, ongoing series about social work; that program, known as Eastside/Westside, was cancelled after one year (Andrews, 1987).

Fortunately, another new series, Judging Amy, debuted on CBS later the same year. This show is receiving the NASW’s support and the early feedback on the program is overwhelmingly positive (“Judging Amy,” 2000). Tyne Daly portrays a child welfare worker who embodies many of the qualities that social workers embrace. This series is a step in the right direction, but it is only one show. The profession needs to increase its positive public exposure and should not wait for other benevolent producers to tell social workers’ stories.

There are only two basic requirements for educators seeking to teach students to produce their own television programs: funding and cooperation. Educators do not need extraordinary technical knowledge as long as they have adequate funding to pay for skilled production partners (Tower, 1999). The primary responsibility of a social worker/producer is to coordinate all of the entities involved in a media project, while gaining and main-
taining cooperation, until the project is complete. These practice skills are not new in social work education. Only the focus is changed.

Television Production in Academia?

At the UNR School of Social Work, faculty and students (both graduate and undergraduate) have been involved in producing video documentaries for commercial and public television since 1992. In the early projects, we worked with public television station KNPB to create a 3-part TV series on culture and disability. Episodes aired on Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) stations throughout the nation. One of the shows, Mending Spirits: Native Americans with Disabilities, was nominated for a PBS Gabrielle Award for humanitarian programming. Another episode, Pathways: Latinos with Disabilities, was hosted by Emmy-award winning actor, Edward James Olmos.

In 1997/1998, Drs. Kristine Tower and Susan Chandler were awarded a Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) Millennium grant to create a systematic media course and produce a documentary specifically about social work. Sixteen graduate and undergraduate students participated in that first class. The product of the class, a program entitled, Faces of Change, aired on commercial television (KOLO, an ABC affiliate) and was later purchased by CSWE.

Another media course was offered in the spring semester of 2000, sponsored by federal Title IV-E funding. In this class, students researched the issues of young adults as they left the foster care system at age 18 (or younger). Although it seems like a daunting task to learn about the media, study the topic under investigation, and simultaneously produce a television documentary within a 15-week semester, it is not as difficult as many educators might think (see Table 1). Moreover, it is one of the most rewarding and exciting courses available in our curriculum, as evidenced by the students’ high evaluations of the class.

Educational Objectives

At UNR, the learning objectives for students involved in media production are consistent with generalist and advanced generalist social work education. Upon the completion of this training, students should have:

1. Gained knowledge of the multiple stages, levels, and systems involved in television production;

2. Developed an understanding of the utility of television and other mass media for the dissemination of information by and for social workers;

3. Learned about collaboration with colleagues, human service agencies and consumers, and media professionals, as well as learning about funding sources to complete a creative project;

4. Learned about the application of the professional knowledge base to a specific issue or problem presented in a television project, including researching a topic through rigorous literature and other media review;

5. Developed specialized rapport-building and interviewing skills; and developed an understanding of human behaviors that facilitate and impede communication;

6. Gained knowledge of the negative stereotypes and myths that persist about social workers and the people they serve, with particular emphasis on vulnerable populations and oppressed groups;

7. Developed an understanding of the power of television and other media as tools for advocacy and systems change.
Table 1. Timeline for Social Work and the Media

| Week 1 | Week 2 |
|--------|--------|
| Introduction to the course<br>Images and attitudes about social work<br>Media consciousness<br>Television production as good social work practice | Production basics<br>Language of and roles in TV production<br>Introduction to topic selection<br>Pre-production research (literature review) |
| **Week 3**<br>*Calling the shots:* Examining directorial styles<br>Class discussion: *Mending Spirits*<br>Locating resources, participants, talent<br>TV: Topic selection, title discussion | **Week 4**<br>*Let's tell a story:* Examining alternative ways to engage, inform and entertain the public<br>Storyboard approach vs. investigative reporting |
| **Week 5**<br>Field trip to television station<br>Annotated Bibliography due<br>TV: Pre-production research is complete | **Week 6**<br>Production Begins This Week<br>Interviewing techniques for TV<br>In-class exercises: role-play interviewing for TV<br>Ethical considerations in TV production<br>Video: *Prime Time:* “Welfare fraud” and discussion<br>TV: Student participation in videotaping sessions begins |
8. Developed skills in thinking, writing, and speaking persuasively;
9. Learned to apply social work ethics to situations that may arise when vulnerable people are involved in public displays of personal problems.

**Generalist Approach to Program Content**

At UNR, students select the video topic and begin to design the content by examining a social problem from the generalist perspective. Figure 1 presents a worksheet that is used to help students conceptualize the multiple systems they hope to influence with their project. To illustrate, students in the Spring 2000 course were concerned about young people who were aging out of the foster care system. For this television documentary, they chose to focus on individuals who were struggling to become independent adults in the absence of strong family support (micro level). There were several groups in the foster child's immediate environment that students were trying to reach, including human service providers, foster parents, friends and neighbors, and other natural helpers (meso level). The students hoped to reduce the stigma of foster care, raise awareness of the problems of older foster children, and ultimately, influence systems to change and become more supportive of the children's transition into

*Figure 1. Topic Selection Worksheet Using a Generalist Model*
adulthood (macro level). The worksheet aids students in developing the major topic, sub-topics, and key concepts that must be translated into visual images. It serves as the starting point for brainstorming and discussions that eventually result in consensus about the program content.

Across all levels, students must remain conscious of the main objective of the documentary: improving the public opinion of social work. They must look for images that capture the essence of social work in this field of practice. Hopefully, the students will focus on the strengths of all participants and will showcase the sincere efforts of people trying to improve conditions for neglected and abused children.

Resources for Broadcast Television Production

There are several ways to make a television program, but broadcasters are very selective about the quality of a production that they will air. It is possible to make free or low-cost videos by using home video cameras, community-access television, or asking local news people to volunteer their time. Such programs, however, are unlikely to receive much air time unless sponsors are willing to pay generously for broadcasting. Furthermore, while it may be feasible to assemble a video through volunteer efforts and free services, it isn’t possible to continue producing media projects that way.

The caliber of a program will depend largely on the quality of the equipment used and the people who operate the cameras and editing systems. Television equipment is extremely expensive. Cameras, for example, may cost $75,000 each or more, while editing studios run into millions of dollars. Fortunately, social workers need only to rent the equipment and services for brief periods of time.

Locating sources of funding is one of the major topics covered in UNR’s media course, including a brief overview of grant writing and an examination of local, state, foundation, and federal funding. Students are directed to use numerous resources to locate grants, (e.g., Federal Register, CD-ROM and online catalogs, foundation directories, NASW News, and CSWE Social Work Education Reporter), and to watch for requests for proposals in state publications and the newspaper. In the class, the professor demonstrates how grants are written and involves students in the process of developing a new proposal for a future video project. In this way, the search for funding for the next documentary is initiated so that the course is self-sustaining.

A local public television station is probably the best place for novices to get started with TV production. It has been the experience at UNR that PBS stations enjoy collaborating with universities. They promote programming that is usually compatible with social work values and they seem to respond to social work issues with interest. Discussions with the station representatives will inform educators about the amount of funding needed and the availability of equipment and trained personnel. PBS stations may also have ideas about corporate funding opportunities for topics of interest to their major contributors. To illustrate, Mending Spirits (mentioned above), received a significant amount of funding from the Hartman-Kanning Trust (for health-related programming), which was arranged entirely by the local public television station. Less than $8,000 of external funding was needed to make that 60-minute program.

PBS is divided into four sections (called quadrants) within the United States. Stations within each quadrant share their local productions, usually at no cost. Those from the outside quadrants pay (from grants and donations) for the privilege of airing desired programs. PBS has syndicated programs such as Frontline,
ment to another as well as editing tricks to cover up mistakes and disguise poor quality footage. Editors also show students how various transitions between scenes are used to change themes or create the illusion of time passing. Students also discover the ethical issues involved in editing. For instance, through technology it is possible to change the meaning of someone's statements by piecing words together out of context. Former students reported that the experiences taught them to have a healthy mistrust of television. At the same time, they discovered how to use the medium to the profession's advantage.

Students make field trips to the studio during normal broadcasting times for an orientation to the production process. Next, they go out on location with a production crew to conduct their interviews, seeking out interesting information about the respondent that may lead to ideas about how to approach the segment visually. For example, in Faces of Change, one of the social workers told us that he was a co-pastor of the Bethel AME Church in Sparks, Nevada. Subsequently, he was videotaped singing and leading the church choir.

After the taping session, original tapes are taken by the videographer and made into VHS copies, each with unique time codes running across the bottom of the screen. Those codes are used to locate the best video footage for final editing. Students and faculty make all of the editing decisions and they apply their unique talents to embellish the program. In Faces of Change, for instance, two students created and recorded original music for the documentary. In Mending Spirits, a student developed poetic narration for the show. In another program, Full Circle: African-Americans with Disabilities, one of the students was a featured guest.

Students become increasingly self-confident as their class project takes shape. By the end of the semester, they've learned that television production is not a mysterious or forbidding task. It is simply a communication technology that is accessible to social workers, even those with little or no experience in television production.

Educator's Experiences: Positive and Negative

After completing the first television documentary (Mending Spirits) with major support from a professional videographer and editor, the author was ready to become autonomous as a producer. One of the greatest benefits discovered by doing this work is the opportunity to teach and conduct scholarly work simultaneously. Driven by a deadline, the professor is certain to complete at least one major project during the semester and is likely to find funding for a future work. Moreover, while researching the topic and conducting interviews with consumers, the educator truly gains expertise on a particular subject. The professional networking and personal contacts with social work clients that occur during production help to keep academicians in touch with important community issues. The experiences contribute to better preparation for teaching about social work throughout the curriculum.

It would be unfair not to mention that there are hardships involved in teaching a course such as this. For example, a video project picks up speed during the production, and toward the end of the semester the demands on the professor's time are enormous. It is necessary to plan ahead and allow for the intensive work that is involved during the last few weeks of editing. In addition, tenure and promotion for junior faculty is often dependent on strong records of publication (Gelman & Gibelman, 1999). Regardless of its popular success or critical acclaim, television production does not receive the same measure of respect as refereed publication, especially of empirical research.
On the other hand, university administration takes notice when television programs result in positive attention. At UNR, students schedule a premiere showing of each video and invite friends and family to attend. Faculty invites university colleagues, administrators, and representatives from the funding sources. Social workers’ responses suggest that the experience was more gratifying than other forms of scholarly work. Certainly, the breadth of exposure to the public is much greater. This kind of scholarly work isn’t enough to ensure tenure though, so it is a good idea to balance it with more traditional research and publication efforts.

Overcoming the Obstacles

The greatest aversion to television production is probably fear of the unknown. It would be helpful if there was a simple manual for novice social worker/producers to use, but there is none known to exist. In an earlier article, some of the basic mechanics of video production used at UNR were presented (Tower, 1999). This should be of some value to beginners. However, most of what social workers need to know they can learn just by getting started and going through the process.

Despite the potential of this medium to serve social work purposes, there are those who will resist it on principle alone. For social work educators, getting involved with television may seem like fraternizing with the enemy. Few would support the position that television is generally wholesome or beneficial to American society (Lazar, 1994). But, many stereotypes about television are inaccurate, just as they are about social work. Not all television is harmful; in fact, some of it is educational and therapeutic (Rubin, 1991; Stoesz, 1993; Stosny, 1994). In recent years, there has been increased pressure and renewed commitment to improve the quality of children’s programming (Lazar, 1994). The author’s experience has been that people who work in television generally care about society and are willing to cooperate with social workers. They are enthusiastic about collaborating on social causes, as long as they are not expected to donate all of their time and energy. If all other factors are equal (sponsorship, quality, and audience interest), I believe that television broadcasters are likely to choose good programs over bad ones. The problem is a lack of good programs that meet the other criteria. Social workers need to understand these motivations so that they can concentrate on producing television programs that meet broadcasters’ needs. In doing so, the profession will fulfill its own needs.

Implications for the Future of Social Work Education

Kaufman and Raymond (1995/96) have asserted that, “it is likely that the profession’s ability to attract qualified people to pursue social work careers in order to meet its future personnel needs will in some measure be influenced by the public’s knowledge and perception of the profession” (p. 25). It is frustrating, but in addition to all of the responsibilities of doing and teaching social work, the profession must use precious energy to shape public opinion. The image problem is real, however, and social workers should be concerned. Educators who are not convinced that an image problem exists need only ask students if someone close to them disapproved of their decision to enter the social work profession. In students’ responses familiar themes and stereotypes about social workers (e.g., baby snatchers, uncaring civil servants, food stamp workers, do-gooders) and their clients (e.g., lazy, hopeless, welfare frauds) will emerge. The profession and its constituents are perceived in this way, at least in part, due
to the influence of the popular media. It is time to challenge the same media to reshape such images and attitudes.

If the goal of social work education is to prepare effective practitioners, researchers, and policy makers, it could be argued that current instructional approaches are neglecting to teach students crucial skills needed to promote a healthy and just society. Television is a vehicle for advocacy, therapy, public information, peer support, recruitment, and qualitative or quantitative research. This medium is the most pervasive form of communication in the world, yet, social work’s presence and influence is almost nonexistent. Increasing numbers of practitioners and educators must take an active role, either by creating their own television programs or by serving as technical consultants on good quality shows. Only then will it be possible to study the efficacy of this medium in changing the public’s image of social work. In the meantime, critics of television, social worker/producers, and those social workers interested in becoming producers should continue this discussion.

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