

THESIS

DOING IT ALONE: DO VIDEO JOURNALISTS AFFECT THE QUALITY AND  
CREDIBILITY OF TELEVISION NEWS?

Submitted by

Dan Messineo

Department of Journalism and Technical Communication

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Master of Science

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

Spring 2015

Master's Committee:

Advisor: Joe Champ

Greg Luft

Kathleen Kelly

Copyright by Dan Messineo 2015

All Rights Reserved

## ABSTRACT

### DOING IT ALONE: DO VIDEO JOURNALISTS AFFECT THE QUALITY AND CREDIBILITY OF TELEVISION NEWS?

The recent financial pressures on local TV news stations have forced many owners and managers to cover the day's events with fewer employees. Many station owners have turned to video journalists to cut newsroom costs.

The video journalist, also called "backpack journalist," does it all. These intrepid reporters conduct interviews; write scripts, shoot and edit their video. With so many stations turning to video journalism, this research explores how and to what extent video journalists affect the quality and credibility of TV news.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
THE MORNING SHOW BEGINS IN 30 MINUTES .....	1
THE MORNING SHOW BEGINS IN 15 MINUTES .....	3
THE MORNING SHOW BEGINS .....	4
THE TVU PACK.....	4
IFB SET UP .....	5
HISTORY OF SOLO JOURNALISM .....	6
THE PIONEERS.....	7
THE BOTTOM LINE.....	10
VIDEO JOURNALISTS: QUALITY.....	13
QUALITY VS. VIDEO JOURNALISM.....	15
THE DEADLINE.....	16
“DEPTH OF SCRUTINY” .....	18
SOURCE CREDIBILITY VS. AUDIENCE RESPONSE.....	20
METHOD: FOCUS GROUPS.....	23
FOCUS GROUPS: ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES .....	23
TRIANGULATION.....	25
FOCUS GROUP DESIGN .....	26
VENUE.....	26

SELECTING A SAMPLE .....	27
FOCUS GROUP .....	28
OBSERVATIONS .....	30
DISCUSSION .....	32
FURTHER RESEARCH .....	35
WORKS CITED .....	37

## **The Morning Show Begins in 30 Minutes**

Camera, light, microphone and tripod in the car... Got my IFB and cell phone... I have got five batteries. Script is in the bag. TVU Pack is ready to go. Rushing out the door, I yell to the producer and anchor "I'll call you when I get set up." Amazingly, the 6 or so pieces of equipment mentioned above are all I need as a video journalist to go live for the two-hour morning newscast. However, I will get to that a bit later because the equipment is just a small portion of what I have to contend with before the anchor introduces me at 5:15 a.m.

I am a video journalist for the graveyard shift at a station in a mid-sized Midwestern U.S. market. In the book *Video Journalism: Beyond the One-Man Band*, Mary Angela Bock (2012) defines video journalism as "the practice of video news production whereby one person shoots, writes, and edits news stories, using digital technologies, to be disseminated via broadcasting or broadband Internet," (p. 3). News industry professionals use a variety of names to describe the reporter who does all of the above: multimedia journalist (MMJ), backpack journalist (BPJ), solo journalist (SoloJo), mobile journalist (Mojo), one-man-band and platypus. For the purposes of this paper, I will use video journalist.

Once everything is in the car, I am usually off to some barely lit street corner. It is almost time for the 5 am show and I arrive at a scene where just a few hours before there was a violent crime, accident, fire or some other breaking news event. Being the overnight reporter, stories such as these are usually what I am covering. I have been at the scene of numerous house, grass and car fires; I've covered shootings, stabbings and vehicle homicides; I have been there for two-car accidents, three-car accidents and even a school bus vs. semi accident; I have stood in snow

storms and in the debris field of a tornado and I was alone – shooting, editing and writing –  
through all of it.

## **The Morning Show Begins in 15 Minutes**

Once I get to the scene of the live shot, my safety and that of the equipment are extremely important, so I make sure to check the area before getting out of the car and pulling out thousands of dollars worth of gear. Being alone definitely makes me more vulnerable and it is important to keep that in mind during the two-hour show. In the article *The Changing Face of News*, Bruce Young (2009) discusses the vulnerability of a lone reporter, “ A reporter, standing a dozen feet away from his unattended camera doing a standup in a bad neighborhood might as well hang a little sign off the tripod saying, ‘Grab Me!’” (p. 41).

I set up as close as I can to the car just in case I am attacked or robbed. I cannot overstate how much this comes in to play when I am alone in the middle of the night. Every show is a constant balance between my safety and what makes a compelling live shot.

Luckily, I have never been robbed or assaulted. However, I have encountered a few strange people while outside during the early morning. One time, I had 15 seconds before I was about to go on air, and out of the corner of my eye I saw a man quickly walking toward me. Before I knew it, he was in my face. He made a loud, guttural sound and walked off; about two seconds later I was on camera. I was visibly shaken by the situation, and at that point, not sure if he was going to come back while I was on the air. Thankfully, he did not.



## **The Morning Show Begins**

The morning broadcast consists of four thirty-minute shows. I am on four times, usually around the quarter hour. So, I have about 15 minutes to continue setting up. Fifteen minutes may not seem like a lot of time; however, in television time it can make all the difference between a successful live shot and a huge failure.

### *The TVU Pack*

The particulars of setting up for a live shot are surprisingly simple. It is all made possible by the TVUPack. The TVUPack is a “portable, lightweight video capture and transmission backpack that enables broadcasters to deliver live news and events to audiences with a professional broadcast-quality picture” (Wegner, 2012, pg.1).

Gone are the days of driving a live truck to a scene and all that entails. I have done multiple live shots and I have only been in a live truck once. In an interview for *Backpack Live Technology a TV News Game Changer*, Jeff Houston, news director for WTVA, said, “I doubt I'll ever buy a live truck again.” Houston goes on to talk about the benefit of using a TVU backpack, “One person can do a self-contained live shot” (Wegner, 2012, pg.1).

Speaking from experience, Houston is correct. The live TVUPack is the backbone of the video journalists' live shot. These small backpacks that weigh about thirty pounds are revolutionizing live news. Not only can one person use this technology, journalists can take the TVUPack into many different environments that a live truck just cannot go. I connect the backpack to a camera with a USB cord and the TVUPack “broadcasts live video in HD using

multiple 3G/4G/WiFi/WiMax/BGAN connections,” (Wegner, 2012, pg.2). The TVUPack also has a monitor, so I can see the picture being broadcasted.

### *IFB Set Up*

Not only is it critical that I am seen and heard from the scene, but it is just as important that I can hear the control room. I use cell phone IFB technology. I use a standard IFB connection for my ear and I connect it to an IFB box, which acts as the “middle man” for my IFB earpiece and the cell phone I use to connect to the control room. Once I am connected, I can hear the entire show and the producer can talk to me. The latter is most important because he cues me to talk. The TVUPack has a five to seven second delay, so if the producer does not cue me, I would stand in silence looking into the camera for five seconds. I am sure we’ve all seen reporters look goofy while standing in a front of a camera because the cue wasn’t timed correctly.

Now of course with all of this technology live shots can quickly turn ugly. My camera has inexplicably turned off, the backpack signal has been too weak to transmit, my microphone has not worked and the camera light has turned off in the middle of my on-camera intro. Just about every thing that could go wrong has gone wrong.

Despite all of the glitches, a lone reporter standing in front of a camera for a live shot with nothing more than a TVUPack and microphone would have been nearly impossible just ten years ago.

## History of Solo Journalism

When reviewing the history of journalism, the advent of the video journalist is one of the most recent occurrences. In order for video journalism to happen, two major shifts in the industry took place at roughly the same time. First, industry cameras and the equipment became more advanced, cheaper and smaller. Secondly, the bleak economic future of the industry forced the hand of many station managers to do more with less, which meant eliminating nonessential positions.

Initially, television news took a crew of four to capture the story for the evening broadcast. In the book *Going Solo: Doing Video journalism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, G. Stuart Smith (2011) quotes former CBS News correspondent Charles Collingwood on the rigors of television news, “It’s mechanically more difficult, more cumbersome, it involves more people and uses more skills and puts more burdens on correspondents than either radio or the press,” (pg. 7).

During the 1960s, news crews used film cameras to capture the day’s events. Film cameras are more complicated and cumbersome than the video cameras of today, so the news stations had to employ a person who could carry the heavy equipment and who was also knowledgeable about the complexities of shooting on film. Also, film cameras have no way of capturing sound, so a sound person was on the crew to record sound on a separate device. Many times another technician would be on hand to light the interview. Of course, the fourth person on the crew would be the reporter (Smith, 2011, pg. 7).

The 1970s ushered in one of the first big changes in broadcast news reporting with the advent of electronic newsgathering (ENG). Gone were the days of capturing news on film and a separate sound recording device. The new cameras used videotape, which could record the

sound on the same line of tape as the moving pictures. Soon after, the sound technician was no longer needed in the crew. Also, video is much easier to light than film, so the lighting technician became obsolete too. The responsibilities of a three-person crew now fell on the shoulders of one, “Photographers, with the camera on either a tripod or one shoulder and recording deck, that some referred to as ‘boat anchors,’ on the shoulder, managed to shoot video, get usable sound and do lighting set-ups if needed,” (Smith, 2011, pg. 8). This set up was clunky for the videographer but manageable.

The Betacam followed which merged the video recorder and camera. The videographer no longer had to carry around a separate video recording device, which made the process of newsgathering less burdensome. The easier-to-use Betacam cemented a place for the two-person crew in smaller news stations around the country (Smith, 2011, pg. 8).

### *The Pioneers*

Jon Alpert, a freelance reporter and photographer in the 80s, was one of the first in the news business to ditch the photographer and go it alone. As a “one-man-band” reporter, Alpert was able to travel the world to capture stories that news crews “could not or would not go,” (Smith, 2011, pg. 8). NBC executives took notice of his work after many of his stories were featured on the *Today Show*. G. Stuart Smith quotes Steve Friedman, the *Today Show* executive producer at the time, “I thought, this is the kind of stuff that we can’t get, because we can’t spend that kind of time with people,” (Smith, 2011, pg. 9).

In the early 90s, Michael Rosenblum, another pioneer in video journalism, championed the idea that a lone reporter should go out with a small Hi-8 camera. Rosenblum considered “conventional television news” to be “a bloated system that presents an uninteresting product,”

(Bock, 2012, pg. 3). Rosenblum thought of video journalism as a higher form of the traditional news-crew journalism. He stressed that a video journalist is not just a one-man-band reporter; he suggested that video journalism “tends to be much more intimate; it tends to be much more, almost cinemagraphic in terms of its construction,” (Smith, 2011, pg. 16). Believing so much in the practice of video journalism, Rosenblum created “Video News International.” It was an international news network that exclusively employed video journalists. The network didn’t last long. Soon after its inception, the *New York Times* took it over and closed it when they opened their own “video journalism unit,” (Bock, 2012, pg. 3).

After a successful run for video journalists at ABC’s *Nightline*, larger and smaller stations around the country jumped on the video journalism bandwagon. KRON in San Francisco hired none other than video journalist pioneer, Michael Rosenblum, to transform the languishing station into a leaner moneymaker by converting the staff to video journalists.

The conversion nearly doubled the number of journalists covering the city’s daily news. However, KRON got some flack for making the change, “Critics called many of KRON’s news stories amateurish,” (Smith, 2011, pg. 10). The news director pushed back with pointing out that the station now has enough journalists to find the good stories, “I firmly believe that we’ll come out of this a far better station journalistically” (Smith, 2011, pg. 10). The switch to video journalists did not sway the minds of the decision makers; KRON’s parent company sold the station despite the efforts.

Today, stations in large and small TV markets around the country have video journalists on the payroll. Critics say it ruins journalism: supporters herald its efficiency and intimacy; whatever the opinion, most consultants and media watchers agree the practice of video

journalism will continue to flourish and the “old-timers” who refuse to accept the paradigm shift will get left behind.

The rise of video journalism has had its fits and starts. Of course, the Internet and the continuing technological advances in equipment (like the TVUPack) have made its future more secure. Furthermore, for many stations trying to keep afloat during a rough period in the industry, the video journalist is quickly becoming a necessity.

## The Bottom Line

Many local television stations across the country have shelved the reporter/photographer combo in favor of something more cost effective: the video journalist. In the article *Mojo in the Third Millennium: Is multimedia journalism affecting the news we can see?* Peter Martyn (2009) discusses the benefits of one person performing multiple jobs, “ Many media managers have embraced with enthusiasm the solo journalist – able to move fast and travel light, at lower cost than traditional news teams” (pg. 196).

Cost is the key word for most station owners. Like all other pursuits in a capitalist society, news programming needs to make money. Martyn (2009) quotes Andy Rooney, of CBS’ 60 Minutes, who said “Corporate America was late discovering there was profit to be made with news, and it’s trying to make up for its slow start” (pg. 197).

The business model of news has changed dramatically since its inception. Delivering the public information about its government has always been seen as a necessity for a healthy democracy. This in mind, the news had to be delivered regardless of whether it made money or not. In fact, networks expected news programming to lose money. In the book *Changing Journalism*, Lee-Wright, Phillips and Witschge (2012) argue whether via newspaper or an evening broadcast, networks have never received enough money from advertisers to produce news. Networks sold advertising for their popular programming and funneled those dollars to their news departments. In the book *The Economics and Financing of Media Companies*, Picard (2012) points out the contentious relationship between the news business and the importance of getting information to the public. He writes the two roles “create tensions within media

companies and among media policy-makers that require careful balancing if society is to gain the benefits of a free and independent media system” (Lee-Wright, Phillips, Witschge, 2012, pg. 4).

The insatiable appetite of media companies to rake in profits has forced them to rely heavily on advertising dollars. Unfortunately for the media makers, advertising dollars are scarcer than ever. The Internet has thrown a wrench into the business model that has, more or less, worked fairly well up until now for networks and station owners. Audiences are trading in the traditional news delivery methods for the Internet. Peter Lee-Wright et al. discuss the consequences for news “As audiences move on to the net, so too do advertisers,” he goes on by saying “Advertisers are finding new ways to get directly to their audiences which do not require them to pay for space in news media as they have done in the past” (pg. 3). With all of the new and cheaper ways to reach an audience, advertisers have little reason to “take up the cost of news production” by purchasing ad space. Many news organizations have responded to the crisis by dramatically cutting the cost of news production.

Removing personnel from the newsroom is one of the many ways overhead costs have been slashed, therefore, relying on one person to perform multiple jobs. Martyn (2009) stresses the realities of television news when it needs to be a profit center: “The pressure to make money has often meant orders to do more with less, to produce more content of greater variety with fewer staff” (pg. 197).

Enter the “backpack journalist” or the “solo journalist” or the “video journalist.” “Multi-skilling” or multi-tasking journalists are the norm in many stations across the country, especially, in smaller media markets where advertising dollars are not as abundant. The video journalist originated in broadcast news and flourished in the mid- nineties. These intrepid reporters do it all. In the article *Watchdog or Witness? The emerging forms and practices of video journalism*,



Sue Wallace (2009) writes, “It (video journalism) differs, though, from conventional television reporting in that the video journalist is a solo newsgatherer, carrying out all the duties traditionally shared by a crew” (pg. 685).

What happens when one person is responsible for carrying out all of the tasks of a video journalist? It stands to reason that the already busy and stressful job of a reporter is compounded. Are station managers using video journalists at the risk of sacrificing program quality? Does the added workload affect the quality of a video journalist’s output, and in turn, diminish the credibility of the station? Or, perhaps the benefits of using video journalists outweigh the negatives.

## Video journalists: Quality

Before discussing the pros and cons of video journalism and how the practice might affect program quality, it is important to define quality and how it applies to news programming. In the article *Quality in programming: Views from the North*, Rosengren, Carsson and Tagerud (1996) propose a general definition of quality, they view *quality* “as being one or more characteristics satisfying certain standards backed up by more or less central values and norms” (pg. 5). This definition is a bit tricky in regard to broadcast news quality. Mostly because whose “standards” are we employing to decide what news program deserves the term “quality”?

Much of the previous research relies on professionals to decide what is and what is not quality programming. However, a growing number of scholars propose that quality in programming should be decided by the receiver or viewer of the program. Viewers are the ones who the professionals or senders are creating the program for, and also, the ones who the advertisers want to reach. So, are they not the most important part of the equation? However, without the proper training or experience, how would viewers discern quality programming? In the article *Quality Assessment of Television Programs in Israel: Can Viewers Recognize Production Value?* Jacob Shamir (2007) says “Lay viewers have been perceived as lacking the interest and knowledge to cast judgment on production elements and the production value of television programs” (pg. 325).

Further into the article, Shamir says whether it be TV, books or anything else for that matter; it possesses quality if the person engaged with the medium gives it purpose and meaning in their lives. In the article *The Ethics of Quality in Television*, J. Mephram (1990) says, “in assessing the quality of television broadcasting, one must explicate the set of valued standards,

norms, uses and gratifications which guide the evaluation” (pg. 58). Therefore, “quality” is subjective and based on the receivers’ experiences, which include their “psychological and social environment.” A viewers’ perception of “quality” could also include their opinion of the media in general or their expectations of what role the media should play in their lives (Bryant, Zillman, 2002, pg. 527).

For the purposes of this research, I will use Rosengren’s (1996) definition of “quality” and employ the “standards” of the viewer, which are based, in short, on J. Mepham's (1990) thought that the viewers’ assessment of quality involves their engagement with the material.

## Quality Vs. Video journalism

A growing number of video journalists are grabbing cameras and heading out into the field to produce, report and shoot their own stories. According to reporters and station managers alike, this emerging practice comes with benefits, but also, is saddled with a host of negatives. In the article *Watchdog or Witness? The emerging forms and practices of video journalism*, Sue Wallace (2009) points out the not-so good aspects of video journalism, “Multiskilling, specifically in relation to video journalism, has also been considered to have implications for journalism output through its impact on working practices” (pg. 688). Wallace and many others argue that video journalism has removed the specialist from the newsroom. They say that most journalists’ talents and expertise are finite. When the scope of their work broadens to include areas such as videography, or other aspects of production, the work suffers. When talking to journalists in the field, Wallace found that they admit the practice can “affect quality of output to the extent that journalists produce work which is merely acceptable rather than excellent” (pg. 688).

## The Deadline

All journalists face a deadline. The time pressures all reporters deal with are compounded for video journalists. I know that no matter what happens throughout the course of my shift, and many times it is not pretty, at 5:15 a.m., the anchor is going to introduce me and I have to have something to show. Many reporters and researchers say juggling the duties of a video journalist under a time crunch affects the final product. In the article *Quality Assessment of Television Programs in Israel: Can Viewers Recognize Production Value?* Jacob Shamir (2007) discusses the degradation of work that happens when documentarians rush a production schedule. I argue the same can be said for the video journalist who has too much to do while facing a deadline, Shamir (2007) writes “Cutting production time and costs often means less thorough research” he goes on with the consequences for the end product, “a rougher, less faithful, less compelling production,” (pg. 324). Video journalists that have little time might cut short any number of important story aspects because they have to leave time for postproduction. Often times, I rush the research process, the writing process, or an interview because I need time for production. I want to share the following work story to illustrate how a simple news story can become problematic when facing a deadline as a video journalist.

*A call came over the scanner that three teenagers were stealing car stereos. A neighbor saw the kids and called the police. Officials said when the police showed up, two of the kids took off in a car. The police chased them into a nearby mobile home park. Officials said the two kids bailed out of the car and ran off on foot. The police officials said officers setup a perimeter and brought in the K9 unit to track them. The police immediately arrested the one kid who didn't drive off in the car. The two that took off in the car were not found until later. Eventually, police said they had all three teenagers in custody.*

When I got back from the scene, I had about fifteen minutes to talk to the police captain, write the story, load the video onto the computer, edit the video and get dressed in my on-air

clothes. Again, all journalists deal with deadlines. Wallace's (2009) research uncovered stories of compromise due to strict deadlines for journalists, "Compromises in the quality of journalism seem to derive, at least in part, from the intensified demands of news production" (pg. 687). In the case above, the compromises I had to make were numerous.

Between the time I left the building and was on the air reporting the story, I felt like I had to make several compromises in regard to quality: I was not able to spend much time at the scene to get quality video, I did not have enough time to toggle through the video to find the best shots to put into the final edit and I was not able to spend much time interviewing the police captain for story details. The last compromise bothers me the most because I could have reported a much clearer story if I would have had time to ask follow-up questions. The facts are fairly straight forward, however, in a hurry, they can quickly become muddled: How many kids were in the car? How many kids were left behind at the original location? How many kids did police initially have in custody? Where are the two locations in the story?

A report by the National Union of Journalists published in December 2007 says "employing single journalists to produce video reports has a clear impact on quality" (Wallace, 2009, pg. 688). In retrospect, this was true in regard to what happened with this story. Quality definitely suffered because I had to work alone. The quality of the story that aired would have been higher if I were part of a reporter/photographer team. The photographer could have rushed to the scene to grab video while I worked the phones trying to get information. Or I could have gone to the scene with the photographer. While he/she was shooting video I could have looked for the commanding officer for information. Either way, the information probably would have been more complete and the video better. Back at the station, I would have had more time to write while the photographer edited.

## **“Depth of Scrutiny”**

In the article *Watchdog or Witness? The emerging forms and practices of video journalism* Sue Wallace (2009) discusses the importance of the reporter interview. She argues that a video journalist can affect it and ultimately diminish story quality, “The VJ has to divide their attention between setting up shots for the camera and talking to the interviewees, putting them at their ease, and gaining extra information” (pg. 694). Wallace’s (2009) research shows that a lone reporter cannot concentrate on conducting an in-depth interview while operating the camera; one of the two is going to suffer, “Video journalists themselves considered it mentally impossible to concentrate on filming and interviewing at the same time” (pg. 694). Wallace considers the lack of concentration on the interview and the lack of engagement with the interviewee to be a shallow “depth of scrutiny.” Wallace (2009) quotes one video journalist as saying that video journalism is “just not good enough. It doesn’t allow you to go for cross examination or complex interview techniques” (pg. 694). I can confirm this view with personal experience. Worrying about multiple production aspects while interviewing lessens the scrutiny of the interview.

Every interview that I have done has been a combination of questions and camera work. When I first started as a video journalist, I had to continually stop the interview in order to look through the viewfinder to make sure the interviewee had not moved out of frame. I was always checking to see if the camera was still recording or if the microphone was still working, while simultaneously trying to concentrate on the interview. I’ve developed habits to deal with some of these issues, for example: hi-definition digital video can be “blown up” without much degradation to the picture. I say this, because now, I leave the framing of the interview wide and

I increase picture size in postproduction to achieve the desired framing of the interviewee. I find this works pretty well most of the time, and then I do not have to worry as much about the interviewee stepping out of the frame while delivering great sound.

I have also found that setting up the camera while the interviewee watches can be problematic. Especially, during breaking news, many interviewees do not want to go on camera. So, after talking them into an interview, the last thing they want to do is wait for a reporter to set up. Also, many times, watching the news apparatus being set up makes the interviewee a little apprehensive about being interviewed. So, I try to make conversation to keep them preoccupied while I set up the camera. Of course, if I had a photographer with me, there would be no set up time. That being said, I have become very fast at setting up a tripod, camera, light and microphone. However, many times, with speed comes lesser quality. I have gotten back to the station to look at my video and there is something in the background that diverts attention from the interview, or simply, does not look good.



## Source Credibility vs. Audience Response

One of the most important considerations for a news organization is its reputation as being an accurate and credible news source. In the article *Source v. Content Effects on Judgments of News Believability*, Weintraub and Dong (1996) describe the credibility ascribed to a particular news source by the receivers as “source credibility” and the concept “focuses on the information messenger, usually an institution or a news personality,” (pg. 973). Albert Gunther, one of the leading scholars on “source credibility,” says the concept “includes judgments both about the media’s expertise in covering a topic and about the media’s biases in covering a topic,” (Weintraub et al., 1996, pg. 973).

Most information receivers want their news source to be competent and skilled and to report the truth (to the best of the news sources’ ability) with an unbiased approach. In the article *Biased Press or Biased Public?* Gunther (1992) quotes the Washington Post editor at the time the article was written: “The credibility of a newspaper is its most precious asset, and it depends almost entirely on the integrity of its reporters,” (pg. 148). However, Gunther (1992) says integrity and credibility of the reporter has little to do with how the receiver perceives the newscast. He points out that much of the past research on the media’s credibility has focused on the source, leaving the receiver of the newscast out of the picture entirely. Gunther (1992) argues that “credibility is an audience response” and not a characteristic of the message source (pg.148). After researching studies of “source credibility” Weintraub et al. (1996) found that viewers “judgments are multifaceted and highly situational, suggesting that individuals analyze the context of information as well as just the source” (pg. 974).

Gunther and Weintraub (1996) argue that perceived credibility comes from many factors, the least of which, the news source. Wientruab et al. (1996) found receivers consider the “message content” more than the source’s reputation. Their data showed that the source of the message had no effect on how the information receiver judged the news story. Weintraub et al. (1996) found it surprising, considering all of the attention paid to a news source’s credibility as being paramount to its business model. According to the researchers’ data, the credibility of a news source is not that important to information receivers, “The possibility is intriguing, and alarming, that at least some publics may be analyzing messages without much thought to the reputation of the source,” (pp. 978, 979).

If not the source, what do receivers rely on to gauge the credibility of a news outlet, or specifically, a news story? Gunther (1992) points out that the demographics of the receiver could affect their perception of message content. Information receivers vary on all levels of understanding: their education, past experiences, background, their involvement or knowledge with the news story being covered by the source, and perhaps most importantly, the groups with which they associate. Gunther (1992) theorizes that, “group involvement will predict more variance in respondents’ credibility judgments of media than will media attributes, demographic variables, a skeptical disposition, or a disposition to distrust media in general,” (pg. 152). Gunther (1992) points out that many studies show a link between a persons’ relation to a group or issue and “distrust for media,” (pg. 150). People or groups that closely identify with an issue covered by the news media are likely to have more “intense personal interest in the issue” and also consider the topic a part of their self-identity. If what the media reports counters their belief system, they may consider that a personal affront, “the importance of maintaining a positive sense of self may incline such people to consider their existing attitudes correct, and to want to hold on

to them, even in the face of dissonant information or opinion,” (Gunther, 1992, pg. 151). Thus, “highly involved” message receivers might be more skeptical of the news story, therefore, finding the source less credible (Gunther, 1992, pg. 152). Weintraub et al. (1996) paraphrase author of *Public Confidence in the News Media*, Ralph Izard: “readers are active and rational, and they know what they think makes good journalism. That does not necessarily mean, however, that they do know what really makes good journalism,” (pg. 979).

#### Research Question #1

To what extent can the focus group respondents being interviewed for this study present an astute explanation for what makes good journalism?

#### Research Question #2

To what extent can the focus group respondents of this study discern the difference between the work of a video journalist and that of a reporter/photographer team?

#### Research Question #3

Does a lower news production value lower the focus group respondents’ perceived credibility of a news station?

#### Research Question #4

To what extent does this research indicate that video journalism is diminishing the quality of news, therefore, the credibility?

#### Research Question #5

To what extent does this research indicate that video journalists lessen the credibility of the news stations that employ them?

## **Method: Focus Groups**

In the article *Rethinking the Focus Group in Media and Communication Research*, Peter Lunt (1996) discusses the idea that a focus group can reproduce the daily discourse taking place among people, “A simulation of these routine but relatively inaccessible communicative contexts that can help us discover the processes by which meaning is socially constructed through everyday talk,” (pg. 85). I want to exploit the “everyday talk” Lunt says focus groups produce. I see the focus group as being a rich environment for expression of opinion, which Lindlof and Taylor (2002) say can be used to harness personal “interpretations” and “perceptions”; in this case, viewers’ opinions of news programming (pg. 182).

Much like the critical conversation viewers engage in after watching a movie, the focus group in this research functions as a conduit for viewers’ perceptions and opinions. Lunt (1996) says focus groups “should encourage participants to explore their feelings in some depth and take account of the personal contexts that people use to frame their accounts,” (pg. 89). For the purposes of this research, the focus group will be centered around viewers’ opinions on the quality and credibility of news stations.

### ***Focus Groups: Advantages and Disadvantages***

Using a focus group for this research had multiple advantages: the free flowing expression of ideas that is not hampered by the rigid design of a questionnaire, the loose structure allows the moderator to ask participants follow-up questions and to clarify confusing answers, and participants can elaborate on their opinions (Bertrand, Brown & Ward, 1992, pg. 199). Also, focus groups highlight the line of conversation, or what Lunt (1996) refers to as

“thematic content,” he writes the “unit of analysis in focus groups is thematic content or discourse used in the group, not properties of the individuals composing the groups,” (pg. 92).

Lunt points out that there is little agreement among scholars about the use of focus groups in research. Many researchers think of focus groups as part of a much larger methodology. They would consider using a focus group as a way of collecting “preliminary data,” but not as a stand-alone method. They argue that the small sample size used in a focus group can’t represent the population. Also, the lack of quantitative methods introduces extraneous variables and what Bertrand, Brown and Ward call “undue subjectivity,” (pg. 199). Many argue that the focus group doesn’t provide the validity that rigorous research demands.

## Triangulation

In the book *Mass Media Research: An Introduction*, Wimmer and Dominick (2006) define validity as “the degree to which a test actually measures what it purports to measure,” (pg. 452). Many researchers say using a focus group as a primary method cannot ensure validity; however, other scholars argue that the validity of a focus group can be increased through triangulation.

In the book *Qualitative Communication Research Methods*, Lindlof and Taylor (2002) define “triangulation” as “the comparison of two or more forms of evidence,” each one making up one point of a triangle. (pg. 240). The three points of triangulation for this research would be a focus group, documents and personal experience. The focus group was used to gather viewers’ opinions and perceptions of media produced by multimedia journalists; the literature was to gain a sense of past research and scholars’ findings on the topic; finally, the third point of the triangle is my personal experience as a multimedia journalist.

Lindlof and Taylor (2002) argue that the three points of triangulation can increase validity when the data intersect, “if data from two or more methods seem to converge on a common explanation, the biases of the individual methods are thought to cancel out and validation of the claim is enhanced,” (pg. 240).

## **Focus Group Design**

The intent behind using a focus group for this research was to elicit conversation among news viewers. Wimmer and Dominick (2006) point out that many production studios use focus groups to test “pilot programs.” These production houses test viewers to “determine the groups reactions to each concept,” (pg. 132). The focus group in this research acted in much the same way. The viewers watched news packages from two different stations: one using video journalists to produce packages and the other using a reporter/photographer team. The viewers were asked to give their opinions and perceptions about what they have seen. After viewing the media, the moderator and the participants discussed their thoughts on the credibility and quality of each news station. Bertrand et al. (1992) highlight one major study in which the researchers used 29 focus groups for their data collection. These researchers argued that the quality of data from the focus groups was far superior than what they would have collected from surveys, “The information would be richer, more detailed, and closer to actual fact,” (pg. 201).

### *Venue*

The focus group took place at a hotel conference room in Omaha, NE. I chose Omaha for multiple reasons: its proximity to Lincoln (where I live); it is a larger metropolitan city with four local news stations, which means there will be plenty of local news viewers to participate in the focus group; most importantly, I wanted to eliminate extraneous variables, therefore, the news programming used should not be familiar to focus group participants (I will not be using any media from Omaha stations). The participants should not have any preconceived ideas on the news stories being used.

## *Selecting a Sample*

The focus group consisted of a random sample of 6 to 10 participants who watch local news programming more than twice a week. To be included in the focus group, participants had to be regular local news viewers in order to have a foundation of experience to draw from when making judgments about the material.

Recruiting for the focus group consisted of multiple efforts. I hung up flyers asking for participants in the student center at the University of Nebraska-Omaha and in multiple businesses around the Omaha area. Secondly, I posted an ad on craigslist, an online classifieds website. The materials used for recruitment consisted of research explanation, identification (Dan Messineo, CSU student), a brief description of the study, participant compensation and contact information.



## Focus Group

After a brief introduction and instruction, the focus group for this research began by viewing news packages from different news stations. The news stations were divided by two categories: one category is stations that use a reporter/photographer team to produce packages and the other category is stations that use a “backpack journalist” to produce packages. The media consisted of 5 news packages that were presented in random order. Focus group participants were blind to the method each station uses.

Directly after viewing the material, I began the focus group by using an “extended focus group” (Wimmer, Dominick, 2006, pg. 130). In the book *Mass Media Research*, Wimmer and Dominick (2006) define the extended focus group as a questionnaire that is given to participants before the focus group conversation takes place. The purpose of the questionnaire is to record participants’ opinions prior to conversation. This exercise is useful because it asks participants to “commit” to answers before possibly being influenced or intimidated by group dynamics (pg. 130).

After the questionnaire, the focus group conversation began. The moderator started with general questions (mainly, to “break the ice” and to adjust to the group dynamic) and moved to more specific questions about the material. The moderator prepared questions to spark conversation among participants; however, the moderator also asked follow up questions. Again, the participants were encouraged to engage in dialogue among each other and with the moderator.

The focus group took place on April 26<sup>th</sup>, 2014 in a hotel conference room in Omaha, NE from 9:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. Each participant was paid \$60 for taking part in the focus group.

Initially, I had confirmed focus group participation with six people. On the day of, one person cancelled and one person didn't show up. One participant who attended called her friend to participate. We had to wait for the friend; therefore, the focus group started about 30 minutes late. However, the late start ended up being beneficial because we had more time to talk and to become familiar one another, which I think, helped foster conversation during the focus group.

During the introduction, I explained what a video journalist does and contrasted it with the work of a reporter/photographer team. I also posed the question: Do video journalists diminish the quality of television news? I explained that we would watch five news stories in random order. I told the participants that some of the stories were created by a reporter/photographer team and other stories by a video journalist.

The five participants watched five video news stories. Three of the news stories were produced by a video journalist and the other two were produced by a reporter/photographer team. Between the news stories we would discuss the story's quality and the reporter's credibility. As moderator, I did not want to limit the participants' critiques, so participants had no parameters on the comments they could make. I began the discussion by asking each participant if they thought the story involved a video journalist or a reporter/photographer team. I asked the participants to give reasons for their answers and then I opened up the discussion to the entire group.

I asked participants to fill out a questionnaire in which they rated the quality and credibility of the news story on a Likert scale of one to five: one being low quality and credibility and five being high. Participants were also asked "What do you think makes quality journalism?" and "Do you think video journalism has the potential to diminish the quality of journalism?" After the discussion ended and all the questionnaires were completed, I told the

focus groups participants, which stories were produced by a reporter/photographer team and which were produced by a video journalist.

After the focus group ended, I sat down with two of the participants privately to interview them on camera about their thoughts regarding video journalists.

### *Observations*

All five focus group participants had definitive answers and clear opinions on which stories had high quality and credibility and which did not. However, participants could not distinguish between the two story types with any consistency. Also, participants had some trouble articulating the specifics behind their answers, one participant stating “Something about the tone of her voice that led me to believe it was a video journalist... not that it was bad.” In his research, Jacob Shamir (2007) found viewers lacked the training to identify and express “gradations in production value,” he writes, “They watch television not to evaluate the production quality, but to derive benefits and gratifications from them,” (pg. 335).

Focus group participants commented on the stylistic aspects of the stories. Participants judged the stories on production value and a couple participants equated lower production value with video journalists. One participant wrote “shaky video” for the reason he thought the story was produced by a video journalist and another stating “poor sound, poor picture and poor editing.” Shamir (2007) found that “viewers seem to be aware of production value considerations” and that “such considerations do affect their overall assessment,” (pg. 335). Interestingly, the participants above were incorrect about their assessment of the story they were critiquing: the story was produced by a reporter/photographer team – not a video journalist.

Participants also drew a correlation between poor production value and a reporter's credibility: participants who gave lower ratings for quality also gave lower ratings for credibility. In the article, *How Production Value Impacts Perceived Technical Quality, Credibility, and Economic Value of Video News*, R. Glen Cummins and Todd Chambers (2011) highlight a study in which researchers had similar results. In their study, the researchers showed participants video of a news anchor in standard-definition and one in high-definition. The researchers found that participants marked the high-definition anchors as having higher credibility than that of the anchors broadcasted in standard definition (pg. 740). In light of their findings, the researchers conclude that "Organizations whose content displays higher production value are judged as better able to thoroughly cover events and be more credible as information sources," (pg. 740.)

## Discussion

An interesting picture comes into focus after reviewing the literature, reflecting on personal experience, and conducting a focus group. Through this research, I have found that two narratives run parallel to one another: one from the video journalists' point of view and the other from the focus group participants. The video journalists, forging through a difficult day of deadlines and compromise cannot help but stew about the diminished quality of their work. Conversely, the participants were blissfully unaware while watching the video journalists' stories during the focus group.

Sue Wallace (2009) found that most of the video journalists she interviewed felt their work quality suffered greatly under the time pressures and other obstacles in the workday, "These journalists considered that the quality of their work was consequently reduced, particularly in terms of increased superficiality," (pg. 867). Without a trained eye, being once removed from the material or ignorant to the reporter's conception of the story, many viewers might be completely unaware of how video journalism could affect the evening broadcast. Once I revealed to the focus group participants which stories were produced by a video journalist and which were produced by a reporter/photographer team, most of the participants saw no downside of having one person performing the job of multiple people.

I have previously mentioned, at times, I am also disappointed in the quality of my work. I often have to sacrifice many aspects of storytelling in order to get the story on the air, unfortunately, at times to the detriment of the viewer. Recently, I was reporting on a local issue about garbage collection. I had a little over an hour after interviewing the city official to synthesize the information, write a coherent story, edit the video, and get ready for a live shot. It

is safe to say that it was not enough time to do all of it well. In the article, *You Really, Truly, Have To 'Be There': Video Journalism as a Social and Material Construction*, Mary Angela Bock (2011) interviews video journalists who found themselves in similar situations, the video journalist “spent more time driving to one of his interviews than actually conducting the interview, cutting his time for writing and editing the story very close to the deadline,” (pg.712). The added step of having to edit video for a story, a task a photographer would normally complete, creates a major time crunch for most video journalists. Having a photographer for the garbage collection story would have allowed me more time for research and writing. It was a fairly important issue that deserved more attention and I felt, in some ways, it was a disservice to the public that I did not cover the topic more completely.

In her research, Bock (2011) proposes that something other than quality suffers when reporters have to go it alone. Bock proposes the “gatekeeping” function of the reporter could be compromised through video journalism. “Perhaps the most important aspect of ‘gatekeeping’ is that issues and events that are not covered are absent from the world view of most audience members,” (pg. 712). Bock argues that the time constraints on video journalists, in many cases, dictate whom the journalist might interview or how deep the video journalist can “dig” for story details, possibly keeping important issues from public consumption.

Whether it is the quality of writing, editing or a host of other issues concerning video journalists, or as Bock posits- a weakening of the “gatekeeping” function, these perceived negative impacts of video journalism on the newscast might be lost on the viewer. As previously mentioned, the focus group participants could not distinguish between a video journalist and a reporter/photographer team with any consistency; in some cases, participants said the video journalists’ work was of higher quality. One participant saying, “I believe reporter/photographer

team diminishes the quality of journalism due to too many people involved.” Another participant wrote “ I actually think that the video journalist is somewhat better off because they know their train of thought and what exactly they want.” Again, insiders say something quite different: in the book *Broadcast News: Writing, Reporting and Producing*, Ted White and Frank Barnas (2010) quote James Rosen, a former video journalist who now works as a White House correspondent for a national news organization. Rosen bemoans the practice of video journalism, “The quality of the piece suffers when you work alone,” (pg. 159.)

In this research, I have found a disconnect between the people who report the news and those who watch it. It is similar to dining at a restaurant: when the food shows up at the table, those about to eat it have no idea what went into the preparation – they usually do not care as long it tastes good. No matter what hurdles a video journalist had to overcome throughout the day, viewers might not recognize or care whether one or two people work on the stories for the evening broadcast, as long as there are no glaring issues with the story or reporter. When asked if they think video journalists have the potential to diminish the quality of journalism, one focus group participant said “No. I couldn’t tell the difference when it was a team. So, I believe the quality is just as good.”

## Further Research

Heralding the end of broadcast news is a favorite pastime for many TV insiders. Many might say video journalism is cheapening or ruining TV news quality or journalists' credibility. However, that is not the case according to focus group participants in this research. After viewing the news stories, participants say it is quite the opposite; they preferred the video journalists' work, some saying it is probably better for the video journalist because they can assert more control over the final product.

As more stations employ video journalists, Bock (2012) points out that station owners and management must always try to walk the fine line between money and quality for the good of the industry, "As video journalism continues to grow as a profession, it is essential for journalistic institutions to prevent what might be a cheaper way to produce news into cheapening the product," (pg. 715). However, do "journalistic institutions" have a vested interest in preventing the degradation of the news broadcast? If video journalism is better for the "bottom line" and viewers cannot perceive a difference, would station owners have a reason to change practices? This could be seen as a cynical take on the issue, but after all there is no newscast without revenue.

Perhaps future researchers could continue to talk to viewers about the differences between video journalism and the reporter/photographer team -- news station owners and management could also be brought into the discussion. What is the average news station owners' opinion about the line between quality and revenue? Through the literature that I have read, some station managers say doing more with less is the way it has to be; however, others such as Jim Disch, director of news and programming for CLTV in Chicago, said there is still a



need for news videographers, “ We prize our photography.” Disch said “stations better serve its viewers by hiring both videographers and reporters,” (White and Barnas pg. 160). Whatever the case, with rapidly changing technology and the ever-shrinking budgets of modern newsrooms, the debate will continue.

## Works Cited

- Bertrand, J., Brown, J., & Ward, V. (1992). "Techniques for analyzing focus group data." *Evaluation Review*, 16, 198-209.
- Bock, M. A. (2012). "Video journalism: Beyond the one-man-band." New York: Peter Lang.
- Bryant, J., Zillmann, D. (Eds.). (2002). "Media effects: Advances in theory and research." London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Gunther, A. (1992). "Biased press or biased public? Attitudes toward media coverage of social groups." *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 56(2), 147-167.
- Lee-Wright, P., Phillips, A., & Witschge, T. (2012). "Changing journalism." New York: Routledge.
- Lindlof, T.R., & Taylor, B.C. (2002). "Qualitative communication research methods." Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Lunt, P. (1996). "Rethinking the focus group in media communication research." *Journal of Communication*, 46(2), 79-98.
- Martyn, P.H. (2009). "The mojo in the third millennium: Is multimedia journalism affecting the news we see?" *Journalism Practice*, 3(2), 196-215.
- Mulgan, G. (Ed.). (1990). "The question of quality." London: BFI.

- Rosengren, K. E., Carlsson, M., & Tagerud, Y. (1996). "Quality in programming: Views from the north." *Quality Assessment of Television*, 3-48.
- Shamir, J. (2007). "Quality assessment of television programs in israel: Can viewers recognize production value?" *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 35(3), 320-341.
- Smith, G. S. (2011). "Going solo: Doing video journalism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century." Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press.
- Wallace, S. (2009). "Watchdog or witness? The emerging forms and practices of videojournalism." *Journalism*, 10(5), 684-701.
- Wegner, D. (2012). "Backpack live technology a tv news game changer."
- Weintraub, E., Dong, Q. (1996). "Source v. content effects on judgments of news believability." *Journalism Quarterly*, 71(4), 973-983.
- Wimmer, R.D., & Dominick, J.R. (2006). "Mass media research: An introduction." California: Thomson Wadsworth.
- Young, B. (2009). "The changing face of news." *New Photographer*, 64(1), 40-42.