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Producing SA Today

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Renee Crown University Honors Program at
Syracuse University

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Television Radio and Film; Spanish Language and Literature

And Renee Crown University Honors

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Honors Capstone Project in Television Radio and Film

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Abstract

After analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of last year's production of SA Today, I developed a new structure for the show and its purpose. SA Today is a show produced by CitrusTV for the Syracuse University Student Association, (SA). It serves as a broadcast outlet for SA to better inform and maintain contact with Syracuse University and SUNY E.S.F. students. The show's purpose has grown under my care. With changes in design, structure, writing style and content value, my team and I have been able to create a new product produced by CitrusTV to better serve our campus viewership. The inclusion of headline local, national and world news into a show strictly dedicated to furthering the outreach of SU's Student Association has increased the show's overall value. The creation of new graphics, which are still in the works, are sure to also increase production value. What I hope for next year is to provide SA with a longer show and a redeveloped graphic outlook; this desire has already been expressed and is in the works for the coming semester. I believe that these changes should peak student interest in not only what SA has in the works, but also in the community that surrounds their home on the SU hill.

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SA Today Reflective Essay

Over the spring semester I have worked as the executive producer of SA Today, a show dedicated since its creation to giving our student body government a broadcasting outlet to better serve Syracuse University and SUNY E.S.F. students. What makes SA Today unique is that three groups take part in its production and broadcast. SA Today is produced at SU's campus news station, CitrusTV, and broadcasts live once a week on OTN, Channel 2. Our student body, the Syracuse University Student Association, works in conjunction with CitrusTV to produce 14 minutes of live content weekly to inform the student bodies of what SA, its President and his or her cabinet are working on throughout the year. These three groups work in unison every week to create a show that provides students an "on the go" news outlet for their everyday endeavors. Over the semester, the show has continued to fulfill its original purpose; it has continued to serve the SU and SUNY E.S.F. student bodies at its highest potential and has deepened and enhanced its overall campus coverage.

What producing a show like SA Today entails is hours of organized workflow and a focused eye and ear. I would arrive at the station every Monday at 10 am, and work straight through the day until my show aired at 6:30 pm. The morning was for creating a vision; I would read up on the topics SA chose to discuss and find connections between those topics to events and news in the Syracuse area, or abroad. After a tentative rundown was developed, I would sit with my videographer and plan out potential video plugs for the show. For example, a story on the disaster in Japan and what students on campus are doing to help would require footage of the Japanese Student Association, the signed flag that was posted outside of the association and the cranes students made in an effort to raise money for disaster relief. I would then ask my videographer to also get footage of students reacting to the events, and of our student association panel in case they had any plans or comments that related to the discussion at hand. Once video roll was planned, I would begin writing the stories and finalizing the official show rundown using ENPS, the Essential News Production System. Show rundowns contain lower-third identification and video queues, graphic displays, camera

operation and queues, full screen images and phoner displays, the official script to be sent to teleprompter and audio and music queues. All of these elements must be planned, detailed and placed appropriately; they must also be created from scratch before each show as all videos and graphic displays, as well as lower-third identifications and full screen images, vary based on show topics. At the end of the day, all of these elements must come together flawlessly to assure a properly produced and directed piece come show time.

A few changes have been implemented since I have taken over as Executive Producer. The show has adopted a slightly altered format, including top headline news, a weather segment and a humorous closing “kicker”. The show continues to operate on a 14-minute total running time, something I believe needs alteration, but that I cannot single-handedly approve under station bylaws; it is a change that must be decided upon before the coming year by the station’s executive board and Channel 2, OTN, as well as by SU’s Student Association. I am also currently working on creating new graphics for SA Today, another process that must await implementation in the coming semester. One thing I wanted

to do with the show since I became Executive Producer is change its overall tone. My and my anchor's writing styles have reflected this change throughout the semester allowing for the growth of SA Today into a more light-hearted yet informative "talk show". SA Today has also incorporated more video, questions and comments from students for a more interactive and viewer-friendly setting, all things that have improved its broadcast quality and overall production value.

The purpose of adding headline campus news to SA Today this semester was to inform students of the weekly "goings on" of Syracuse and SUNY E.S.F. campuses as they relate to SA initiatives. CitrusTV, as an organization, prides itself in informing students of any important dates, news and changes to the ordinary that may affect them. At the bare minimum we produce a two-minute news brief every day. However, most days of the week there is also a full 30-minute show including everything from local and world news, to health and entertainment news. On the days we broadcast SA Today, however, there is no news show produced at the station. Thus, SA Today now not only serves as an outlet for our student body government, but also as a campus news outlet. SA Today has

become somewhat of a hybrid between its original specified SA programming and our everyday news show. We cover two or three headline stories per show before bringing in our guests. This is our way to not only provide our students with their bare essential campus news, but also to allow our student government to answer any questions that may come up in relation to topics that fall outside of their usual "jurisdiction"; it gives them the opportunity to comment on and include themselves in affairs, other than those of SA, that affect the student body they represent.

This news format is different from former productions of SA Today in that old shows essentially took what SA wanted to cover each week and let representatives cover it as they saw fit. SA Today now offers more of a direction as to where discussion is headed. For example, I will cover campus top stories as they affect students daily and weekly, and connect them to issues SA wishes to discuss. A concrete example of this is when the show covered a sharp rise in gas prices in the Syracuse area. We took student reactions, reflected on how the prices may affect the number of students heading home for Passover and Easter holidays and then directed the topic to how the change may affect students

travelling into downtown Syracuse. The story was covered as a segway into a discussion of SA's current initiative offering discounts to students in downtown restaurants and boutiques. The discount initiative was not yet in place at the time of the show's production, but was something SA believed could be a concrete way of persuading students to travel out of the University area and into the city. SA hoped this would not only enhance student knowledge and care for the city in which they study, but also give stores in the downtown area more business during the academic year.

In my gas price example, SA Today tied in a top campus story based in the city of Syracuse and discussed how it affected students specifically in terms of holiday travel plans. It further discussed how it affected the city in general. We then brought in SA and dissected how a new SA initiative would be affected by the change in gas prices. In my opinion, there is always a way to connect stories of great importance citywide or nationwide to students; it is something I strive to do in every show. If it is a big enough story, it will affect students in one way or another and can impact the way Student Association works on their initiatives throughout the year. I believe it is important to give SA the

opportunity to talk about their initiatives in regards to how it affects students from every direction. Thus, as executive producer, I strive to dissect the news as thoroughly as possible in order to give a full account of every situation and how it affects our students. I believe this major change of incorporating not only what SA believes is important to students but what we, as students outside of Student Association, know is important, is one of the biggest changes we made this semester to the show. It was, for the most part, successful. One downfall is when there was no connection in any of our top stories to what SA wishes to discuss. However, even when this occurs, it is in my mind still more important to cover these huge stories than to let SA's topics dictate the full 14-minutes of SA Today.

Another big change we've made this semester is that the show is now directed by its producer. It is my belief that a show's executive producer not only knows the show best, but also understands the show's original intent, as he or she is the creative visionary. By having the producer direct the show, we ensure a higher quality broadcast every time SA Today is produced. In fact, for the beginning of the semester we had an outside party come in and direct the show as usually occurs with news segments.

However, I have found that in the weeks I directed SA Today, the show was produced at a higher quality. The “talk show” type of show is difficult to produce and direct in general. For example, it is impossible to know how long our guests will speak each time they are asked a question, which makes timing difficult. Also, calling for graphics, videos and audio is very important, and must often be timed appropriately to what our guest says and when they choose to say it. This task is something a show’s producer is best capable of gaging as they have already developed a predetermined flow, and understand the show’s original visual intent.

Another change SA Today made this semester is the inclusion of a weather segment. We no longer have live news on days in which we broadcast SA Today. This, outside of our 2-minute brief, is our station’s only way of covering big campus stories for our viewers on Monday evenings. Thus, as Syracuse is a city of major weather changes, I believe students can always benefit from the constant reminder that it is raining, snowing or hailing outside and that they should, as SU’s Orange Alert system would say, “seek shelter immediately”. Coming to school in Syracuse, weather has become a huge part of all our lives and must be accounted for on a day-to-

day basis. Another change that should be huge for the coming year is a change to the graphics of SA Today. We are working on designing and creating new lower thirds and over-the-shoulder graphics to enhance the overall image of the show. We are also working on creating stingers for SA Today to ensure a more fluid and aesthetically pleasing final product. The graphics currently used seem too rigid and cold for the show's intent and modified feel. Using a rounder frame, the new graphics should give SA Today a more light-hearted and easy aesthetic and should be more applicable to the show's current purpose and feel. With the creation of new graphics designed specifically for the coming year and the enhanced purpose of SA Today, the CitrusTV executive council has the opportunity to change the show's overall aesthetic. The board as well as SA must come to an agreement on when to implement these graphics for the coming year.

What we began with prior to this past spring was the backbones for a useful, informative and modern show that would serve the Syracuse student community in a better way. Because the show premise had already been developed from the year before, I could not change its format as much as I had hoped.

There are some changes that can and should be made beyond what was changed this semester. What I wanted to do based on my proposal was,

“model the broadcast somewhat after ESPN’s P.T.I (Pardon the Interruption), where each headline is afforded a minute or two of conversation to get in as many different topics within the limited timeframe of the show as possible”.

This is something I was unable to do given the constraints of the original purpose of SA Today; our executive board felt the concept “too gamey” and inconsistent with SA desires. This idea is something that could enhance the show’s structure and create a more fun visual experience with student news. Another change that should be made is to the show’s total run time. SA Today was for the most part successful, but certain issues should be addressed to continue to improve SA Today’s overall broadcast quality.

One thing that could use improvement with SA Today is the level of communication between producers and the Student Association. What I believe needs to be done to improve communication is to have one representative from SA be committed to programming and coordinating the show content

with either the executive producer or content producer of the show. Much of what went wrong in the beginning of this semester was because show format and content was not properly communicated with all parties involved. There should be a liaison that serves as the central line of communication between both groups to maintain a high level of communication. Another change SA Today can afford to see is a longer total run time. There always seems to be more material to cover than time allows. Even though timing is somewhat of an issue due to the difficulty in assessing how long each topic's discussion will run, it is rare that I struggle to fill my 14- minute slot. When this occurs, and it occurs very infrequently, it seems it is because SA has not fully detailed the topic they wish to cover with my content producer or me. What I hope for next year is to have that central line of communication established so all topics are fully detailed. This way SA Today can be produced to its fullest potential; it should be timed appropriately to a longer total run time, so it could potentially be modeled after a show like Pardon the Interruption, should its next executive producer see fit.

Overall this spring semester, I have produced a total of ten live 14-minute episodes and over two full hours of student-interest focused content. However, I cannot say the semester has been easy. My experience as SA Today's executive producer has undeniably been a whirlwind of change. Without prior experience producing a more "talk show" type of segment, it was hard to transition from the past four years of hard news production. The production credits of my past are filled with 30-minute live hard-news shows. I would work a full day from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m., with airtime live at 6 p.m. on OTN, Channel 2. My passion has always been in this form of hard broadcast news. I have spent all four years of my college career honing in on this news format and am very happy I was able to incorporate a similar concept into my honors capstone project. By developing a show that incorporates hard news into SA's informative talk show style, I was able to take what I love and spin it on its head to create an improved SA Today. As was my original plan, SA Today has become a more palatable news show to SU and SUNY E.S.F. students on the go, and that, I view as a victory.

To be entirely honest, our show does not have many viewers on campus. It exists as an outlet for students should they look up at the TVs of Newhouse as they pass. This is why I believe SA Today should serve as an "on the go" campus news show. While it is somewhat discouraging to know the work you put in to adapting a show and improving its overall purpose sometimes goes unnoticed, I believe I was able to adapt the "on the go" experience more appropriately for students on campus. Another outlet we do have for students to receive the news is via the internet. "Citrustv.net" is the stations website, where all news, sports and entertainment content goes after it is produced live. Here, CitrusTV gets hundreds of hits and provides students, faculty and family the "word" on Syracuse and SUNY E.S.F. news, as well as national and world news. After each show is produced, our daily content producers take the time to put the content online so it is available that night for our viewers. This is something we, at CitrusTV, pride ourselves in – immediate coverage. We have often produced "breaking news" on the fly, as it comes into the station. This content goes up immediately online, should a show not be airing live at the time the

news breaks. We serve as a real station for our viewers and make sure to give them constant coverage they need to stay informed. An example of this immediate coverage is a special produced after the news of Osama Bin Laden's death. This is how our website serves us best; if you missed it on TV, you can see it online right away at your own pace, and your own convenience, day or night.

Our student association always has information to be shared on campus and has needed this sort of an outlet for years. It is my pleasure to have served as SA Today producer for the semester, and hope that they too believe the semester has improved the show for the better. The responses I have received from SA are positive. They believe the more light-hearted yet informative take on campus news has improved the show and will allow for continued growth for years to come. Students respond much more to a quick and easy intake of information, rather than a full 30-minute segment designed to put emphasis on international news rather than what affects them directly in campus life. My personal growth as a producer this semester has been interesting as well. I have not only learned to produce an entirely different broadcast format, but have also learned how to communicate better with,

and forge a connection between groups. Communication was one of our biggest problems for SA Today since the beginning of the semester. I have realized that unless communication is concrete at all times, holes will develop in show production that can and should be prevented. CitrusTV has afforded me the opportunity to learn and gain experience in the field in which I hope to immerse myself post-college. It has given me the foot up I need to succeed beyond my wildest dreams. I am currently in the process of speaking with News12 Networks in my home state of New Jersey. My employment prospects in the network are high, as I am to be meeting with the New Jersey associate director of news on the 19th of this month. I believe the experience I gained in producing SA Today, and other news segments in the past years has prepared me for not only the job, but also the interviews ahead. I am grateful for the enjoyable experience, the work I have done and the connections I have made at CitrusTV.

Source Cited and Consulted

Dubin, Richard; rdubin@syr.edu

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SA Today Capstone Summary

The project I have been working on through the semester is a redesign of CitrusTV's current show produced every week for Student Association (SA). This show is called SA Today and I am the show's Executive Producer. What the show focused on mostly in the last year it has been produced was pure question and answer information provided by Student Association Representatives. The topics were selected by SA and strictly covered what the President and/or guest speaker was assigned to discuss. What I have tried to do for the show this semester is create a more open format and informative and interesting structure. I am also in the process of redesigning graphics and creating standard bump shots and stingers separate from those of news, specifically for SA Today.

The purpose of SA Today has always been to provide an outlet for our student government to reach the student body. Specifically, the Syracuse University Student Association works in conjunction with CitrusTV to produce a 14-minute live broadcast, to inform the Syracuse University and SUNY E.S.F. student bodies of what the student government, SA President, and his/her cabinet is

working on each week. This semester, the show continues to run in a 14-minute format. One of the things I felt needed to be changed, however, was the way the show resembled somewhat of a group of talking heads for the full 14-minutes. What I did this semester was begin with a few top campus stories that affect our students directly. For example, when Marshall Street flooded, we covered the flood and the effect it had on Marshall Street stores and their customers (our students). When most of North Campus lost electricity, we covered that story and how the campus blackout might affect students in their everyday lives (in terms of studying, cooking, etc). Our SA Today anchor introduces the show, our upcoming guest speakers, and then proceeds to introduce our top headline stories. The way I like to cover these stories is by introducing the topic, what we call a "toss", then allowing for some student reaction, what we call "SOT", and finally closing the topic, or "tag"ing out. In this manner we can cover all sides of the story and be as unbiased as possible. We often also air live calls to experts, faculty and executives who can offer some insight into how the news could affect students in the weeks to come.

After our top stories, we then give SA the opportunity to react to the news and connect to it as our campus student government. They offer suggestions, clarifications and topics on how the news may affect campus negatively and/or positively and what they may do about it. The point is that at SA Today we try to connect campus coverage to issues we may discuss with SA Representatives every week. SA exists on campus to enlighten Syracuse students and serve as our campus voice. SA representatives have been highly cooperative with the show format, and are always willing to offer their word of advice via SA Today.

Another thing we try to do is bring in national and international stories that tie to campus and affect our students in some way. We discuss these themes and issues with our SA representatives. An example of this is when government groups overturned the Egyptian government in Cairo. Our students abroad in Egypt were flown out of the city and into various safe-havens in Europe. This kind of story began as an international concern and was covered on SA Today as a focused story on how our five Syracuse University students studying in Cairo were affected, and how their study abroad experience was cut short. Another example

is when the quakes and tsunamis hit Japan. Students studying here at Syracuse from Tokyo's Tokai University were sent back just a few weeks after the catastrophe. Now even though the students were sent back for no reason directly related to the damage, there was a legitimate concern on campus as to why they were heading back so soon and if they and their families would be safe. This is the kind of news we cover on SA Today to keep our students aware of how world news affects them directly, and to keep them up to date on day-to-day occurrences at Syracuse University.

SA Today's overall format consists of 3 blocks. Our headline news is always in the first block unless it incorporates into news covered by SA later in the show. In such a case we brief it in A-block and cover it later in the segment. Before our first break, we bring in our first guest, (either our SA president or an SA representative), for a one-on-one conversation with the anchor for the remainder of A-block. There is a brief weather update and a one-minute 30-second break. After our public service announcements, B-block consists of a one-on-one conversation between the anchor and our SA president or chosen member of the SA cabinet (depending on which guest was interviewed in our

first block), regarding any topics SA chooses to cover for the remainder of the show. The guest and topics vary each week based on what SA has been working on. After another break, C-block consists of the anchor covering one humorous story usually related to campus affairs, and a final thank you to our guests. Often spread throughout the show are student questions and comments to SA that are addressed accordingly. Questions may come in a number of formats including but not limited to SOTs, written questions, Facebook messages, tweets, or phoners, (phone conversations). The show is then closed with an announcement to students regarding where they can contact SA regarding any concerns they may have with what SA is working on.

Some more changes I implemented as executive producer this semester are in the graphics the program will be using from now on. These graphics still have to be completed, but the general design has been made and is in the process of ultimate approval. The designs I have created for SA Today are a much more round and fun, providing for a light-hearted "talk show" appearance. This is a change I have been waiting to make because I believe what we currently use makes the show look entirely "hard news" oriented

and rigid. I am hoping the graphics will be implemented in the coming semester to support the show's modified feel.

Being SA Today's executive producer proved difficult to start. There was a lot that changed from my usual 30-minute hard news segment in terms of production. For example, it is much easier to time regular news broadcasts. Timing has been extremely difficult with new guests on every week for SA Today; you never know how long they will speak. Little changes like this, as well as never really knowing where conversation will lead because guests dictate much of show content, have proved difficult to deal with. I have been able to grow immensely in this experience, and I really appreciate the time I have produced SA Today. I now know that I have the talent, ability and experience to produce various broadcast formats, and can bring that experience into the real world. My time with CitrusTV after four years has been truly exceptional; I just hope others can gain that same experience in becoming a creative visionary for their own show before they leave college as I have been privileged to become through SA Today.