

**Putting pop into the classroom:  
Journalism Idol as an academic exercise and glimpse into the future of media**

Kanina Holmes  
Assistant Professor  
Room 330, St. Patrick's Building, Carleton University  
School of Journalism and Communication  
1125 Colonel By Drive, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1S 5B6  
Tel: 613 520-2600, ext. 7435 (office) 613 769-9410 (cell)  
[kanina\\_holmes@carleton.ca](mailto:kanina_holmes@carleton.ca)

## **Introduction**

It is almost an understatement to speak of living in a time of immense change and innovation within the field of communications. Gutenberg would likely stare, breathless and aghast at the breadth and pace of recent developments. Fueled by increased capacity and mobility, new platforms permit the spontaneous, instantaneous sharing and promotion of ideas. These transmissions are often social barometers and with signposts firmly, albeit fleetingly, embedded in popular culture.

It is incumbent on educators in the field of journalism and communication to find ways to stay afloat amid these sea changes. Otherwise how can instructors understand the current context, equip students for the future and, above all, remain relevant?

As part of examining some these major, pressing issues, this paper will describe and assess the potential of an unusual, if not unique, pedagogical exercise called Journalism Idol. In addition to discussing the parameters of this educational tool -- its origins, evolution and implementation -- this research paper will also analyze the results, drawing from specific in-class events, student reactions and post-exercise surveys. This exercise speaks to the nature of audiences these days. If we look at journalism students as more than future producers of media content but also as young readers, listeners and viewers, understanding what they're looking for as media consumers could provide some indication of the future of journalism.

The Idol television programs and Journalism Idol, the classroom endeavour, are obviously different beasts. However, this paper aims to look at American Idol as a media model with an eye to better understanding Journalism Idol as an educational model and a

vehicle for teaching some wider lessons about the media. Comparing them and reflecting on them yields some wider avenues for discussion and debate, including:

- how we define journalism and how that definition is changing as a result of technology, shifting values, aspirations and expectations of both media practitioners and audiences
- the rise of and trends in infotainment, along with some strategies for taking the best of low brow and turning it into a wider and more captive audience
- the importance of connecting with students on their terms to make a curriculum more engaging and relevant
- the value of mentorship
- the potential for using this pedagogical exercise in other countries and cultures.

### **Context**

To understand Journalism Idol, one should have some familiarity with the original television program, American Idol, a show (adapted from a British version called Pop Idol) that began in 2002 and launched a pop-cult phenomenon that has spread, in various incarnations, around the world.

On the surface, American Idol is a glorified vocal talent contest. Contestants from all over the United States sing for a traveling panel of judges. In the early stages, after participating in a spectacle that would have some – tongue in cheek -- pondering the relative benefits of a widespread resurgence of karaoke, those judged to have the most talent are selected to compete on national television. Over the course of several weeks, after numerous theme-based, earnest performances and feedback from an esteemed and

sometimes loathed panel of music-industry experts, contestants are assessed and gradually pared down by a quasi-democratic system of audiences voting in by calling a number that corresponds to their top pick for that particular week's performance. It is a process that continues until there are just two finalists dueling on stage.

The contest has been the subject of considerable attention and analysis. Many observers have been stumped by its popularity. As Simon Dumenco of *New York*

*Magazine* once wrote:

American Idol amounts to much more than just the aggregated neediness of its most eager participants. As a mass phenomenon, it suggests multiple, intertwined orders of psychopathology: the culture at large goring on hordes of fresh "talent." A populace parodying the idea of democracy by choosing exactly the entertainment it wants (and deserves). And, perhaps most pointedly, the fame factory engaging in a sort of ritualized cycle of bingeing and purging. (Dumenco)

On the surface, bringing a version of American Idol into a classroom may appear a questionable and risky intellectual endeavour. But, beneath the surface silliness, there are some serious and cardinal concepts that can be extracted and some essential parallels that can be drawn between the Hollywood production and a second-year journalism seminar.

One of the key principles taught in journalism is to find the heart of a story by revealing issues and events through the lives of regular people (rather than solely through officials or politicians or experts). This is based on the premise that stories that center on people are much more compelling than pieces about process or ideas devoid of human context. Idol, the show, has capitalized on this concept as well. Many of the contestants are people to whom an average North American can relate. After all, who among us doesn't sing in the shower or harbor a closeted desire to emerge from the campfire and come out into the limelight of adulation?

As Donna Reynolds, a freelancer with RealityNewsOnline has written:

The show gets enormous ratings because viewers really care about these people. We relate somehow to a particular contestant and live the experience vicariously through them. This is why the audition shows work and why the finalists have such strong early support. Viewers feel as though they have been on the journey themselves and take their favourite's success or failure very personally. That investment grows as the competition progresses and reaches a fever pitch during the final weeks. Win or lose, we internalize the results and become a part of the experience. (Reynolds)

From a story-telling perspective, Idol, the television show, employs some classic devices that make it, for many, compelling programming.

For one, there is a quest. In this case, it's the desire for fame and fortune. The money at stake is substantial, at least for the musical promoter/agent as well as the winner. There is also conflict, a classic David and Goliath battle between aspiring amateur talent and a committee of judges, an audience of peers. There's also the conflict and contest among and within competitors as they battle it out to prevail another week and also to fight their own personal demons, including stage fright. There is also a villain, one of the founders of the show and an often sour, forthright judge, otherwise known as Simon Cowell. There is suspense in terms of contestants and audiences wondering which way the vote go, who will rise above the odds and claim victory, recognition and a recording contract. This suspense is followed, of course, by a resolution – the on-air announcement of a winner and mass celebration. Combine this with a healthy dose of basic and powerful ideals and emotions – fear, self-loathing, disappointment, courage, persistence and joy – and voila, you've got a runaway TV success.

American Idol, which was designed to grab a younger demographic, has attracted tens of millions of viewers, unfathomable numbers for newscast producers pondering

market share. Some observers have noted the influence of American Idol in resurrecting appointment television – a brief occurrence in an age of personal video recorders and online streaming of TV programs. The program isn't just a TV show, it's a franchise that encompasses a wide swathe of its fans lives, influencing what they watch, what they listen to, where they surf, how they spend their cell phone minutes.

The show engages viewers on their terms. Its creators grasped that fans, especially youthful enthusiasts, heavily use and rely on the Internet to gather information and to communicate. Evidence of this can be seen in the hundreds of thousands who participate in chat rooms and blogs initiated by and about the show.

For the same reason that the Internet has democratized communication, Idol may also hit the right note in responding to a wider public desire to be involved in and to exercise an element of control over what and whom they see transmitted. Being given a stake in an event or project, however small, generally expands and cultivates interest in it. This held true as well for Journalism Idol.

The Idol shows engage TV viewers. Journalism Idol also succeeded in engaging its audience – a class of second-year students. Journalism Idol goes far beyond a trite talent contest. It was designed initially as an exercise both in media awareness and mentorship. In the end, it has yielded some much more profound and fundamental insights about the field of journalism.

### **The origins of Journalism Idol**

I developed this curricular segment and first used it in a classroom in 2005. It has also been used in two other terms, one in 2006 and the other, most recently in 2010. It currently forms part of my section of a second-year reporting course within a four-year

undergraduate journalism curriculum at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada. This second-year workshop usually has between 17-23 students, runs once a week for three hours and is considered a core part of the reporting curriculum.

For the vast majority of journalism students, this course represents their first real, extended exposure to the rigors of reporting. Over the course of the year, the class gets an introduction to covering municipal and national politics, social issues, ethics, police and the courts. Students also learn the importance of attribution and context, the need to write tightly and yet descriptively, tapping into their creativity, employing all of their senses.

Given its timing within the four-year Bachelor of Journalism program, teaching this course is a major responsibility. I know that among my colleagues there is a lot of pressure to get it right in terms of setting a constructive tone, in engaging students and instilling in them a sense of the requirements and opportunities that come with becoming reporters and journalists.

To be quite frank, at first I approached teaching this course some intimidation. Teaching students how to write and report can be a bit daunting. As with many university courses, much of a curriculum can be inherited from past instructors. However, I believe it's also critical to take ownership of some of the material and to adapt the course outline to one's own experience, expertise and comfort level. In dreaming up this new exercise, I thought back on my time as a journalism student (Carleton), as well as my media career, and recognized the benefits of learning from others and the inspiration and motivation that can come with having a mentor, something often sadly lacking in this industry.

With those ideas in mind, I did what many good journalists do – I built on an existing concept, consulted a wide range of sources – in these case, my peers and my students –

discovered the pros and cons of such an undertaking and produced a project that will hopefully have some lasting significance. Besides being cognizant of my own comfort level, I believed it was equally crucial to find a way to relate to students' experiences, their world, and their encounters with pop culture. The show that sparked this idea seemed like a good fit.

In brief, here are the guidelines used for this exercise:

- Students choose a journalist who catches their attention and whose work they admire. The stated goal is to find a professional mentor, someone who inspires, provokes and forces reflection about the media, about reporting and journalistic potential
- Idol candidates can work in radio, TV newspapers, magazines, online and can be from anywhere in the world. The candidate can be someone famous or it can be a person who toils in relative obscurity. The person can be living or dead.
- Students are instructed to spend time monitoring and examining their “idol’s” work to determine strengths, weaknesses, quirks, style, notable reporting or production techniques as well as the overall approach to reporting and journalism in general.
- As well, students are asked to pay special attention to analysis of their idol’s work, noting lessons that could be applied to their own assignments and, in the longer term, their own career paths



- More specifically, students are asked to discuss: story choice; writing; story telling; leads; structure; overall presentation; use of sources, quotes and clips; research and the idol's career path
- Direct contact, when appropriate, with an idol is encouraged but not mandatory, given the daily demands on most journalists and students
- Assignment requirements include a 15-minute in-class presentation addressing the above points. These presentations can involve PowerPoint and the use of audio and video clips. Presentations are followed by a discussion and questions by members of the class. A short paper on the chosen idol, something that follows the same parameters as the presentation and which also takes into account peer comments and questions as well as the student's own reflections
- These presentations are staggered over the term, sometimes with gaps of two or three weeks between presentations, in order to accommodate the other demands of this course curriculum, to accommodate guest speakers etc. Overall, about half of the 12 weeks of the term included time allotted for Journalism Idol presentations. Depending on other logistics, such as time constraints, this exercise can also work well with students working in groups of two on a presentation but handing in separate essays.
- Score sheets are handed out in class, allowing students to assess a candidate's work and their peer's presentation of it. Students were not permitted to submit a score for their own candidate. The idol with the highest average score wins the

contest and the student(s) presenting that contestant receives a small, engraved, star-shaped trophy

- The total value for both the presentation and the essay was 10 percent of the final grade (5 percent each).

### **Student reaction**

For some pedagogical purists, I can understand the temptation to dismiss this kind of contest, or any adaptation of it, as banal and perhaps even somewhat counterproductive to some of the ideals we try to teach. This kind of criticism is not unusual when academia and pop culture are combined (Erich 38). When the idea first popped into my head to make a classroom exercise out of it, I too was skeptical and, as it turned out, I was not alone.

In post-exercise surveys, I asked students to share their views of Journalism Idol. Here are excerpts from these surveys. A sample of the full surveys is included in the appendix.

*I actually hated the idea of Journalism Idol at the beginning. After hearing a few of the presentations though, I started to like it because I found I was actually starting to notice some of the idols' work. I also found that searching for an idol made me look at the work of different journalists and figure out what I like about them."*

*At first, journalism idol seemed a bit corny and childish. But once we started them, I realized how much I learned. It really was fantastic to hear about journalists I otherwise would not have known. It's also helpful for class interaction because you get to know them a bit better through their presentation.*

Initially, the creation of Journalism Idol was in part a concession to the reality that many students are not thoroughly engaged by mainstream media. Instead, they glean

much of their knowledge and awareness of the world through pervasive infotainment. As such, this pedagogical project was also an acknowledgement of the premise that if you can't beat them, then join them, or at least recognize that these other sources exist. It's the idea that some of the most effective battles are waged from the inside, a kind of Trojan horse approach. If instructors can respond to students on their terms, they can, perhaps, get better access for their curricular needs and ideals.

**The candidates\***

**Journalism Idol Candidates**

| <b>Candidate</b>         | <b>Description</b>  | <b>Term(s) nominated</b>                     |
|--------------------------|---|--|
| George Stroumboulopoulos | Canadian, national TV host (CBC's The Hour)   | Winter 2005, Fall 2006 and Winter 2010       |
| Rick Mercer              | Canadian, comedian and host of Rick Mercer Report on CBC TV   | Winter 2005                                  |
| Tim Blanks               | TV fashion reporter (national show, Fashion File, a series that aired on Canada's 24-hour news public TV channel) | Winter 2005                                  |
| Russell Smith            | Canadian, national print columnist, fiction and non-fiction author  | Winter 2005                                  |
| Lisa LaFlamme            | Canadian, TV host and correspondent (CTV)   | Winter 2005                                  |
| Ken Wiwa                 | Canadian-Nigerian, national print columnist, Globe and Mail and author  | Winter 2005                                  |
| Kate Adie                | British, TV correspondent (BBC)   | Winter 2005                                  |
| Peter Mansbridge         | Canadian, TV host, CBC's The National   | Winter 2005 and Winter 2010 (winner in 2010) |
| Christianne Amanpour     | U.S., TV correspondent and host (CNN)   | Winter 2005 and Winter 2010                  |
| Anderson Cooper          | U.S., TV correspondent and host (CNN)   | Winter 2005                                  |
| Arthur Black             | Canadian, national radio  | Winter 2005                                  |

---

\* Please see Appendix 1 for detailed student comments about some of these candidates

|                       |   |                        |
|-----------------------|---|------------------------|
|                       | host, (CBC)   |                        |
| Michael Harris        | Canadian, private radio host, commentator, author                           | Winter 2005            |
| Ian Hanomansing       | Canadian, national and local TV host and correspondent (CBC)                | Winter 2005            |
| Stewart Bell          | Canadian, national print correspondent, author                              | Winter 2005            |
| Ron Maclean           | Canadian, national TV host (CBC sports)                                     | Winter 2005            |
| Jon Stewart           | U.S., TV host/comedian (The Daily Show)                                     | Winter 2005, Fall 2006 |
| Kelly Egan            | Canadian, print columnist, The Ottawa Citizen                               | Winter 2005            |
| Alan Neal             | Canadian, CBC local and national radio host (Ottawa, Canada)                | Winter 2005            |
| Jian Ghomeshi         | Canadian, (British born), National TV and radio host, CBC, writer, musician | Winter 2005            |
| Stephanie Nolan       | Canadian, national print correspondent, The Globe and Mail                  | Winter 2005 (winner)   |
| Bill Mason            | Canadian, Author/naturalist   | Winter 2005            |
| Steve Paikin          | Canadian, Host, TV Ontario  | Fall 2006 (winner)     |
| Jeanne Beker          | Canadian, Host, Fashion Television, print columnist, Globe and Mail         | Fall 2006              |
| Victor Malarek        | Canadian, TV correspondent, CTV's W-Five                                    | Fall 2006              |
| Leah McLaren          | Canadian, print columnist, Globe and Mail                                   | Fall 2006              |
| Gwynne Dyer           | Canadian columnist, author military historian, documentary maker            | Fall 2006              |
| Margaret Bourke-White | U.S. photo journalist   | Fall 2006              |
| Edward R. Murrow      | U.S. radio and TV journalist  | Winter 2010            |
| Nicholas Kristoff     | U.S. columnist, New York Times  | Winter 2010            |
| Robert Fisk           | British, print correspondent, columnist, The Independent                    | Winter 2010            |

|                  |  |             |
|------------------|--|-------------|
| Nelofer Pazira   | Canadian freelance print and TV correspondent, documentary maker, author | Winter 2010 |
| Natasha Mitchell | Australian, radio correspondent host, Australian Broadcasting Corp.      | Winter 2010 |
| Lloyd Robertson  | Canadian, host, CTV National   | Winter 2010 |
| Chuck Kolsterman | U.S., author, columnist  | Winter 2010 |

With this number of subjects, this is too small a sample to make this a statistically sound survey. But, qualitatively, it allows some observations and conclusions.

Out of a total of 34 candidates, there were:

- ❑ 16 TV hosts and correspondents (including two comedians and satirists)
- ❑ 11 print correspondents and columnists (two of whom also work in TV)
- ❑ 3 radio hosts
- ❑ 1 naturalist (writer, documentarist)
- ❑ 25 men, 9 women
- ❑ 10 foreign journalists (report for non-Canadian media)

These categories are somewhat blunt because there have been changes in roles since the candidates were originally presented and also because a number of the candidates, while primarily associated with a specific medium, sometimes cross over to another media platform.

Overall, about half of the candidates worked in television, mostly as hosts of programs. Of those who were print journalists, seven of the eleven candidates could be classified as columnists, while the remaining four worked on both hard news and feature stories. Only three of the candidates had careers in radio, an indication perhaps of that medium's ongoing, uphill battle to capture a youth demographic, at least in terms of coverage of news and current affairs.

The fact that two-thirds of the candidates are male could be the subject of further research, with a larger sample and a more in-depth survey. The preponderance of male

would-be idols could perhaps be seen as somewhat surprising given that, within the journalism program at Carleton, the ratio of female to male students is between 4:1 and 3:1.

While the line between hard news and current affairs can be slippery, in my assessment, 15 of the 34 candidates worked with hard news or new-oriented current affairs. Among the other candidates, two reported and commented on the world of fashion, one was a science journalist, one covered sports. Two others focused on pop culture and social trends. Two of the candidates – Edward R. Murrow and Margaret Bourke-White were deceased and both were considered pioneers in their respective fields.

## **Findings**

### ***Who is a journalist?***

One of the most interesting results to emerge from this exercise is the students' definition of terms. When I established the parameters of this exercise, it didn't occur to me to be more specific about who/what constituted a journalist. In retrospect, I'm glad I didn't establish strict guidelines because some interesting and unexpected choices emerged.

Some of the Journalism Idol "candidates" didn't fit the standard definition of a journalist, a definition characterized by entries such as that found in the Concise Oxford Dictionary. It defines a "journalist" simply as a person who writes for newspapers or magazines or prepares news or features to be broadcast on radio or television. Journalism is traditionally defined as the business or practice of writing and producing newspapers. As well, students chose candidates who often went against the tenets taught in many

journalism programs, including a commitment to the truth above all else, a duty to provide evidence-based reporting and attribution (Windschuttle 146).

The citizen journalism movement, in the form of blogs and participatory news sites, was gaining profile and momentum when Journalism Idol started. The breadth of candidates selected as Journalism Idol contestants speaks to this willingness to see the media in a different light. It also serves as confirmation that the field and craft of journalism is constantly evolving.

By making unconventional choices in this classroom competition, this exercise allows students directly and implicitly to comment on what journalism means to them, what they want and what they expect out of it. The choice of candidates points to a more modern, realistic definition of journalist as: someone who works in a variety of roles within the media and who monitors and produces news or news-related commentary and current affairs.

As one student wrote in his or her anonymous assessment of the exercise:

*The assignment opened my eyes to the types of journalism and journalists that are out there. Our class saw a good mix of traditional and unconventional journalists, and this really made me reconsider not only the definition of what a journalist is, but also what I'd like to do with my journalism degree after I graduate. Furthermore, this assignment gave me the opportunity to stumble upon the work of a journalist I had never heard of before.*

Traditionally (and in self interest), journalism educators have long stressed the importance of journalists having some training or field experience prior to publication or production. Along with these ideals, there has been an expectation – by both those in the profession and by media consumers -- that becoming a journalist also requires a respect for certain stylistic and editorial rules and standards.

However, these standards are changing. Over the past five years – the period during which Journalism Idol was launched and conducted – this shift can be seen in the surging popularity of non-journalist journalist Jon Stewart and in the larger citizen journalism movement.

If we look at journalism through more traditional parameters, in Journalism Idol, some of the more unconventional choices would likely be the Daily Show’s Jon Stewart, comedian and social commentator, Rick Mercer, fashion commentator, Tim Blanks, pop-culture columnist and author, Chuck Klosterman and Canadian naturalist, Bill Mason.

Mason is perhaps one of the most interesting choices of candidates. He never even worked in the media but rather is a world-renowned expert in canoeing who wrote several books appreciating both the sport and the environment.

The student who chose to nominate Mason defined journalism even very broadly to include a body of work that makes a connection with an audience. He was accepted enthusiastically as a candidate with students classifying him as a photojournalist, a travel writer, a documentary maker, an activist or advocacy journalist.

**Table 1: Student comments on Bill Mason, Journalism Idol Candidate**

“Very different. I like that Mason isn’t a conventional journalist, but still so important to the world.”

“A really interesting man who followed his passion. What a beautiful way to live one’s life.”

“Not a traditional journalist, but made a real difference with journalistic film-making work and charting Canadian rivers.”

“Work examines an aspect of Canadian life that is a source of national pride.”

“While there is no clear cut definition for journalism and Jon did a good job of outlining why he thought journalism should have different connotations, I think Mason seems more like an author.”



Jon Stewart was another iconoclastic choice, a Journalism Idol candidate who takes pains to disavow himself from the label of journalist. His selection as a candidate can be seen in part as critique of the current state of journalism. As others have discussed, the surge in popularity of commentators such as Jon Stewart or Stephen Colbert, “has made critique an increasingly relevant way to think about journalism” (Zelizer 89).

**Table 2: Excerpts from student essay (Sarah McQuillen) on Jon Stewart.**

The Daily Show says that when news breaks, they fix it, and in a society which finds itself ceaselessly bombarded with biased and uncontextualized news, it stands out as an example of what should be happening, but isn't.

The Daily Show is full of witty commentary that highlights the irony, humour and outrageousness of events happening all around the world, but it is particularly pointed in its challenge of the mainstream media. Stewart does not hide his contempt for the pack mentality associated with much of American broadcasting. He deliberately highlights the negative effect that this has had on the ability of Americans to get the information they need in order to make informed choices, the provision of which is one of the fundamental tenants of journalism.

Using satire and humour Stewart challenges his audience to take the information they have gathered throughout the day and really think about it. By assuming that his audience already knows the basics of what is going on in the world Stewart is able to place events in new and thought provoking contexts. While his occasionally crude and often exaggerated jokes may not be appropriate or feasible in more conventional media, his refusal to simply accept the narrow view of news provided by public relations executives and broadcasting corporations is universally transferable.

Stewart's irreverent approach to politics and politicians is refreshing, and should serve as a reminder to other journalists not to accept everything at face value. Stewart sees both sides of a debate, and while he openly admits his personal bias, *The Daily Show* is not partisan, presenting the failings and humour of each without qualification. His intelligent, entertaining commentary encourages the kind of real discussion that many feel today's modern media discourages through a reluctance to question information beyond a superficial level. While *The Daily Show* may provide Stewart a unique platform from which to share his views, it is important to remember that the opportunity to question and challenge people's understanding of the world is as available to all journalists as it is to him.

The scores he received and the student comments also revealed considerable admiration for Stewart's work:

I absolutely love Jon Stewart. In my opinion, he is one of the only a very small amount of American 'journalists' who aren't the president's puppets. He is honest, extremely intelligent and is not afraid to voice his clearly controversial opinion. Despite the fact that even he says his show is fake news, I would prefer it to the trite they call CNN any day. By injecting humour into politics, he has also gotten a younger demographic to get interested.

I like Jon Stewart's non-traditional journalism. Comedy and satire can be very useful tools to get people to open up. Very quick wit and good interviewing skills.

Jon Stewart is awesome! He's a personal idol of mine, just because I love satire. The way he is able to make news relevant and funny to a younger audience shows how powerful comedy can be. I feel sometimes that comedy is back-burnered in favour of hard-hitting reporting, but can easily see that Stewart has the power to illicit amazing responses from his guests on the show. ... Sometimes I feel that the media takes itself too seriously, and Stewart is a good remedy to this. He just has a wonderfully fresh approach that just invigorates journalism."

Really interesting approach to journalism. He's so entertaining and engaging you don't even realize you're learning, which is really good for younger people. Does a great job trying to reform journalism.

While the choice of Jon Stewart as a journalism idol could, especially five years ago when Journalism Idol was first initiated, be considered controversial, his inclusion in this contest makes sense if we look at journalism, and especially its goals, more broadly. Among these loftier ideals is the contribution of journalism to public knowledge and to a greater good – whether that be holding public authorities accountable, provoking informed discussion and debate, righting wrongs.

If journalism students are thinking more broadly, perhaps so should educators. If we can remain open to what our students could potentially teach us, their choice of Journalism Idol candidates and commentary about the nominees represents feedback on

the state of the media, what journalism means to them as well as what they want and expect out of this field and its practitioners.

Evidence suggests that the young and the marginalized demand opinion and critique as a necessary journalistic engagement; when coupled with the popularity of comedy shows, satire, and blogs, this points to a healthy accommodation of the critical voice in ways that have been largely missed by thinking about journalism as a certain kind of value-free information relay (Zelizer 89).

Based on the student presentations, essays, commentary and feedback, some of the key concepts that emerged from this classroom exercise were:

- ❑ Students value the message more than the medium. Many appear to be less hung up on how content is delivered, opting to concentrate more on the information
- ❑ As they explore and form their ideas and impressions about the media, students are quite critical of how they perceive it is run
- ❑ They get frustrated when they see untapped potential
- ❑ They dislike pack mentality and value individuality
- ❑ In keeping with a more fluid or expanded definition of journalism – there was an acceptance that journalists can and should do more than news. Some candidates focused on fashion (Tim Blanks), some on sports (Ron Maclean), others on arts (Jian Ghomeshi). Canadian radio presenter, Arthur Black was chosen for his program that focused on unusual “characters”
- ❑ Students value hard work, people who have risen slowly through the ranks and people who may have had humble beginnings. Many appeared to find some of the stories of how people got started very encouraging, using this information to support the notion there is hope for them and their careers.
- ❑ Students admire risk takers – both physical and editorial (Kate Adie, Christiane Amanpour, Stewart Bell, Stephanie Nolan, Robert Fisk)
- ❑ They can identify powerful storytellers and appreciate some of the elements that go into humanizing and contextualizing news and world events. (Stephanie Nolen, Kelly Egan)
- ❑ Students respect the power and responsibility to inform and provoke that can be wielded by a well-written, thoughtful or clever editorial or commentary (Ken Wiwa, Egan, Russell Smith)

- ❑ The importance of personality in today's media (Tim Blanks, Arthur Black, Anderson Cooper, George Stroumboulopoulos, Alan Neal)
- ❑ They appreciate humour and satire as a vehicle of communication (John Stewart, Ron MacLean, Rick Mercer, George Strombouloupoulos)
- ❑ They understand the pivotal role of a strong anchor and appreciate hosts who play a hands-on editorial role in their newscasts as opposed to simply being talking heads (Peter Mansbridge, Ian Hanomansing, Lisa LaFlamme)
- ❑ There is considerable admiration for journalists who have maintained a life/work balance. This represents another shift away from the image and requirement of a reporter who is married to the job and could lead to calls by this generation of journalists for employers to consider new labour standards and practices.

### **Subjectivity and objectivity**

Another key message from this exercise is the questioning by many students of the standard of objectivity in journalism. In the same way that candidates such as Jon Stewart and Canadian comedian Rick Mercer were embraced for their rebelliousness and resistance to traditional media norms, they, along with a number of the candidates, especially the columnists, were also celebrated for taking a stand and for making it appropriate to have clearly articulated views on important issues.

*From what I learned from [Nelofir] Pazira, probably the most important piece of knowledge I will use in the future is the fact that journalists don't necessarily need to be objective, passive observers. It's normal to feel emotion and to connect with the people whose stories you tell. I would like to adopt that approach to the journalism I do because I think that empathizing with and respecting one's sources ultimately results in more powerful stories.*

As a professor and as someone who, like many journalism instructors, worked as a journalist before becoming a teacher, I think I took for granted that the debate over objectivity and subjectivity was more or less resolved and that the standard of objective reporting was one to which students aspired or, at least, accepted.

However, in the same way that students demonstrated thoughtfulness and

flexibility in how they defined journalists, they also questioned and expanded the concept of objectivity.

*It was interesting that a lot of our presentations brought forward the idea of 'objectivity' as a fundamental journalistic value. I learned that it is not always necessary (or desirable for that matter) to be completely detached, unemotional, or objective about the subject you are writing on/exploring. As one can conclude from our presentations, it is often those people who are most passionately undetached from their issue that produce the best journalism on it. As our subject told us, it's not about being objective, it's about being fair.*

*The one thing that I found repeated in every presentation was that journalists are subjective writers. Every single group told the class that their journalist was biased or opinionated in some way, which I found shocking because we've always been told to stay completely objective. I always thought subjectivity was an evil in journalism, any true journalist gives both sides equal weight and opinions is left for columnists. These presentations really showed me the many ways subjectivity can help us do our jobs well and convey messages to readers that help them better understand the world without brainwashing them.*

These kinds of comments pervaded the students' essays and feedback forms. They tap into a renewed discussion over values and professional behaviour triggered, in part by increasing activity and public acceptance of citizen journalists (Martin).

### **Building a case for using a pop culture model to learn and connect**

Even within a school of journalism and communication, an environment that, at its best, cultivates curiosity, it is often an uphill battle to get many students to immerse themselves in and follow daily news media. One consequence of this is a lack of exposure to a wide range of journalists.

I regularly give news quizzes to try to change bad habits or to create new, more positive ones, including making journalism consumption part of a regular routine. On those quizzes I'll usually insert a few pop culture/entertainment questions, such as: What

did Gwyneth Paltrow name her baby or name the Hollywood couple that split up during a particular week etc.

Without fail, most students get these infotainment-oriented questions correct. It's a bit depressing in light of many students' inability to accurately identify events and people much closer to home and their sphere of true relevance. The reason for inserting questions about Hollywood gossip is to point out to students the glaring inconsistency in their knowledge and hopefully to motivate them to read more pertinent media material. It's apparent that, like or it hate it, students pick up this information because their lives – the Internet sites they go to, the shows they watch online or on television, the magazines they buy off the shelf – are saturated with it.

The need to reach out to young people is not confined to journalism education or to professors and students. Connecting with a coveted younger demographic is something that has been identified as a priority within the media industry, a goal, ironically, that becomes increasingly elusive – at least with respect to concentrated attention -- as media platforms proliferate.

Over the past five to 10 years, around the world, there have been innumerable attempts by media conglomerates to forge inroads with younger audiences – everything from the distribution of free news tabloids, reality programs, opening up more outlets to allow an unprecedented level of comment on programs and publications and audience participation in the news. Obviously, the scope of this paper doesn't permit a full discussion of these efforts.

However, there is one example that is particularly relevant to Journalism Idol. In Canada, the public broadcaster debuted a show in 2005 called *The Hour*, a mid to late-

night television program that airs Monday to Friday and which is hosted by former MuchMusic video journalist, George Stroumboulopoulos. The show is a clear attempt to push a younger, fresher agenda of news and current affairs. On the CBC website, *The Hour* sells itself as a “talk show with a different take on the news,” backed by a team that is there, “to inform and deliver the message that nothing is sacred within the news of Canada and the world.”

From its outset, *The Hour* attracted both passionate fans and equally angry critics. In the latter camp, some viewers felt the CBC was dumbing down news and selling out its values and mandate as a public broadcaster by promoting such a cheeky host – someone who usually dresses in jeans and black T-shirts and who looks like he’d be comfortable as a member of a motorcycle gang. Since its inception, however, and according to the public broadcaster, the show has won six Gemini Awards, (the Canadian version of a U.S. Emmy Award and considered a top honour within the TV industry) and according to the CBC, is the most popular daily show cite at CBC.ca.

The launch of *The Hour* also coincided with the start of Journalism Idol. While Stroumboulopoulos has never won this classroom contest, he is the only candidate to be presented by students during all three terms this competition has been staged.

**Table 3: Student comments on Journalism Idol candidate, George Stroumboulopoulos**

|   |
|---|
| <p>I think that George is deserving of the title Journalism Idol because of his appeal to the younger audience. His personality gives youth someone to connect with, and I think this will end up attracting more viewers. I’ve seen his work and I actually pay attention to what he’s saying.</p> <p>He has a great new look for CBC news and his fresh perspective, or maybe fresh presentation, of the news is something the he should be recognized for.</p> <p>I really like that George can make the news cool. Most young people hate</p> |
|---|

watching it and I support anyone who is trying to educate youth. He is not quite accomplished enough to be the 'best' yet though.

He seems to have a good mix going, both in terms of content (serious and humorous) and in experience (VJ, television, radio, docs). I like how his personality shines through. As for his new show, I like some of the stylistic choices and the conversational tone. The pace is a little frenetic sometimes, but if he calms down a bit, I think it would be even better.

I love George's style, his down-to-Earth quality, his mix of pop culture and hard news makes current affairs so accessible

The fact that he appeals to a younger generation is excellent. A lot of younger people don't follow news

He's young and I've grown up with him. He's spunky and knowledgeable.

George is wonderfully gifted. He has the ability to meld current affairs, witty opinion and pop culture in an extremely entertaining way. George S is the voice of Canada's youth.

*The Hour* describes itself as “a hybrid of news and celebrity, reflected through in-depth conversations and a dynamic production style. It covers politics, the arts, entertainment, the environment, human rights, sports and more. George is one of the most respected journalists in Canada, equally comfortable speaking with a world leader as he is a rock star.”

I think it also makes sense to categorize Journalism Idol as a hybrid, straddling serious pedagogical purpose and pop culture.

### **The Future of Journalism and Journalism Idol**

When given the opportunity, many students, (20 out of 21 in 2005 and 16 out of 21 in 2010), provided mostly formal feedback on the exercise. Some suggested constructive changes, including forcing people to stick to time presentation time limits, developing some clearer guidelines, such as a grading rubric, for how to assess



candidates. Some questioned the need to do both an essay and a presentation as they felt it was repetitive. Some had concerns about workload as this assignment sometimes fell on weeks when students also had to write a news story. However, everyone who provided feedback recommended continuing with this project.

I thought this was a brilliant idea because there was lots to learn about other journalists which helped to form my own opinions on the best ways in which journalists can serve ‘the public sphere.’

**Table 4: Excerpts from student feedback sheets**

“I thought this was a brilliant idea because there was lots to learn about other journalists which helped to form my own opinions on the best ways in which journalists” can serve the public sphere.”

“Great experience and really helpful to find an get in touch with a mentor.”

“Learned a lot about many journalists, caused me to pay more attention to the authors of stories I read.”

“The Journalism Idol presentations were a very enjoyable experience from all aspects. Listening to the presentations has been a great way of learning about different journalists. Our own presentations have given us a sense of what we admire and where we would ultimately choose to be. Great change from writing articles all the time.”

“I felt this competition was useful in discovering what I aspire to do in the future. I was able to decide who my idol was and then how to model my work after his so my writing could improve.”

“I loved Journalism Idol. I was thoroughly unaware that many of these journalists even existed and to become knowledgeable in each of their careers was great.”

“I think J-Idol went over very well. It helped us all remember why we wanted to become journalists in the first place. Its main value, I think, was that it inspired us to believe that we really can achieve our goals if we work hard, and we can make a difference. It’s also valuable to be exposed to the work of other journalists that [we] might not have found out about on our own.”

“I liked it because it allowed us to discuss a wide range of ideas and journalism-related topics. It was something different and fun. All in all, a good idea that can only get more

fun as the years go . . . or at least until American Idol becomes irrelevant in society and the next big show comes along.”

“Journalism Idol was a great source of inspiration – and when we are stressed out and facing multiple deadlines – inspiration is something that is nice to have! I would even encourage other professors to do this. It forces students to keep a closer eye on the media and gain a fuller respect and admiration for other people’s work!”

In terms of applying it to other classes, while this exact exercise may not work in some courses and curricula, I believe the ideas behind it could be adapted and translated into a variety of formats, taking into consideration the size of the seminar and the requirements of the curriculum. The Idol show format is remarkably popular and resilient, with spinoffs in at least 42 other locations (Wikipedia). This widespread appeal could indicate the potential of its classroom spinoff, Journalism Idol, to be applied in other programs, cultures and countries.

However, there may be an optimum time frame in which to undertake this exercise. My students have responded favourably to this exercise, in part because they are still in the early stages of our journalism program and are really just starting to envision their future media careers. There is still plenty of scope for idealism and optimism. Unfortunately, this openness to novel in-class exercises and to trying on various journalistic hats, starts to fade. Even by the fourth and final year of the program, when the demands are greater and the reality of finding a job hits closer to home, I’m not sure Journalism Idol would be a total success because there may not be the same degree of buy in from the students or the same willing suspension of disbelief required to adopt the role of a admired journalist and promote that candidate to peers.

**Conclusions: success, failure and the way forward**

While students showed an enthusiasm for pop-culture novelty and a willingness to embrace new forms of journalism and journalists, they also highlighted the ongoing importance, to them, of more traditional core values. Included in this was some criticism of the broadly defined journalist. One student wrote, in a feedback note:

You might think about tightening up the criteria for who is a journalist. While fashion and music reporting might be interesting to some, I don't think an analysis of this type of journalism is that relevant to the course.

The student-selected slate of Journalism Idol nominees included a wide range of candidates – from national TV news anchors, well-known international correspondents along with several people with much lower profiles. However, in spite of the variety of candidates, there was a consistently sharp critique of the media and, as mentioned, a strong sense of idealism.

For all the praise of Jon Stewart and George Stroumboulopoulos, many students also identified flaws, and demanded more of the media.

**Table 5: Student comments on Journalism Idol Candidate Jon Stewart (2005)**

“I don't know that I necessarily consider him a real journalist. He is more of an entertainer. His guests seem to do the 'reporting' for him. However, I give him credit for turning a lot of youth on to news, especially to politics.”

“It's difficult to perceive Jon Stewart as a real journalist, especially when you hold him up against a journalist's ethical standpoint. He does tell stories though, in an unconventional method, but he does so very interestingly and humorously!”

“Jon Stewart is very funny and incredibly smart, however, I still have some troubles classifying him as a journalist. I think he is well informed. However, you're not watching the news when you're watching his show. It's supplemental to what someone watches to be informed.”

“Stewart is young, hip and funny. However, I'm not sure he achieves the balance between seriousness and humour that would give him a higher score. I do admire his guts to tell it like it is, but sometimes I wonder whether he does this because he truly believes

people deserve to know the truth about the ironies and hypocrisies of politics etc. or whether it's just a ratings stunt.”

“Here's my problem with Jon Stewart: he's mainstream. I don't know a single person my age who hasn't heard of him, and seen him at least once. ...Our generation has been conditioned to laugh at shows like Stewart's – so conditioned that I'm not sure anymore whether what he says actually is funny.”

There were similar comments and critiques about Journalism Idol candidate, George Stroumboulopoulos. These remarks, I believe, demonstrate a level of maturity that many may not expect of university students of this age and at this level of their journalism education.

**Table 6: Student comments on Journalism Idol Candidate George Stroumboulopoulos (2005)**

“I like George, but I feel CBC's trying too hard by not having him in a suit.”

“To be honest, I do not watch the show. However, as 'cool' as he seems, I believe he has one key flaw. To be the ultimate journalism idol, one must appeal to a wide swath of the public, not just young people (as important as we are).”

“Does the news really need to be 'cool'? The bottom line: I don't think entertainment and music qualifies as news. It's important, but he shouldn't be trying to pass off a music show as serious news.”

“While I appreciate his efforts to reach a younger audience, I find his style a little oversimplified and flashy. I feel like substance suffers as a result. While he is looking at important issues, they get sidelined by his entertainment focus.”

Where the appeal of infotainment stops, the mechanics and the rigour and the discipline that gives shape to more serious and constructive journalistic enterprise must intervene. This was another clear message from students. As teachers and mentors, this is also where we probably best fit: in instilling and cultivating these values.

Finally, I believe there is reason to take heart in the winners of the competition.

The 2005 Journalism Idol was Globe and Mail correspondent, Stephanie Nolen. From 2003 to 2008, Nolen was the Africa correspondent for the Globe, a Canadian national daily newspaper. Nolen is an award winning journalist and author of a book on Africa AIDS pandemic. She is known for her gutsy approach to pursuing stories and for tackling the Global South, as a beat, in a compassionate, powerful and honest way.

The winner in 2006 was Steve Paikin, a TV Ontario journalist, author and documentary producer. Paikin hosts the network's flagship current affairs program, The Agenda. The show offers viewers a thoughtful look at both Canadian and world affairs, without the glitzy production values and sensationalism of many U.S. programs of the same genre.

Finally, the 2010 winner of Journalism Idol was Peter Mansbridge, a senior journalist and host of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's nightly, national news program. Mansbridge, whose career started almost accidentally – he was hired by a CBC manager who liked the sound of his voice as Mansbridge, then a young baggage handler at a remote, northern Canadian airport, stepped in to announce some flight information – has become one of Canada's highest profile news contributors and personalities.

All three winners are respected reporters, hosts and interviewers, fitting the more traditional definition of journalist. They were chosen for qualities such as their ability to spark social change, to dig deep in efforts to inform and enlighten. While there was certainly openness to more populist and more unconventional candidates in Journalism Idol and while these choices revealed something about the changing face of reporting and of audience expectations, these shifts are not necessarily accompanied by an abandonment of conventional, core journalistic values.

At the end of the day, this exercise was designed to generate interest awareness in the media, how various journalists got their start, how they work and what they accomplish in their jobs. Another key component was finding a way to inspire students who are at a formative time in their lives and education. Judging from some of the comments of students, I believe this project worked and worked well.

### **Works Cited**

Dumenco, Simon. "The Un-Star System." New York Magazine 8 Sept. 2003.

[http://nymag.com/nymetro/news/media/columns/download/n\\_9155/](http://nymag.com/nymetro/news/media/columns/download/n_9155/)

Erich, Matthew C. "Thinking Critically About Journalism Through Popular Culture."

Journalism & Mass Communication Educator 50.4 (Winter1996): 35-41.

"Idol Series." Wikipedia. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Idol\\_series](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Idol_series)

Martin, Courtney E. "Questioning Journalistic Objectivity." The American Prospect 3

Aug. 2009.

McQuillen, Sarah. Journalism Idol Essay: Jon Stewart (class assignment,  
unpublished)

Reynolds, Donna. Idol Thoughts: Season Three. Lulu.com. 2006.

Windschuttle, Keith. "The Poverty of Cultural Studies." Journalism Studies 1 (2000):

145-159.

Zelizer, Barbie. "How Communication, Culture, and Critique Intersect in the Study of

Journalism." Communication, Culture & Critique 1 (2008): 86-91

## **Appendix 1: Excerpts from student comments about Journalism Idol candidates**

**(2005)**

### **Stephanie Nolen (winner)**

“Nolen is brave. She has been in countless war zones, was tried as an illegal alien in Iran, was trampled in a queue in Lagos and owns a tailor-made flak jacket. I respect the fact that she puts herself in danger for important stories. I also respect the fact that she works almost exclusively on stories with widespread and urgent significance. No fluff for Nolen.”

“She writes of war, conflict, poverty, child soldiers, disease and other major global problems. I believe that her work is truly making a difference in the world. She is the noble ideal that all journalism students strive to. She promotes awareness of human rights abuses and the ravages of disease and capitalism in third world countries. Without journalists like her, Canadians would not know of the importance of consumer choice, foreign aid and our government’s role in the global community.”

“Using smaller local story and then relating it to big picture can work really well and be compelling.”

“Tackles very tough issues (AIDS etc.) with class and vigour”

“Missing that kind of lighter side I think journalists need to have.”

“Wow, five languages!”

“She obviously cares about what she’s doing and wants her readers to care. She puts a human aspect to the story that we saw by looking at it from the perspective of someone who is affected by the issues.”

“Nolen is obviously a very dedicated individual doing important work. She seems to be a very inspiring person who seeks out stories that most people aren’t aware of, but probably should be.”

“If journalists are supposed to be agents of social changes, Nolen would be a prime example.”

“In a cushy, comfortable Western world, having the bravery to tackle the Third World and its many atrocities is truly inspirational.”

“Her style draws the reader along naturally.” (ability to elicit emotion)



“Nolan does what I believe is the most important thing I have learned this year – to write about human stories. I love her writing, and I love that she tells stories about things that people in Canada need to know in terms of humanitarian issues.”

“She writes from a feminist perspective which is a journalistic bias. However, she is revealing stories from a marginalized group: woman and children. She writes from a humanitarian perspective.”

### **Kate Adie**

“I was blown away by this woman’s courage and dedication to journalism. To take a bullet... wow”

“A fearless journalist willing to risk her life literally for a story. She is extremely inspirational.”

“I like how she tells her stories – with dignity and good observations. It creates an image of what’s really happening.”

### **Christiane Amanpour**

“She’s a very brave woman to interview these intimidating people and to go to all these scary places. It’s nice to see that she isn’t afraid to speak her mind.”

“Her coverage is in depth and human centered. It’s always nice to hear about well-known journalists who have managed to balance work with family.”

Additional observations from students:

-many students drew attention to the fact Amanpour questions practices of her network and colleagues.

-some criticism for being too opinionated, not as versatile (multi media) as some other journalists

-others felt a drawback was that she worked for CNN

### **Stewart Bell**

“Impressive. I like that he has a passion and fights for it.”

“Woohoo, Carleton alumnus! A brave guy for writing this book.”

“Writes interesting, un-formulaic hard-news leads.”

“He is a courageous journalist, proving that he is committed to telling stories that need to be told.”

Additional observations from students:

- Seen as an agenda setter because wrote about terrorism before 9/11
- admired also for human rights work

### **Tim Blanks**

“Some may not consider fashion journalism to be journalism at all, as it rarely follows the traditional ethical standards of accuracy, fairness, thoroughness and the ability to check bias at the door. Fashion journalism may not be building democracy or exposing corrupt government, but it does nonetheless hold a place in the journalism world, a cozy little niche right next to the likes of music, art and entertainment.”

“Interesting that he decided to take a different aspect on fashion . . . considering the age of models etc. Don’t know if I consider this journalism. Is fashion really newsworthy?”

Additional observations from students:-

- One student deducted points because, in his/her view, covering the fashion industry is too easy because stories are fed to journalists
- praised for good interviewing technique, ability to make fashion stories accessible to wide range of viewers and also for exploring dark side of industry (context)
- points for connecting fashion with news and current affairs

### **Anderson Cooper**

“He’s got a fresh take on journalism.”

“The show looks interesting and I think it’s good that he’s trying to attract new viewers. He seems a little more serious than most of the anchors that are trying to appeal to young people which might make him seem more credible.”

“Cooper’s show strikes me as a cross between a news program and a talk show, which is a neat take

Additional observations from students:

- some said his style was too sensational and cliché ridden
- criticized for being too good looking!

### **Kelly Egan**

“This guy is great. I mean, really. He has no journalistic training whatsoever, other than practice, and he writes the way I think people should write – with passion and colour.”

“I’ve never been a fan of print journalism, but I admit I read every one of his articles sent to me from start to finish and then proceeded to look up more. They’re like short stories.

They suck you in. He uses words that keep me interested and structures his articles in a way that by the end, I believe what he's saying."

"I like that he's opinionated and shameless. It's edgy and refreshing. There are few people, I find, who are willing to put themselves out there."

"I really appreciate Kelly Egan's writing style. He is a very good at showing not telling, putting the reader in the story. I also like opinionated pieces when it is well backed up by the way Egan's are."

"He writes in a way that reaches out to people, by making commentary that is relevant and by using details that give you a good picture of the story he is telling."

"Egan seems to have a very good (poetic) turn of phrase and is able to create beautiful imagery in his stories. He also seems to be very connected with everyday people and their experiences and is able to write compellingly about them."

"I really liked Egan's way of taking items that are in the news and putting them in a new context. The different angles help show how everyone is impacted by events they may not be directly a part of."

"His positive attitude inspires me that all journalism does not have to be cynical and critical."

### **Jon Stewart**

"I really like the Daily Show with Jon Stewart, but he said himself that he doesn't present the news in a different way. I don't think Stewart really tells the news – it's more like he's providing commentary/satire on what journalists have already reported."

"I absolutely love Jon Stewart. In my opinion, he is one of the only a very small amount of American 'journalists' who aren't the President's puppets. He is honest, extremely intelligent and is not afraid to voice his clearly controversial opinion. Despite the fact that even he says his show is fake news, I would prefer it to the tribe they call CNN any day. By injecting humour into politics, he has also gotten a younger demographic to get interested."

"I like Jon Stewart's non-traditional journalism. Comedy and satire can be very useful tools to get people to open up. Very quick wit and good interviewing skills."

"Jon Stewart is awesome! He's a personal idol of mine, just because I love satire. The way he is able to make news relevant and funny to a younger audience shows how powerful comedy can be. I feel sometimes that comedy is back-burnered in favour of hard-hitting reporting, but can easily see that Stewart has the power to illicit amazing responses from his guests on the show. ... Sometimes I feel that the media takes itself too

seriously, and Stewart is a good remedy to this. He just has a wonderfully fresh approach that just invigorates journalism.”

“Really interesting approach to journalism. He’s so entertaining and engaging you don’t even realize you’re learning, which is really good for younger people. Does a great job trying to reform journalism.”

“He is pushing people to consider alternatives to mainstream coverage and alternatives to mainstream opinion.”

“The show’s format probably attracts people who wouldn’t normally watch the news. But, is he a journalist?”

“A clear favourite. You have to be super intelligent and talented to use comedy to comment on social issues. Jon Stewart rocks!”

“I don’t know that I necessarily consider him a real journalist. He is more of an entertainer. His guests seem to do the ‘reporting’ for him. However, I give him credit for turning a lot of youth on to news, especially to politics.”

“It’s difficult to perceive Jon Stewart as a real journalist, especially when you hold him up against a journalist’s ethical standpoint. He does tell stories though, in an unconventional method, but he does so very interestingly and humorously!”

“Jon Stewart is very funny and incredibly smart, however, I still have some troubles classifying him as a journalist. I think he is well informed. However, you’re not watching the news when you’re watching his show. It’s supplemental to what someone watches to be informed.”

“Stewart is young, hip and funny. However, I’m not sure he achieves the balance between seriousness and humour that would give him a higher score. I do admire his guts to tell it like it is, but sometimes I wonder whether he does this because he truly believes people deserve to know the truth about the ironies and hypocrisies of politics etc. or whether it’s just a ratings stunt.”

“Here’s my problem with Jon Stewart: he’s mainstream. I don’t know a single person my age who hasn’t heard of him, and seen him at least once. ...Our generation has been conditioned to laugh at shows like Stewart’s – so condition that I’m not sure anymore whether what he says actually is funny.”

### **Alan Neal**

“It was obvious from the get-go that he is extremely intelligent but also incredibly witty.”

“I find Alan Neal’s journalism interesting but not out of the ordinary. It is satisfactory, complete, and he tries to be original, but I guess I just don’t really get his humour.”

“To be quite honest, I’m not a big radio listener, so right off the bat, that’s working against Neal. I thought it was impressive that he held together a two-hour time slot every week but didn’t find his reporting to be a real showstopper

“I do admire his presence and ability to fill dead air time without making it seem like he’s filling it. I’m not sure if his approach is different than other journalists. He just seems to do regular journalism.”

“Neal comes off as approachable and thorough in his research of stories. I admire the fact that instead of reading a brief summary of a book that will be discussed on his show, he actually reads the whole thing. However, I found that Neal lacked a certain spark that would distinguish him from others in the field.”

### **Ian Hanomansing**

“Doesn’t like turtlenecks = +1”

“I love that he’s sticking around in Vancouver. It’s an inspiration to see someone so successful able to have a stable home life.”

“I respect how well rounded that he is ... not just an anchor, but helps to edit/write.”

“Canadian nationalist gets him points.”

“Great that he has a brain, not just a talking head.”

“I don’t know. He’s Canadian and I love anyone that works for the CBC. But, I don’t see him as being super innovative or groundbreaking. He’s a CBC staple and that’s great. But, I’m looking for someone funnier and more artistic.”

### **Rick Mercer**

“I don’t really see Rick Mercer as being a journalist. He’s funny, but he’s not telling the news or presenting new issues. He’s providing commentary and editorializing. I think that anyone could do this, as long as they have some knowledge of the news. Rick Mercer just happens to be lucky enough to be able to comment on TV.”

“Rick, like Jon Stewart, injects humour into politics so successfully. He is also an astute pseudo-reporter with very great opinions and ideas.”

“Mercer mixes comedy and journalism better than anybody else in Canadian media.”

“Not journalism in the student sense, but encourages people to seek other ‘real’ news sources to be able to appreciate his comedy.”

“His humor is a good way to get news across sometimes.”

“Comedian, but is he a journalist?”

“Satire is a good way to draw attention to important issues.”

“Brings issues to light that certain people who are watching the show for purely comedic value would not normally be exposed to.”

“Government watchdog, therefore a journalist. Because our role is to inform the public about the workings of the government. A non-traditional style of journalism as he clearly states his opinion and position on issues.”

Additional observations from students:

- amazing camera presence and technique
- uses the Internet which is a big part of the ‘new media’
- seen as Canadian equivalent to Jon Stewart!
- liked his unconventional approach to interviews

### **Lisa Laflamme**

“Lisa is a wonderful reporter and a wonderfully talented journalist. She is extremely professional, confident and concise in her news. To get to the heart of the story is difficult, and she makes it look easy.”

“Good all-round journalist who carries out the function of journalism for our society, i.e. she reports clearly and without bias on important issues.”

“Some of her reporting seemed to uphold the status quo. Talking about voting for freedom. The election (Iraq) doesn’t guarantee anything.”

Additional observations from students:

- confident, professional, strong, doesn’t leave unanswered questions
- noted for working her way up (therefore seen as a role model)
- some said they liked that she was a woman in a difficult and male-dominated field
- typical news anchor/correspondent
- lacks flare
- too many clichés and formulaic

### **Ken Wiwa**

“Very important work. Balance between activism and neutrality in journalism difficult, but Wiwa seems well able to cope with it. Good providing of context and international perspective.”

“Author or journalist? Activist vs. objective?”

“I wonder how his work as an activist affects his work as a journalist in terms of bias?”

“Takes daily events and puts them into grander context”

“Talks about issues usually ignored by mainstream press.”

“He seems like a journalist that makes you think. I like the way he takes things and links them together to show how they are similar. He points out significant issues that always make you question things.”

“Not easily fooled by political motives.”

Additional comments from students:

- strong emotional connection with his work {his father}, draws on personal experience
- overcame adversity
- strong emphasis and commitment to human rights
- provides interesting perspectives on globalization
- provokes readers to think about issues
- not many indigenous African journalists
- seen as noble
- praised for covering globally important issues
- some didn't consider him a journalist, but rather a columnist

### **Arthur Black**

-talent in discovering the unusual, but could be more thought provoking

“It's people like this that make the project so cool! I would never hear about Black if it weren't for it. Anyway, fun choice. I'm not so convinced that he's a journalist, but because of the reasons why Amy chose him (i.e. good story selection), I think he's someone to learn from.”

“I love humour when it's injected into journalism. Black clearly uses his intense curiosity and wit to convey an opinion and often dig up really cool stories.”

-criticized for lack of hard news value {"Where's the news?"}

“Black seems to be very experienced in all forms of media. I like that he finds eccentric stories. He definitely has his own niche.”

“Doesn't like getting bogged down in grammar”

## **Jian Ghomeshi**

“His focus on the Canadian-American relationship is important and his provocative style really works. He seems to have diverse knowledge in a variety of issues which makes him a strong journalist as well.”

“Journalists who can reach over several media (TV/radio etc.) and genres (arts to politics) successfully, are very few and far between.”

“Objectivity seems to be fleeting with these idols.”

Additional comments from students:

- very interesting, atypical style -accomplished at a very young age
- wide range of knowledge contributes to quality of interviews
- uses musicians and entertainers to get point across
- patriotic
- appeals to young people
- liked his pop-cultural influence
- some wanted to him to do more serious stories

## **Michael Harris**

“He represents what journalists are supposed to do, according to many – watchdogs of the government.”

“He strikes me as being a community/public journalist . . . using his journalism to change/fight societal wrongs.”

“In my opinion, if there were more journalists like Michael Harris, the behaviour of politicians and bureaucrats would improve noticeably and quickly. Just as peace can be so much more than just the absence of war, so also can good government be so much more than just the absence of corruption.”

“different in that he evaluates journalism instead of sticking to reporting.”

“thought-provoking and inspiring”

“It seems he considers himself a human first and a journalist second.”

“committed to social reform”

“Not impressed by cynicism without humour. However, that doesn’t undercut the importance of the knowledgeable work being done by Michael Harris. And perhaps with his experience, I’d be cynical too.”



“I find Harris somewhat over the top. While I see that in some ways he’s doing the same thing as [Rick] Mercer, he doesn’t couch it in terms of humour or satire, which makes his work more unapproachable to me.”

“It seems like he writes a lot of commentary and books, but doesn’t really come up with new news. It’s interesting to read, but I don’t know how informative it is.”

Additional comments from students:

- some saw him as too editorial
- check on government (fair, passionate and unrelenting)
- investigative {writes about bigger ideas than just stories}
- some noted his respectful approach to sources, i.e. asking permission first and warning about consequence
- not afraid of questioning authority
- obsessed with details

### **Peter Mansbridge**

“Great interviewing skills. Always seems to make guest seem at ease but always manages to ask the hard-hitting questions”

“I don’t find him to be an incredible journalist. I don’t have the same respect for news anchors as I do for journalists who research, produce and change.”

Additional comments from students:

- praised for his consistency (stuck with CBC)
- worked his way up
- lots of awards (respect for depth of his experience)
- hands-on role
- seen as a Canadian institution
- not seen a revolutionary, but solid (meat and potatoes)

### **Bill Mason**

“Very different. I like that Mason isn’t a conventional journalist, but still so important to the world.”

“A really interesting man who followed his passion. What a beautiful way to live one’s life.”

“Not a traditional journalist, but made a real difference with journalistic film-making work and charting Canadian rivers.”

“Work examines an aspect of Canadian life that is a source of national pride.”

-seen as a photojournalist, an environmental journalist, activist journalist, a documentary maker

“While there is no clear cut definition for journalism and Jon did a good job of outlining why he thought journalism should have different connotations, I think Mason seems more like an author.” (more personal than public, i.e. for the media)

### **Ron MacLean**

“Sports in general are often looked upon as the toy department of the media industry. However, sports journalists must be able to do stories on not just the game but politics, money and beyond. One need look no further than the NHL lockout to see a situation where a journalist must be well versed in both sports and politics. MacLean is one of the top journalists in Canada at doing this.”

“He’s a part of the Canadian psyche. He just seems like someone I would want my parents to be friends with. His versatility surprises me.”

“Good at breaking down media-trained players and personalities.”

“...he is more like a TV personality than a journalist.”

“Ron may be a ‘cultural icon’ and a good hockey announcer, but as a journalist, he doesn’t impress me that much. There are just far more important things to me than professional sports and his salary disputes are ridiculous.”

### **Russell Smith**

“In a lot of respects, Smith is the antithesis to the average journalist. He has very few research skills, he uses gigantic words, he’s politically incorrect, and on all accounts, he appears to hate journalism in and of itself. But this is precisely why I admire and respect the man. In all honesty, there are days when I find journalism excruciating. There are days when I don’t think I will be able to finish the program. There are days when the constant worry is so great that I wonder why I subject myself to it and I contemplate twisting an ankle just to have a rest. And then there are the days when I inevitably realize what a dramatic fool I am—because despite all the worry, I do enjoy it. Smith’s attitude and success show that you don’t have to be in love with journalism to succeed. It can be just a job—an amusing and wonderful job—depending on your attitude.”

“I see a lot of Seinfeld-type comedy in his writing which I find pretty cool.”

“Gotta love his honesty.”

“Truth can hurt, but it’s important.”

“I don’t like snobs. A journalism idol must be a man or woman of the people.”

“His cynical outlook seems to give him a different perspective on things, therefore provoking thought in the audience, which I consider an important part of the job.”

“Smith seems like a character. I like that he’s self-deprecating. While he may not fit the conventional image of a journalist, he has a certain in-your-face quality that I really admire.”

-seen more as a writer of creative non fiction versus a journalist

“He really isn’t a journalist – he isn’t trying to recover truth that affects our lives in a large way.”

Additional comments from students:

-use of imagery seen as very effective (“master of words”)

-admiration for his ingenuity and boldness

-praise for writing about seemingly random things, but usually have a greater issue

-points out sociological patterns

-takes approach that other writers would be afraid to

-some appreciated his use of humour to comment on issues

-praise for bringing his personality into his work

### **George Stroumboulopoulos**

“I think that George is deserving of the title Journalism Idol because of his appeal to the younger audience. His personality gives youth someone to connect with, and I think this will end up attracting more viewers. I’ve seen his work and I actually pay attention to what he’s saying.”

“I like George, but I feel CBC’s trying too hard by not having him in a suit.”

“He has a great new look for CBC news and his fresh perspective, or maybe fresh presentation of the news is something he should be recognized for.”

“I really like that George can make the news cool. Most young people hate watching it and I support anyone who is trying to educate youth. He is not quite accomplished enough to be the ‘best’ yet though.

“He seems to have a good mix going, both in terms of content (serious and humorous) and in experience (VJ, television, radio, docs). I like how his personality shines through. As for his new show, I like some of the stylistic choices and the conversational tone. The pace is a little frenetic sometimes, but if he calms down a bit, I think it would be even better.”

“I love George’s style, his down-to-Earth quality, his mix of pop culture and hard news makes current affairs so accessible.”

“The fact that he appeals to a younger generation is excellent. A lot of younger people don’t follow news.”

“He’s young and I’ve grown up with him. He’s spunky and knowledgeable.”

“George is wonderfully gifted. He has the ability to meld current affairs, witty opinion and pop culture in an extremely entertaining way. George S is the voice of Canada’s youth.”

“To be honest, I do not watch the show. However, as ‘cool’ as he seems, I believe he has one key flaw. To be the ultimate journalism idol, one must appeal to a wide swath of the public, not just young people (as important as we are).”

“Does the news really need to be ‘cool’? The bottom line: I don’t think entertainment and music qualifies as news. It’s important, but he shouldn’t be trying to pass off a music show as serious news.”

“While I appreciate his efforts to reach a younger audience, I find his style a little oversimplified and flashy. I feel like substance suffers as a result. While he is looking at important issues, they get sidelined by his entertainment focus.”

“I like that George isn’t a ‘typical’ journalist. He doesn’t have the look and he presents things in a different way.”

## **Appendix 2: Student surveys, Journalism Idol 2010**

### **Journalism Idol Assessment**

**Winter 2010**

#### **What did you think of this assignment?**

Maybe this is super cliché, but I found this assignment really inspiring. I actually really looked forward to the weeks that we had a presentation, because it was interesting to see the variety of journalists our class came up with. I thought that most people would choose people that were humanitarian, like Allison and I did. I found it was a very interesting variety of idols- it really showed the diversity of our class. I also found it really interesting to see how my colleagues put presentations together and spoke in front of the class. Everyone was so confident while they presented! You could tell that people chose people they really were inspired by. I was really impressed with all the video clips, research, and KNOWLEDGE that everyone had about their journalists. I think it was just really fun to have presentations because it's not something journalism students do very often. It helps that we have a very welcoming class, so it wasn't nerve-wracking or stressful to get up and talk.

#### **What did you learn?**

I learned to look outside the box. Science journalists can be inspiring! (Who knew?) I also learned how many people are considered journalists. It was really interesting to see how Klosterman's wit and subjectivity still makes him an amazing journalist. I was happy to see many sides of journalism.

#### **How will you use this knowledge/information in the future?**

I feel like I know a lot more going into my potential career as a journalist. I now know that I may end up somewhere I had no intention of being. Most journalists never know where they are going to end up, or want to be in a specific beat but end up doing something completely different. It really opened my eyes to what is possible, and I will definitely use the knowledge I gained to keep an open mind when job searching and pursuing a career.

#### **What, if anything would you do to change this assignment in the future? Why? (Please include any suggestions for constructive change)**

I think it was done really well. I really liked how it was spread out over the term, so it was something to look forward to. A partner is definitely a good thing, since I wouldn't want to get up there and talk alone. The time limit was good because it was all the BEST information that the group could come up with, and made everyone really drive home their main points.

The only thing I don't really understand is the marking/grading system. Maybe if there was a list of the journalists at the end of the term and everyone voted? The only reason I say this is because from my own sheet and conversing with people around me, most people got really high marks. Since the presentations were all done so well and the journalists were all pretty interesting, I think most people were really generous in their marking. I feel like everyone is going to have the same amount of points!

Overall, I had a really fun doing the assignment and presenting for the class. It helped me learn that I really need to be doing a talking job... whether its radio or television. I just like talking to/for people. But then again, since I want to be on camera, I will probably end up doing print since it's such an unpredictable career!

## **Journalism Idol Assessment**

**Winter 2010**

### **What did you think of this assignment?**

I thought this assignment was very unique. I really enjoyed the presentation aspect of the project a lot because I've done few group projects in university. I also thought it was fun to compete with my classmates.

### **What did you learn?**

I learned about many different journalists that I had never heard of before. I also learned the ambiguity of the term 'journalist.' It was really interesting to me that people like Chuck Klosterman could be considered 'journalists.' I like Chuck Klosterman but I've never thought of him as a journalist. I really enjoyed hearing snippets of unique journalistic work because I thought it really demonstrated the power of great journalism. Even hearing a few sentences from a story, like in Emily and Alison's presentation, really showed how powerful language can be.

### **How will you use this knowledge/information in the future?**

I am very intrigued by the different styles of journalism discussed during Journalism Idol. I think it would be interesting to try different formats in the future.

### **What, if anything would you do to change this assignment in the future? Why? (Please include any suggestions for constructive change)**

I think it would be cool if a creative presentation format was mandatory. The presentations were interesting but I really enjoyed presentations that had creative structures, like Paul and Jordan's presentation in which they had a fake interview. I also think it would be cool if journalism idol included guest judges, like on American Idol.

## **Journalism Idol Assessment**

**Winter 2010**

### **What did you think of this assignment?**

I really enjoyed this assignment. It wasn't too time-consuming, and I was introduced to many interesting journalists. It gave me an idea of where I wanted to go as a journalist, and showed me what can be done with a bit of hard work within the field. Overall, the assignment was inspiring and made me realize the potential that can be reached as a journalist.

I also like that the assignment allows you to work in partners, but also gives you the opportunity to work alone. That way the assignment is not based solely on your ability to work with your partner, and you still have independent control over your final mark.

**What did you learn?**

I learned that it takes a lot of hard work to become a successful, renowned journalist. As well, you need to find your own style and comfort ability within the field. In other words, you need to find what your good at and run with it, but also be flexible and wide-ranging at the same time.

I also learned a lot about the varying styles of journalists, both for writing and broadcasting, which I found very helpful.

But I think the main thing I learned is that a lot of journalists, at least the ones we saw, do not believe in the idea of complete objectivity. More often than not, they believe in fairness and giving both sides of a story a chance to speak. As well, they may place their own opinions or perspectives within their work.

**How will you use this knowledge/information in the future?**

I think I'll be able to use the information and knowledge gained from this assignment by applying many of the actions and skills of these journalists to my own career. Through my work, I will try to stand out as it seems as if the majority of the journalism idols did this. I'll try to find a new and fresh way to provide news and information to people. I know that I will have to maintain the traditional values of journalism, but also go against the norm at the same time to stand out if I want to be successful.

As well, I have really learned about the power of radio and as a result, plan on trying to make my way into broadcasting. I think I learned this from the presentation on the science journalist. I forget her name at this moment.

**What, if anything would you do to change this assignment in the future? Why? (Please include any suggestions for constructive change)**

I don't think I'd change anything. I can't really think of anything. I enjoyed it the way it was laid out. I was able to learn a lot.

**Journalism Idol Assessment****Winter 2010****What did you think of this assignment?**

I actually really liked this assignment. I wasn't sure at first, but it was a really cool exercise, for me, to look at where this program could take me.

I loved how this assignment, by sharing our ideas between the whole class, provided a really diverse and in-depth look at how a career in journalism can look, and how varied it can be.

**What did you learn?**

I learned that I actually might like journalism - that sounds worse than it is, I think. What I mean is that this assignment really showed me the huge variety of things that a 'journalist' can do, and that was really motivating and interesting for me as someone who's not always keen on typical 'journalism'.

**How will you use this knowledge/information in the future?**

I think that what I will mostly take away from this assignment is the knowledge of what's out there. Also, I now know what people look for in a great journalist, and I think it's really good that I know what to strive for now.

**What, if anything would you do to change this assignment in the future? Why? (Please include any suggestions for constructive change)**

Honestly, I don't think I would change anything. I really liked the assignment and the way it played out.

**Journalism Idol Assessment**

**Winter 2010**

**What did you think of this assignment?**

I thought this assignment was very interactive and a good way to keep the class engaged. I liked learning about different journalists and how they inspired other students. It was a nice change to actually sit back and reflect on how our favourite journalists have inspired us, instead of just writing articles every week. I also liked the multimedia aspect of the assignment, how we got to use PowerPoint and show clips.

**What did you learn?**

Besides learning about other journalists, I got to learn a lot more about my journalism idol that I didn't know before. From having marathons of *The Hour*, I learned a lot about George's interviewing style and how he makes guests feel comfortable. In terms of the presentation, I learned how tough it is to work in a group sometimes. Instead of dividing sections of the presentation, my partner and I actually worked on every slide together, and compiled information for each section. There were some testy times but in the end you have to learn how to work cooperatively.

**How will you use this knowledge/information in the future?**

From researching my own journalism idol and listening to other people's presentations (for example, Chuck Klosterman), I found that the newer generation of journalists has to embrace social media. It's good to have a firm foundation of the basics, but in order to pursue journalism we now have to use Twitter, Facebook, Flickr etc.

**What, if anything would you do to change this assignment in the future? Why? (Please include any suggestions for constructive change)**

I know that if my group presented first I would've been a bit confused as to how it should've been structured. Even though you mentioned we were free to do anything for our presentations it would've been nice to see an example of a PowerPoint or essay.



**What did you think of this assignment?**

I am definitely a fan of the Journalism Idol project! Not only was it a blast to watch others' presentations, it was a highly informative as well. I learnt about some journalists who I'm currently following on Twitter who I wouldn't have been exposed to if it weren't for my colleagues' wonderful presentations. I especially enjoyed working on my own presentation because it allowed my partner and I to immerse ourselves in the work of a journalist we have both admired for years now – someone I aspire to be. It didn't feel like an assignment – how can it when we're watching YouTube videos of the charmingly witty and absorbing George Stroumboulopoulos? It also served as a refreshing break from all the hard news reporting we are doing in the course. Additionally, it complemented what we're doing in class and what we'll be doing in the intensive field a couple years from now; it opened our eyes to the busy, busy, but gratifying life of an idol whose style I would like to mirror in my own. It was a no-stress project for sure!

**What did you learn?**

I was presented with a wealth of information about many different journalists –trend-setting, revolutionary, or contemporary – this term. But the information came in packages that were engaging, not involving turning wordy pages of writing or listening to classmates wax lyrical about their idols. I learnt about different types of journalism these reporters pursue, not simply limited to broadcast or print, but reporters who dabble in “subjective” journalism, those who experiment with social media. In terms of my own presentation, I learnt how much dedication it requires to be a journalist. Not simply reading the news religiously or walking around town for a story, but it is a job that demands time, persistence, and even tears. My own idol reached this stage of his career after much (almost) fanatical struggling. I've also had some reassurance on the topic of objectivity and being a reporter – it's not always a necessity and subjectivity serves as sound journalism too. I'm also aware of the direction “new journalism” is heading: it is more fast-paced, charged, and compact.

**How will you use this knowledge/information in the future?**

I will use the new material I have learnt, first and foremost, as a professional journalist. I've noticed similarities in those journalists who don't simply enjoy commercial success, but who are wholly invested and personally fulfilled in their careers. And that's what I want as a reporter, to be doing something I'm proud of. I realize that audiences are jaded by the clinically neutral language in the media. It's not completely illogical to write something that shows a perspective – that's why blogs are so popular. I'm also familiar with the many different styles of journalism, so I have the assurance that a Bachelor of Journalism doesn't limit me to a certain career path.

**What, if anything would you do to change this assignment in the future? Why? (Please include any suggestions for constructive change)**

In relation to your feedback on our presentation, Kanina (i.e. we packed too much information in a short period of time!), I suppose the only thing I can suggest changing is

extending the presentation time to 20 minutes (although I don't know how engaged the class will be after the first 10 minutes) and/or giving the students more specific instructions as to what must be included (e.g. the idol's journalistic style) and what needs to be cut back (e.g. shorter clips). Other than that, keep it the way it is – it was a joy to do (and view)!

### **Journalism Idol Assessment**

**Winter 2010**

#### **What did you think of this assignment?**

I thought this was a really great assignment. Since we had already written a feature for first semester, it was neat to do something different and creative like Journalism Idol. I think it is really important as journalism students to have someone who inspires us, and it was cool to learn more about our idols as well as see which journalists our classmates chose.

#### **What did you learn?**

This assignment helped me learn more about what I look for in a journalist, and about the things I like about the media industry. I learned that I prefer journalism when it is less structured and rigid, and when the writer is given the freedom to write about topics that interest and impassion them.

#### **How will you use this knowledge/information in the future?**

I will use inspiration drawn from my Journalism Idol to further my creative writing paths and develop an interviewing technique that is unique to me.

#### **What, if anything would you do to change this assignment in the future? Why? (Please include any suggestions for constructive change)**

The only thing I would change about the current structure of this assignment would be to allow us to photocopy the notes we made about each journalist during our evaluations so we could have their biographies on hand for the future.

### **Journalism Idol Assessment**

**Winter 2010**

#### **What did you think of this assignment?**

I honestly thoroughly enjoyed this assignment. The research helped me explore journalistic styles, presented me interesting journalists I otherwise wouldn't have explored and the presentations ended in great discussion.

#### **What did you learn?**

Most importantly I learned about different kinds of journalists, meaning my horizons were broadened. Seeing the career paths of each was also a great insight, offering a template for our futures that seem threatened more and more as newspapers close down. I guess when I boil it down, it's great to see the lives, and not necessarily the careers, of successful and renowned journalists. While we get insight into a journalist through their work, we often lack that intimate picture of their lives; it's something the general public might find uninteresting, but as potential future journalists, it hits home, quite literally.

I learned something about my classmates as well, which was wonderful. Not only their interests and aspirations, but through discussion we collectively dug into the journalists successes, faults and concerns – which reflects on us. We're just beginning, and what are often collective concerns come out in questions and comments about the journalist. I found the questions at the end most endearing, offering a relaxed environment in which the presenter could speak honestly about their idol. Often, the best comments were introduced here, offering a real window into the presenter's opinions.

**How will you use this knowledge/information in the future?**

What journalism idol did was bring journalists down to my level. By tracing their paths, it showed me where I could go in the near future.

Being intimately aware of journalists is also helpful, something which I've neglected. It's almost networking, opening my mind to other journalists and their styles. The discussions open a journalistic dialogue between students – after all, we're used to chatting about school work – and lets us exchange names of similar journalists. My own discussion with you pushed me towards science journalists, but discussions with classmates pushed me out into the journalist community.

Hell, we might even interview these guys some day!

**What, if anything would you do to change this assignment in the future? Why? (Please include any suggestions for constructive change)**

I wouldn't mind you doing a Journalism Idol presentation. I think that'd be cool, and maybe set the standard for the presentations. I say this because some presenters got caught up in achievements, which got boring and repetitive.

Otherwise, I can't imagine it much differently. Perhaps the Idol assignment sheet could be streamlined, because it's rather wordy. I found myself scanning through paragraphs, looking for anything I missed. The objectives might be better outlined, explaining how this is supposed to showcase a journalist, not simply give the biography. Otherwise, the onus is on the presenter to put together something interesting.

I'll say class discussion could be encouraged more. Sometimes discussion is pointless, but here we're exploring different styles, careers and opportunities on which to model our own careers. The presentations were good platforms for some discussion that brought the idols down to our level, where we discussed what worked and didn't work. I found the discussion, particularly after a stimulating presentation, the most endearing part of the whole process.

**Journalism Idol Assessment**

**Winter 2010**

**What did you think of this assignment?**

At first I was worried about having to work on a project in addition to writing weekly assignments, especially on a group project (I haven't worked in a group since high school). But it ended up being enjoyable to present and also watch everybody else talk about their journalism idols. It wasn't like it was a huge workload, either, and we had quite a lot of time to work on it, so my initial worry about it being too much to handle on top of everything else ended up being unfounded.

**What did you learn?**

I learned about a journalist I didn't know about, and was lucky enough to also hear her views on journalism, through which I also gained insight into the field. I think this assignment broadened my view of what journalism really is, because of the variety of different idols that were presented. I really liked that we got to learn about such a variety of people, some who were well-known and some that weren't.

**How will you use this knowledge/information in the future?**

I think more than anything, studying a journalist and learning about other journalists through classmates was inspiring. I'm not saying I didn't learn things that I can use in the future, but more than that showed where we could go with our degrees and the options we really have in the field, which I found inspiring, and a nice break from the structure of journalism classes which are so focused on hard news and foreign reporting.

**What, if anything would you do to change this assignment in the future? Why? (Please include any suggestions for constructive change)**

If time allows, I would say give presenters more time. I think almost everybody had something else – a clip, a quote, a lead – that they really wanted to include and would have actually added something to their presentation. Also maybe a scoring rubric might have helped? I think everyone probably scored totally differently, some people I know gave eights and nines to every candidate, whereas others ranged between five and 9.5. Some people just went easier and the scoring itself might be easier if there was some kind of standardization. Not that the scoring is even the most important part, but it might help.

**Journalism Idol Assessment****Winter 2010****What did you think of this assignment?**

I really enjoyed this assignment. I think it taught me a lot about what makes a journalist successful, and what techniques or styles work well for different mediums. I also found it very inspiring, the stories of foreign reporters and their unique stories inspired me to “do what scares me” and think outside the box. It has inspired me to finish my degree to the best of my ability in order to use the resources that are available to me now and apply them to the real world later in my career. I hope to one day travel the world as a foreign reporter, and apply some of the different styles and techniques of reporting that I have learned from the journalism idols. I think what I learned most from this assignment is to create my own journalist style based upon my own experiences and skills. By combining this with a strong journalistic foundation I hope to make a change in the world one story at a time. I also learned that to be successful you not only need talent and skill, you also need to work hard and persevere. This seemed to be a continuing theme for all the journalists we looked at. The only change I would make for this assignment would be to suggest students take a more creative approach to presenting their idol. Jordan and myself attempted to do this, and both learned a great deal about our idol while having fun. I think if students took the chance to step out side the box and present in a way that engaged the audience even more this assignment could reach an even high level of success. Overall I would highly suggest this assignment for future students.

**What did you think of this assignment?**

To be honest, I was a little skeptical assignment before the class began. I thought it sounded a little like busywork, and I wasn't sure why we were doing it. But after completing the assignment, my view is exactly the opposite. I absolutely loved the assignment because it helped me to learn about different journalists and how their careers took form. I felt it was really useful to examine the body of different journalists' work and take tips from them. It also helped me get to know the interests of some of my classmates. Journalism is a really individualistic program in our stage of the game and I liked seeing my classmates present because it helped me understand a bit more about who they were. Overall, I think it served its purpose and inspired me as a student, many of the candidates started out just like me! (or even with *less* training!)

**What did you learn?**

It was interesting that a lot of our presentations brought forward the idea of "objectivity" as a fundamental journalistic value. I learned that it is not always necessary (or desirable for that matter) to be completely detached, unemotional, or objective about the subject you are writing on/exploring. As one can conclude from our presentations, it is often those people who are most passionately undetached from their issue that produce the best journalism on it. As our subject told us, it's not about being objective, it's about being fair. I will carry this knowledge with me as I enter the field. I also learned much about what I admire in journalists. I do not feel inspired by broadcasters or big names. Instead, it is those relative unknowns exploring issues that truly matter to them that I find truly inspirational. I also learned a lot about different parts of the world and their history as we explored the work of various correspondents (including our own candidate). I felt this broad spectrum was really helpful because it gave us insight into how various issues in history were being covered. I learned that "doing what scares you" can really pay off and had a fantastic time interviewing my candidate.

**How will you use this knowledge/information in the future?**

I can definitely use what I've learned about the various journalists in terms of just having a general sense of who has covered certain issues and access their work for background information in the future. I will also take to heart the idea that objectivity is not the be-all-end-all of journalism and try to keep in mind the humanity, the reality of the situations I encounter as a journalist. I think I'll keep my knowledge of who inspires me close so that I can continually remember that it's not the big name or the fancy title that will make me happy, it's the interest I'll have in the work I'm doing (if that makes sense). I'll also try and continue to do what scares me by approaching established journalists whom I admire for help/advice when I get started in the field. I've learned they aren't all really scary.

**What, if anything would you do to change this assignment in the future? Why? (Please include any suggestions for constructive change)**

The only thing that I feel should be changed is the grading system in this assignment. I think it might be more effective to do the grading as a rating system out of the number of candidates at the end of all the presentations. ( i.e. each person rates all of the candidates

out of ten, one being the highest, and the person with the highest rankings across the board wins). I just felt it was really hard to rank the journalists on their inspiration factor without seeing the rest of the journalists and I ended up giving some journalists higher rankings earlier on than I probably would have at the end of the process. Also, I didn't really find it necessary for us to send information to the class beforehand on our subject. I know that I personally didn't always have time to complete the extra research on people's candidates before they presented, but always came away with a solid understanding of who that person was and the type of work they did. Maybe it would be more beneficial to require presenters to ready that information for *after* their presentations, in case people want to look into the person more on their own. I understand why we were required to do it, just want to be really honest and own up to the fact that I couldn't usually find the time to actually look into people's candidates before they presented while preparing my stories and doing my other readings for class at the same time. I don't think it's all that necessary because a lot of the material sent out beforehand was included in people's presentations anyways.

Other than these small suggestions though, I felt the assignment was really well structured and it gave us a nice break at the end of a full class. It also gave a chance to get to know our classmates better by working in groups, which is rare!

## **Journalism Idol Assessment**

**Winter 2010**

### **What did you think of this assignment?**

The assignment was a fun and creative way to explore the technical and theoretical aspects of a journalist's work. I liked that we were asked to draw lessons from our journalism idol's work that could be applied to our own work as journalism students; I found this to be the most practical aspect of this assignment.

The assignment also opened my eyes to the types of journalism and journalists that are out there. Our class saw a good mix of traditional and unconventional journalists, and this really made me reconsider not only the definition of what a journalist is, but also what I'd like to do with my journalism degree after I graduate. Furthermore, this assignment gave me the opportunity to stumble upon the work of a journalist I had never heard of before; I now look up to her as a professional mentor and I think she will serve as an inspiration to me for the rest of my time here at Carleton and also once I enter the field.

### **What did you learn?**

I feel like I benefitted from this assignment because my group actually got the chance to speak to our journalism idol. This gave me the opportunity to interview someone I look up to and also helped my group understand her work on a level ordinary research wouldn't have allowed. In interviewing Nelofer Pazira, we got the chance to learn about the ethical and professional values that guide her work and also got to hear her unique opinions on the role of journalists and the media.

Before this assignment, I never really considered documentary making to be a form of journalism. However, after watching most of Pazira's documentaries, I realized how

mistaken I was. I learned that documentaries are an incredibly powerful medium for storytelling. In a more technical sense, this was the first time I'd done a group project since high school, so it helped me build on my teamwork skills. It was also the first time I'd done a group interview, which went more smoothly than I thought it would due to lots of preparation, background research and planning.

**How will you use this knowledge/information in the future?**

From what I learned from Pazira, probably the most important piece of knowledge I will use in the future is the fact that journalists don't necessarily need to be objective, passive observers. It's normal to feel emotion and to connect with the people whose stories you tell. I would like to adopt that approach to the journalism I do because I think that empathizing with and respecting one's sources ultimately results in more powerful stories.

This project also allowed me to acquire skills needed for group interviews, and I'm assuming I will likely make use of those skills in the future. It's becoming apparent that, unlike other university courses, journalism requires a lot of collaboration and cooperation with colleagues.

**What, if anything would you do to change this assignment in the future? Why? (Please include any suggestions for constructive change)**

I think it would be interesting to involve the class a bit more in each presentation. It might be interesting to have each group come up with a small writing activity that would allow the class to experiment with the type of writing style the group's journalism idol is known for. I think this would add a practical element to the presentations and would get students to dabble in the different styles of journalism that are out there.

**Journalism Idol Assessment**

**Winter 2010**

**What did you think of this assignment?**

Journalism Idol was a great assignment for Intro to Reporting. It broke up the monotony of weekly stories with a reflective assignment. Journalism Idol forced me to look deeper into what journalism means as it is easy to lose that focus when all you can think about is your next deadline. In the process of analyzing a journalist for his or her contribution to the field of journalism, I found myself thinking about why I wanted to get into the profession in the first place. Journalism Idol forced me to look at journalism in the bigger picture.

Although I loved the way this assignment allowed us to choose a journalist we personally admire, I think I would have enjoyed watching the presentations more if there was more diversity. Perhaps giving categories like science, documentaries, etc. for students to choose a journalist from would break things up.

**What did you think of this assignment?**

Overall, I enjoyed it. It was a nice way to mix things up with the other sorts of assignments in a reporting course. All of the presentations were great, and I enjoyed researching my candidate and learning about the others.

**What did you learn?**

I feel I've gained an intimate knowledge of several great journalists -- their history, career path, journalistic style, and so on. It was really interesting learning about the backgrounds of some of the journalists I'd heard of on TV or elsewhere -- especially Peter Mansbridge. I had no idea he was discovered as a baggage handler at an airport.

I also discovered some lesser known journalists (or lesser known to me, at least), like Nelofer Pazira and Natasha Mitchell. It seems most of our candidates were the more well-known journalists, but that's probably entirely due to visibility. Fame is not the only measure of success -- especially in journalism.

From this assignment I can identify some of the qualities that make a great journalist: diligence, integrity, passion, and an immense respect for journalism as a craft. I can really see the value in having these journalists serve as models for our own careers.

**How will you use this knowledge/information in the future?**

I hope to incorporate into my own career the qualities apparent in many of our journalism idol candidates. It's clear that qualities such as being a hard worker and being passionate about the stories you cover are necessary for leading a successful and fulfilling career in journalism.

**What, if anything would you do to change this assignment in the future? Why? (Please include any suggestions for constructive change)**

I really wish I could offer some constructive criticism, but I can't think of anything that could use changing. The whole thing went quite smoothly I think.

**What did you think of this assignment?**

At first, I was scared that this assignment would take up too much time and distract me from our weekly stories, but I ended up enjoying it a lot. It didn't take too much time and it allowed me to learn about a journalist who I'd never heard of before. It also allowed me to work with someone in our class who I've never worked with, which was great because I didn't know that many people in the class. I also liked Journalism Idol because it really gave us a chance to hear what our classmates thought about



journalism and their personal philosophies. It was a great way to get to know the other people in our class, and a great way to learn how other journalists approach the job.

**What did you learn?**

The one thing that I found repeated in every presentation was that journalists are subjective writers. Every single group told the class that their journalist was biased or opinionated in some way, which I found shocking because we've always been told to stay completely objective. I always thought subjectivity was an evil in journalism, any true journalist gives both sides equal weight and opinion is left for columnists. These presentations really showed me the many ways subjectivity can help us do our jobs well and convey messages to readers that help them better understand the world without brainwashing them.

I also learned that it's not impossible to be a great journalist like Peter Mansbridge, or Robert Fisk, or Chuck Klosterman. Journalism Idol really showed us how each great journalist starts pretty much at the same place as we are now; some even start with less education and resources available to them! Journalism Idol really broadened my mind about the different types and styles of journalism that are out there that I can pursue and how to be successful at each. It has made me realize that I really want to become a foreign reporter, especially after seeing Nicholas Kristof as a Journalism Idol. That presentation really inspired me and showed me how writing really can change how people think about the world and what they are aware of.

**How will you use this knowledge/information in the future?**

Everything I've learned from Journalism Idol has further motivated me to be the best journalist I can be, which will help me now and once I graduate. What I have learned about foreign corresponding will also help me out when I eventually start looking for jobs in that area. Watching these journalists be able to do what scares them will help me be less afraid to do what scares me.

**What, if anything would you do to change this assignment in the future? Why? (Please include any suggestions for constructive change)**

I found the essay to be a little bit repetitive of the presentation, personally. I found myself including much of the same material and expressing the same opinions as in my presentation, the only difference was the reflection about the class discussion after the presentation. I think that it might be better to write a shorter essay about the questions raised in class, what new ideas arose from them, how they change or consolidate your opinion of the journalist etc. instead. I also found it very hard to rank the contestants. The first week I didn't know what to expect, so I marked generously, and the last week I had already been so impressed by other journalists that I marked a lot tougher. Maybe I would let people rank the journalists in order of favourite to least favourite after all the presentations are done. Other than that, I found this to be a great assignment and a worthwhile learning experience!

**What did you think of this assignment?**

I really enjoyed the assignment. It was a great change of pace from reporting, but it had enough to do with reporting that I didn't feel as if it was out of place in the course. I had lots of fun working as a team since 2201 is normally all about individual work. Even though it was extra work, I liked how there was a presentation *and* an essay, not just one or the other. I used to love doing presentations in high school, and I've really missed them in university.

I never would have picked a science journalist or a radio journalist if I did this assignment alone. As such, it really opened me up to different forms of journalism and taught me that there is a lot about journalism that is the same regardless of topic or chosen medium.

I don't know about the rest of the class, but I loved the presentations because I felt like they were a fun bonding experience for the class. I learned a lot about my classmates based on their picks and the presentations they put together. It was a really fun, informal way to find out what we, as a collective group of young journalists, think of as good journalism. In that regard, it might be a good glimpse into the future of journalism.

**What did you learn?**

Regarding journalism, I learned that there really are many different ways of being a journalist. Based on the wide variety of picks, I feel like there are far more career options in journalism than I realized. I also picked up a few things about interview techniques and finding different story ideas.

From completing the assignment, I learned that one can be a strong reporter without necessarily being boring. Mitchell, for instance, reports things that are new in science, but she picks the quirkiest stories and looks at them from different angles.

**How will you use this knowledge/information in the future?**

Knowing that there are more career options out there than I thought will probably help me in my job hunt. It's comforting to know I can make my own path in journalism as long as I'm willing to work hard.

Overall, the knowledge I've gained from this assignment makes me want to find different angles for my stories. One of the things each of our idols had in common, I think, is that they all look at things differently and report them from new angles. That is definitely something I'd like to work on.

**What, if anything would you do to change this assignment in the future? Why? (Please include any suggestions for constructive change)**

Honestly, I wouldn't change much about the assignment. I think it works well the way it is. The only thing I might suggest would be to allow the group that is presenting to have a reprieve from reporting for that week. I'm not sure how the groups who presented on weeks when we had stories due felt about the workload, but I would guess they would have liked to have had only the presentation and essay to worry about.