

The Framing of Journalism on Channel One TV: The Inner Conversation of a Journalistic Identity Crisis

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As the journalistic community engages in a conversation about how reporters should represent themselves to the viewers, this framing study examines how journalists are represented on the Channel One news program which is broadcast each school day to a third of the students in the U.S. school system. This program has been shown to have an increased persuasive effect on the student viewers during a period of time when teenagers are building their schematic frameworks about the world around them. This study analyzes the representations of journalists on this program during three election years over a nine year period. This study finds problematic representations of journalists on the Channel One news program and argues that these may be influencing the students' views of the media and could be detriment to the dialogue of democracy.

Currently an inner conversation is taking place in the journalistic community about its identity now and in the future. Media outlets and journalists are torn between attempting to appeal to an audience that increasingly appears to be drawn to entertainment news, while at the same time idealistic reporters are still seeking to carry out the hallmark ideal of journalism which asks them to be watchdogs over the government and engage the citizenry in the dialogue of democracy.

In the midst of this conflicted dialogue taking place in the journalistic community, some network executives are trying to understand how to capture the attention of the next generation of viewers as the bulk of mainstream news followers are aging. One experiment being carried out by NBC involves Channel One TV, a news program where professional journalists construct and broadcast the news on a daily basis to around a third of the students in middle schools and high schools across America.

When NBC agreed to partner with and help provide content for Alloy Media, a marketing firm that acquired Channel One in 2007, Lyne Pitts, the vice president in charge of strategic initiatives for NBC, stated that the partnership could be a way to reach a new audience and turn young people into consumers of news. She also felt that NBC could benefit from Alloy's research on teenagers ([Miller, 2007](#)) and stated that the alliance will give NBC News a chance to explore how a new generation of viewers consumes the news ([Gough, 2007](#)).

The fact that NBC is entering into this partnership in order to understand and attract the younger generation of viewers suggests that Channel One could be a harbinger of the future for the news industry, as news shows change in an attempt to win over a younger generation that grew up in a world where pop culture inundates every aspect of their lives.

The Channel One news program has been controversial since its introduction into the school system in 1989. Some scholars, after conducting studies of Channel One, have critiqued the pop culture features that are intermingled with the hard news stories, the superficiality of the news coverage, and the hip professional journalists (who were framed as celebrities) delivering the news to the teenage audience ([Hoynes 1997](#); [Miller 1997](#); [Buckingham 1997](#), [Bybee, Fogle & Quail, 2004](#)).

This study seeks to build on prior research with the following research questions: Have the representations of journalists changed over the years since the initial studies? Are the concepts of journalism, pop culture and celebrity still intertwined on this news channel, and if so, how are they intertwined?

The questions of this study tie in with the greater question being addressed in the inner conversation taking place in the journalistic community concerning how the ideals of journalistic integrity, civic culture and democracy are affected when celebrity, pop culture and journalism are increasingly intertwined.

The Framing of Journalists in the Media

Scholars have found that framing is an expression and manifestation of power that influences how we comprehend and interpret political issues ([Gamson & Modigliani, 1989](#); [Watkins, 2001](#)). Frames are a central organizing idea that makes sense of relevant events, suggesting what is at issue ([Gamson & Modigliani, 1989](#)). When studying the construction of frames within news texts, frame researchers observe that when journalists frame the news, they select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text. Journalists frame the news in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the issue described ([Entman, 1993](#)). Frame theorists use frames as a method of analysis by identifying a frame and the critiquing the underlying assumptions or ideological predisposition of that frame ([Wolfe, 2007](#)). [Gitlin \(1980\)](#) articulated the definition of media frames when he wrote:

Media frames, largely unspoken and unacknowledged, organize the world both for journalists who report it and, in some important degree, for us who rely on their reports. Media frames are persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse, whether verbal or visual (p. 6-7).

While frame theory studies have examined multiple ways journalists have framed various issues, few studies have examined how journalists frame the practice of journalism to the audience. The few studies that have examined this aspect of framing have led to scholarly expressions of concern about the way journalists are represented in popular culture and the way journalists represent themselves to the viewers as news outlets seek to inculcate stylistic elements from pop culture offerings into their newscasts.

When viewing the situation through the lens of fictional popular culture offerings, [Sturgill, Winney and Libhart \(2008\)](#) observe that journalists were framed in highly negative ways in the *Harry Potter* series. The most notable example is Rita Skeeter, the journalist who asked leading questions, exhibited extreme bias and got her facts wrong. The study also found the government control of journalism frame, the misleading journalism frame, and the unethical means of obtaining information frame in this highly popular series of books. These researchers opine that these representations could cause children to have misunderstandings about the media. In the real world, journalists engaging in the behaviors exhibited in the *Harry Potter* series would not last long in the industry.

In addition to negative fictional pop culture representations, scholars also observe journalists adopting pop culture styles that are antithetical to the typical ethical standards of the journalistic craft. [Bennett \(2005\)](#) finds that journalists are covering elections as pseudoevents that are fashioned after reality TV shows, which he terms “reality news” (p. 364). Bennett defines reality news as stories that involve “rumors or challenges thrown at political contestants to see who can survive the hostile media game, and who, in the case of elections, will be voted off the program” (p. 364). In a similar observation about journalists adopting pop culture practices, [Nitz, Reichert, Aune and Velde \(2007\)](#) observe that journalists (especially female reporters) are representing themselves increasingly in more sexualized ways in an effort to gain audience share.

The Case of Channel One

In the midst of the discussion about how journalism is represented to the viewers, Channel One stands out as one of the most controversial news programs. It has been controversial because of the inclusion of commercials in the public school offering and its increased persuasive media effect on the students ([Bachen 1998](#); [Greenberg & Brand 1993](#); [Tozzo-Lyles & Walsh-Childers 1995](#); [Shaker 2000](#)).

The students in Channel One schools watch these broadcasts each school day over the course of the six years spent in junior high or high school. In spite of this extended consumption of Channel One and the controversies surrounding this program, it has been difficult for researchers to analyze the content of the Channel One news show because of limited access to the broadcast. The news program is beamed each school day by satellite to schools across America and then viewed on closed circuit television sets in the classrooms, thus making it difficult for researchers to view the program for analysis. However, there have been a few studies that have arisen from researchers obtaining some copies of the broadcast for review or from sitting in the classrooms and viewing the program for a limited amount of time.

After analyzing the Channel One news show in 1996, [Miller \(1997\)](#) found that the Channel One journalists represented themselves as adventurers. He also critiqued the superficiality of the news presentation and the morality tales that masqueraded as news stories. He opined that Channel One teaches students not to think, as he further observed: “Although portrayed as god-like, the big celebrities who do the ads on Channel One are likewise hailed for having heads of new-perfect emptiness” (p. 22). [Hoynes \(1998\)](#) observed that the news “often seems like an appendage to this MTV-like display of youth culture” (p. 2). When analyzing the Channel One news show, [Bybee, Fogle and Quail \(2004\)](#) found that Channel One represented celebrity as the pinnacle of achievement and fostered a sense of “belongingness” in the viewers, with the Channel One community being the ultimate in-group.

In contrast, while these investigations into the editorial content of Channel One have produced results that were interpreted negatively in research reports, other researchers have found that opinions varied among students when they were surveyed about Channel One. When [Buckingham \(1997\)](#) conducted focus groups about Channel One with students, he received mixed reactions. When [Angulo and Green \(2007\)](#) surveyed college students (who were majoring in elementary education) about Channel One, a majority of the students indicated that they had paid attention to the broadcasts when they were in junior high and high school. The future teachers also believed that the information they received from Channel One was valuable, found the program interesting and felt that schools should continue to show Channel One news program to the students. These researchers concluded that since over three-fourths of the college elementary education students surveyed planned to use the Channel One news program in their classrooms during their careers, this served as a strong indicator that the news show will remain in the schools for the foreseeable future.

Methodology

Prior studies of the content of Channel One were only able to analyze a few broadcasts occurring in certain snapshots of time. These studies included analyses of 36 newscasts ([Hoynes, 1997](#); [Miller, 1997](#)), five hours of newscasts ([Buckingham, 1997](#)), or one week of newscasts

([Bybee, Fogle & Quail, 2004](#)). In contrast, this study analyzes representations occurring in 518 newscasts that were broadcast during three different election years over a nine-year time period. This sizeable dataset allows an analysis of the representations of journalism over a period of time. Overall 3,101 pages of Channel One broadcast scripts were read and analyzed. Stories were counted and segmented, resulting in the categorization of 2287 stories into thematic categories and frames by the researcher and a graduate student.

This study used the media package approach to frame analysis. This approach asks the researcher to develop a paragraph that presents the keywords and common language that would help identify a particular frame. The frames were identified inductively through a reading of the texts. This frame analysis also included an examination of the ideological undercurrents and symbolic contests of political explanation and storytelling.

Frames that had been found in prior studies were identified and located in the text (such as the journalist as adventurer frame, the journalist as celebrity frame and the journalist as friend frame). Then, other frames were identified which had not been highlighted in prior studies, such as the celebrity as journalist frame and the journalist as consumer surveyor/marketer frame. These categories emerged inductively through a reading of the texts.

Results

There were varied representations of journalists on Channel One TV. The journalists on Channel One TV were represented as friends and as political teachers as they shared vignettes from the journalistic culture or the political system with the students. The journalists interspersed casual language in with their news stories, such as when they told the students that they were “hanging out” with the people they were interviewing, or when they greeted the viewers with the words “Hey, what’s up?” at the beginning of the news program. However, when analyzing the representations that could be the most problematic for the students, the following frames were identified: the celebrity as journalist frame, the journalist as celebrity frame, the journalist as adventurer frame, and the journalist as consumer surveyor/marketer frame.

Frame #1: The Celebrity as Journalist Frame

Prior studies have shown that Channel One reporters were framed as celebrities, and this study observed this type of representation also and found that this frame occurred over the three-year period. However, prior researchers were not able to see the flip side of the “reporter as celebrity” frame, which is the “celebrity as reporter” frame. Much like the actress who played the fictionalized reporter in the *Harry Potter* series, actors and actresses playing fictional characters in movies and TV sitcoms would step into the reporter or anchor seat of the Channel One news show and start reading the news stories to the students. The dualism involving the role of reporter being played by the celebrity was articulated by a Channel One reporter when she introduced an actor as a guest anchor on the show in 2004:

Sofia (Channel One reporter): It’s Tuesday, October 12th. Joining me today is singer and actor [Oliver James](#). He’s starring in the new movie “Raise Your Voice” with Hillary Duff, but today he’s playing the role of my co-anchor. And I’m so glad you’re here today (10/12/04).

In this introduction, there was a rhetorical linking between the actor playing a role in a movie and playing the role of co-anchor on a news show. This practice of the actor/anchor role dualism has evolved and grown over the years on the news show. During the 2000 time period nine celebrities helped with the news show. This number increased to 15 in 2004 and 21 in 2008. In addition to the numerical differences, there have also been differences in the composition of the celebrities on the show over the years. In 2000, three actors, four bands, one athlete and one congresswoman helped with the news show. In 2004, the news show placed 11 sports stars and four actors in the anchor's chair. In 2008, 11 actors, one band and one athlete helped with the show. In addition, the rap group [Flocabulary](#) appeared 13 times to give a summary of the news in rap in 2009. These numbers exclude those celebrities who appeared briefly on the show between news segments to give "shout outs" to the students on the news program.

The role the celebrities played on the news show also evolved over the years. During the 2000 and 2004 time periods, the celebrities were positioned as guest anchors as they were introduced in that role and then played it out as they read the teleprompter and delivered the news throughout the entire news program. In contrast, during the 2008 time period the celebrities were more likely to introduce themselves at the very beginning of the program and announce the arrival of the Channel One news program as part of kicking off the show. Then, later in the program, they would talk about the movie they were publicizing and then read off the pop quiz question with the multiple choice answers provided. The pop quiz questions tied in thematically with something that occurred in the movie they were publicizing.

In this scenario, they were not positioned as guest anchors, which validated them in a high-ranking role in the journalistic culture, but instead were repositioned as celebrities who were telling the students to pay attention to the news show, which was starting "right now!" Then, later in the show, they were able to open an envelope and read the pop quiz information to the students. This scenario is similar to the Oscars, where the celebrities read aloud the choices available and then, with the help of the information in an envelope, announce the winner. Once again, there is the intermixing of the role of the celebrity in the midst of the glittering night of celebration, information, entertainment and high fashion that construct the Hollywood award ceremonies and the role the celebrities play when taking part in the news show for teenagers.

When viewing the celebrity appearances during the first half of the 2008 school year, it appeared that the news show had decided to lessen the role of celebrities as news reporters, consigning them instead to the role as announcers of the upcoming Channel One show and pop quiz segment helpers. At least, this was the case until the news program inaugurated the segment in February 2009 called "The Week in Rap" where a rap group would recap the headlines of the week in a rap song for the teenage viewers, which reignited the role of celebrities as tellers of news stories and political events. The week in rap continued until the end of the school year as a consistent segment of the show called "The Week in Rap."

There are several problems with this representation and role reversal. The first problem arises with the varying levels of skill that movie, sitcom and sport celebrities possess when it comes to reading aloud news stories. Second, this representation gives the students the sense that journalism is something that can be accomplished by anyone sitting in the anchor's chair and

reading aloud the words on the teleprompter, when journalism involves a wide array of skill sets, values and ethical standards.

An even greater problem occurs when the celebrities, while acting in the role of journalists, promote their pop culture offerings, such as CDs, movies, sitcoms, or sporting events. This forms an associative link in the students' minds between journalists and salesmen or self-promoters, when the ideal of journalism has always been the journalist who seeks the public interest first and is not involved in anything that could cause a conflict of interest.

Frame #2: Journalists as Celebrities

While playing with the reality construction involved in having celebrities act as reporters, either by sitting in the anchor chair and reporting the news, or giving "shout outs" to the students, or providing the pop quiz questions and information for the students, the news program has also played with the reality construction involved in framing the reporters as celebrities, as they interviewed and mingled with celebrities and political figures. This representation is presented on the news program in several different ways, some emerging from the reporters, and other manifestations coming from the students as they respond to the representations of the reporters as celebrities being directed at them. One of the ways students express their fan status is by sending in T-shirts from their school to the Channel One reporters. These were worn and acknowledged by the anchors on the news show:

Andrew (Channel One reporter): Before we leave, I want to say thanks to Tim Britt from Uxbridge High School in Uxbridge, Massachusetts. He sent in the T-shirt I'm wearing and is a huge fan of the show. Thanks, Tim (1/25/01).

This practice led to an episode that once again blurred the lines between the perceived roles of newsmakers and celebrities as two anchors started a show in 2004 with a visit to the wardrobe room on the set of the news show. First the anchors introduced themselves and then involved the viewers in a moment of behind-the-scenes wardrobe selection and friendly teasing:

Joshua (Channel One reporter): Right now, we're searching through the Channel One wardrobe for a school shirt for me to wear today. What about this one?

Errol (Channel One reporter): Very nice. Of course, they're all very nice. I actually, though, think this one is just a bit more your style.

Joshua: Okay, Errol, this one it is. It's from Rossford Junior High School in Rossford, Ohio. Thanks, guys.

Errol: And, of course, anything is better than what you're wearing now.

Joshua: If you remember correctly, I borrowed this from you.

Errol: Ouch. Okay. It's April 27th.

Joshua: And this is Channel One news (4/27/04).

It would be rare for viewers of traditional TV news shows to think about news reporters having a wardrobe room, while these rooms have been regularly shown in pop culture representations of movie and stage sets. The clothes in the wardrobe room have represented part of the actor's transformation from the real world into the world of fiction. When the Channel One reporters take the viewers into the wardrobe room, it opens up the associated

conceptualizations of TV sitcom sets in comparison to the Channel One news set. The section of the conversation in the news wardrobe room about the sharing of shirts between the two male anchors could have come from an episode of *Friends* or a teen sitcom. Through this visit to the wardrobe room, the teen viewer is brought into the world of the Channel One reporters as celebrities and pop culture icons. The ongoing conversation with the camera gives the viewers the sense that they are in the wardrobe room with the reporter-celebrities who live lives similar to sitcom actors.

The adoration directed at journalists is also seen occasionally when the Channel One reporters interview teenagers for a news story. When covering the 2004 convention, the reporter observed this adoration when interviewing a teen delegate to the Republican convention. As Derrick, the Channel One reporter, tried to interview the youngest teen delegate, she got distracted when Peter Jennings walked by. Derrick observed that all of the attention Ashlee was getting didn't keep her "from being a little star struck herself" (9/1/04). Derrick showed a clip of Ashlee walking up to Peter Jennings and acting like a fan of a movie or TV star.

Ashlee: I was wondering if I could take a picture real fast?

Peter Jennings (ABC News): Sure.

Ashlee: Ok, thank you, so much. It's so nice meeting you.

Peter Jennings: Are you enjoying New York?

Ashlee: Yeah, I love New York.

A few minutes later, after Derrick ended his report of the convention, the other anchor commented on the comparative star quality of Derrick as opposed to Peter Jennings:

Seth (Channel One reporter): Derrick, it looks like she was more excited to talk to Peter Jennings than to you.

Derrick (Channel One reporter): Hey, you know, she asked for my autograph, too, just so you know.

Seth: All right, thanks, Derrick (9/1/04).

The Channel One reporters were hip young adults who traveled the world, "hung out" with celebrities and politicians, and noted that they had a front seat in history. They also received gifts from the viewers on a regular basis. Once again, this conflicts with the typical ethical values held by journalists, which dictate that they should be the servants of democracy, not the recipients of free gifts. Also, the journalistic ethos typically teaches that the story should be more important than the journalist. Reporters should simply be the conveyors of truth, not celebrities in their own right, because reporter stardom can detract from the dialogue of democracy.

Frame #3: Journalists as Adventurers/Reality News

In addition to being cast in the role of celebrities, the Channel One reporters were also cast as adventurers involved in the drama of international conflicts as they traveled the world in pursuit of stories. Past researchers have found that the Channel One journalists added an increased sense of drama to their stories as they traveled the world. This study found that this adventurer frame was more evident during the 2000/2004 time periods than the 2008 time period.

In one of the more dramatic tales of reporter adventuring, a Channel One reporter told of being caught in the middle of a gun fight in Israel in 2000. The news broadcast started with the action scene involving Andrew, the Channel One reporter, being caught in the middle of the violence and announcing, "More violence between Israelis and Palestinians" (10/5/00). Then, Andrew tells the students he is ducking behind a palm tree because he just heard gunfire. Then Andrew is hacking, coughing and blowing his nose and saying that he got caught in the middle. Then there's a white flash and Andrew tells the students that the Israelis just retaliated with tear gas. At that point, Andrew identifies himself and says that he'll have that story next and the Channel One news program begins for that day.

While often mainstream reporters feel the need to travel to the scene of a story, there are times when the adventurer-journalist can cause something that approaches an international incident. Such was the case when two reporters (Laura Ling and Euna Lee) were arrested by North Korean authorities when the journalists entered the country illegally. Laura Ling had acted as a producer and reporter for Channel One news during the period of this investigation, and had been part of the adventurer frame as she traveled the world as an undercover journalist.

When the 2008 Channel One journalist was relating the story of Laura Ling's capture, he told the students about Laura's affiliation with Channel One:

Steven (Channel One reporter): Two American journalists are being held in North Korea after trying to report on one of the world's most secretive societies. In this week's One Voice report Jessica Kumari tells us what happened in the country that's been called one of the worst violators of freedom of the press rights in the world (3/23/09).

Jessica (Channel One reporter): Along this border between China and North Korea it's hard to tell where one country begins and the other ends. But it's here where North Korean soldiers arrested two American journalists Laura Ling and Euna Lee. Laura is a former producer for Channel One News.

In the course of the news story, the 2008 Channel One reporter related what the journalists had been trying to cover and observed that there were tense relations between North Korea and the U.S., which made some think that the North Koreans would use the American journalists for political leverage.

Then the Channel One reporter said that Laura had secretly traveled to North Korea when she worked for Channel One, and had not requested permission to go into the country at that time also. Then an archive clip was played of Laura in 2002 telling the students that in one hour she would be in North Korea. After the clip, the 2008 reporter told about the nature of the undercover work Laura had been doing:

Jessica (Channel One reporter): In 2002 Laura secretly filmed this report about North Korea with then Channel One reporter Janet Choi. They traveled as tourists and did not reveal to the government they were journalists.

Jessica: If they had been truthful they never would've been granted permission [from the North Korean government] called the world's worst violator of press freedoms. All TV and radio stations in North Korea are controlled by the state.

In this sense, the journalists who are framed as adventurers also are represented as those who don't follow rules and protocol when a story is important to them and they are being denied entry into a country. While this frame was heavily used during the 2000 and 2004 time periods, it was rarely used during the 2008 school year. Under the new management, the 2008 reporters still traveled in the pursuit of news stories, but they seldom overdramatized their stories, went undercover or placed themselves in dangerous situations.

Frame #4: Journalists as Consumer Surveyors/Marketers

While the news program in 2008 was less likely to have the journalists act in the role of adventurers, there was a role added for consumer surveyors or marketers in the news program when a segment was added called "The Next Big Thing" that showcased a new product, technology or service and asked the students to send in their positive or negative votes about whether this was going to be the next big thing. The news program did differentiate the individuals involved in the Next Big Thing segment from the news reporters by not having the journalists involved in news reporting introduce the products. Instead a production associate handled that segment, but many times the individual handling that segment is not introduced by that title, but just has the time turned over to him by the journalists.

Some of the products shown to the students were electronic mirrors that would be placed in dressing rooms to show shoppers other clothing items in the store that would complement what they were wearing, touch screen computers, bike accessories, different types of bicycles and cars and food items, such as fried Oreos and square watermelons. After introducing the item, the students would be asked to send in their votes, and indicate through texting or calling, about whether this was going to be the "Next Big Thing" or the new trend. Then, the next week the students would be told the percentages of the votes turned in about the consumer item.

The problem with the journalist as consumer surveyor frame is tied in the transparency issue that arises when a marketing firm that specializes in teen products and audiences owns a news program that is shown to teenagers and then asks the teenagers for what is essentially a marketing survey during the news show. This action turns the news show, which is supposed to present the dialogue of democracy, into a surveying department of the marketing firm and turns an individual who is seen as a journalist into a marketing employee.

What Does This Mean for Democracy?

Channel One acts as an influence on a wide segment of the youth population. The Channel One news program has been broadcast to approximately 6 to 12 million junior high and high school students each year for the past 19 years. This means that this program has constructed the vision of what it means to be a journalist for up to a third of the U.S. population who are now ranging in age from 13 to 37 years old.

When scholars critique the journalistic practices that involve incorporating pop culture elements in news programs and representations of journalists as celebrities, the main concern is whether the pop culture and celebrity elements are interfering with the dialogue of democracy.

When observing the changing appearance of female reporters, [Nitz, Reichert, Aune and Velde \(2007\)](#) observe that this could be distracting the viewers from the issues being discussed. When observing the pop culture representations of bad journalism displayed in the Harry Potter books, [Sturgill, Winney and Libhart \(2008\)](#) wonder if these representations could be planting an image of journalism that is negative and not in line with reality, and if these representations could affect children as they view newscasts.

In the case of Channel One, these images could be distracting the students from the issues as they sit in their classrooms and view the news program each school day. These representations could also be forming unrealistic expectations or negative images in the minds of the students about what a journalist is or should be. Also, as differentiated from the Harry Potter series and the news programs featuring pop culture elements, when students in Channel One schools enter their classrooms, they don't have a choice concerning whether the TV set in front of the room is going to broadcast this program (and its journalistic representations) into their lives.

In the ongoing conversation in the journalistic community about where journalism is heading in the future, Channel One presents a picture that may not be in the best interests of the democratic system.

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