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Ideas R Us

Do you have a teaching idea or question you'd like to see in the Newsletter or on the website? Would you like to "poll" MED members on some aspect of teaching? Send your ideas to our Teaching Chair and she'll try to pursue them in future issues. Examples might include: teaching ethics to large classes, using the Socratic method in teaching ethics, tips for grading and assessment in ethics education and more. What's "trending" in your brain? Contact Jan Leach at jleach1@kent.edu or phone 330-672-4289.

MASTHEAD

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The Strange Return of "Crossfire"

by **Ryan J. Thomas**

Newsletter Editor

It was a sign of the times, perhaps, that just weeks prior to the shutdown of the federal government, "Crossfire" returned to CNN. The show – centered around a debate between representatives of the political right and left – went down in flames in 2004 following an [infamous appearance](#) from comedian Jon Stewart, who accused hosts Tucker Carlson and Paul Begala of "partisan hackery." The show was [cancelled shortly afterward](#), with CNN president Jonathan Klein asserting that the network would return to traditional journalistic "roll-up-your-sleeves storytelling." But now, Crossfire is back. Is it good? Or is it still, as Stewart decried, "hurting America"?



Ryan J. Thomas

I must confess that, unlike Stewart, I see little *intrinsically* wrong with the format. Politics, for me, is a space of contestation between opposing ideologies and viewpoints, argued out in the court of public opinion. In "[On the Political](#)," the philosopher Chantal Mouffe argues that democracy needs strong ideologies on opposing political wings, for when a shabby consensus forms in the center ground of politics this allows extremism to breed on its fringes. She has a point.

I am far less concerned with partisanship on shows like Crossfire and its ilk than I am with more fundamental issues of *truth* and *accuracy*. That we live in an age of growing partisanship in media is uncontroversial; our attention should instead focus on the *quality* of the discourse and whether media platforms – whether news or opinion – operate on a bedrock of fact or whether they descend into half-truths, smears, and misrepresentations. It is a question of output, not of format.

So, what does the rebooted Crossfire have to offer? Well, a new panel for a start, consisting of former Obama administration advisors Van Jones and Stephanie Cutter (representing the left) and former Speaker of the House of Representative Newt Gingrich and columnist S. E. Cupp (representing the right). Gingrich is far and away the biggest name in the line-up, and though he perhaps [bears more responsibility](#) than anybody else for the toxicity of contemporary American politics, he remains a compelling presence and a natural television performer. Cupp is also an engaging commentator capable of substantive contributions. Jones and Cutter, sadly,

seem less at ease with the format; Jones seems to talk in a string of platitudes (one wonders if he is like this off-screen?) while Cutter seems permanently "on message" and has a tendency to interrupt her fellow interlocutors. The result is a slight but noticeable imbalance in quality between the opposing political wings of the show



The quality of the debates have also been relatively good, whether it is Republican Senator Rand Paul [debating](#) Democratic Senator Bob Menendez on Syria, or Independent Senator Bernie Sanders [taking on](#) Republican Senator Lindsey Graham on Obamacare. Watching the Sanders-Graham debate, I was struck with the potential of this format for the articulation of strong ideas. I did not expect – or want – Sanders and Graham to reach consensus. I wanted them to argue their case forcefully, cerebrally, and respectfully. And they did (perhaps aiding things has been the removal of the whooping studio audience that made the original show more of a lowest-common-denominator bearpit and less of a forum for civil dialogue).

The weakest part of the rebooted show is a concluding segment called "Ceasefire," where the debaters try to find common ground (perhaps they could also hold hands and begin a rousing chorus of "Kumbaya"?). The segment is a clear reaction to criticism that partisanship is the great devil of the age and instead consensus and that other sickly phrase, "reaching across the aisle," are to be venerated. Despite these best intentions, it comes across as false, forced, and stilted, as though the hosts and guests should be apologetic for holding strong opinions.

Shows like Crossfire have the potential to serve as spaces where the public get a sense of the clashing ideological perspectives of the day, drawing citizens in to an ongoing national dialogue on issues of civic import. The beauty of community is that we are not supposed to force a false consensus and become automatons, but to *communicate*. Crossfire and similar shows (such as PBS' "The McLaughlin Group") are much more watchable, and can potentially serve democracy far more, than a hectoring boor like Fox's Sean Hannity, whose show accomplishes little more than sewing seeds of discontent among a fragile polity.

Partisanship *itself* is perfectly healthy – it is simply one's identification with a particular

ideological perspective, and subsequent alignment with a party that reflects that perspective. It is partisanship when mixed with a toxic brew of misrepresentation, McCarthyite accusations of "un-Americanism," exploitation of people's fears and prejudices, and a concerning lack of media literacy in the polity that should be the subject of concern and critique. Crossfire should be assessed on its merits, and not according to objections with its format – objections that simply do not address the root causes of the failure of contemporary American politics.

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AEJMC Conference Report

by **Kevin Stoker**

Division Head

As the new head of the Media Ethics Division, I want to thank all those who assisted with this past AEJMC conference in Washington, D.C. We had excellent attendance at our research and panel sessions and business meeting. I'm hoping that we can continue to promote media ethics scholarship throughout the year.

For the coming year, I'd like to focus on the following three goals:

1. Increase scholarship in media ethics, particularly in terms of the number of papers submitted to the division's AEJMC paper call.
2. Increase diversity in the division, both in terms of a more inclusive membership and scholarship that deals with diversity issues.
3. Increase the number of young faculty and graduate students joining the division. We appreciate the loyalty and support of our long-standing members, but the division will benefit from an influx of new assistant professors and graduate students.



Kevin Stoker

To accomplish these goals, I'd like to solicit ideas and suggestions from the membership. If you have any ideas, suggestions, or comments, please email me at Kevin.Stoker@ttu.edu.

Report on the conference

The Media Ethics Division sponsored or co-sponsored seven panels at August's AEJMC conference. As program chair, I attended all or part of every panel the division sponsored except one, and I missed that panel because I was serving as a panelist in another session taking place at the same time. Though a biased observer, I was impressed with the quality of all the panels. We had good involvement and attendance from our division members and AEJMC membership.

The one panel I missed was “Race for News: Terrorism, Journalism and the Boston Marathon Bombing,” organized by Jack Breslin from our division and the John Jenks from the Small Programs Interest Group. By all accounts, the panel proved to be one of the conference’s best, featuring panelists from the *Boston Globe*, NPR, The Poynter Institute, and the New York Institute of Technology. Breslin praised all the panelists, especially Kevin Cullen, the *Globe’s* Pulitzer Prize winner, whose account of the bombing and his coverage, captivated attendees at the packed session.

Other sessions included personal reminiscences and recognition of John Merrill’s life and career, analyzing ethical dilemmas from a non-Western perspective, freedom of speech and the press in the Middle East and the world, student journalists gone wild, and teaching ethics. The division also sponsored four well-attended research sessions.

I want to thank Bastiaan Vanacker for his leadership last year and welcome this year’s leadership team. Jenn Burleson Mackay moves up to vice head and program chair and Janet Leach was elected research chair. We also elected Chad Painter as Professional Freedom and Responsibility chair, and Genelle Belmas as Teaching Chair. Ryan J. Thomas and Tom Bivins have agreed to continue as newsletter editor and designer, respectively.

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Planning Changes for AEJMC 2014

by **Jenn Burleson Mackay**

Division Vice Head and Programming Chair

A colossal panic swept across the 2013 AEJMC conference in Washington, D.C. Division group chairs and vice chairs gathered around tables and began tossing around programming ideas. It was a frenzied game of wheeling and dealing. Everyone was united under one cause – surviving AEJMC 2014.

A semi-chaotic, energy-driven new programming process kicked in for AEJMC 2014 before any of us even left Washington, D.C. this past August. As a result, many programming chairs (including myself) were begging you for panel proposals almost as soon as you finished unpacking your bags. This new system has dramatically changed our deadlines and planning procedures.

In the past, division chairs and vice chairs flew to a random destination each winter to negotiate panel sessions for the conference. Each division or interest group received a specific number of poker chips that represented the number of potential panels that the division could use for the conference.

Those chips were literally thrown into a container as members declared their panel sessions. A full chip could be used by a division when the group wanted to sponsor a panel alone. On the other hand, a half-chip could be used when the division chose to co-sponsor a panel with another division or interest group.

AEJMC has abandoned that process. With our new system, we receive what you might think of as hypothetical chips. We still receive the same number of chips that we previously had and we're still using these chips to negotiate panels. The change is that we're no longer meeting during the winter to fine tune our schedules. Instead, we're doing everything via the Internet.

The end result is that the negotiations between divisions and interest groups started during AEJMC 2013 as members began worrying about deadlines. Discussions probably will continue



Jenn Burleson Mackay

for several weeks, but divisions are making many preliminary deals far earlier than they have in the past. That's a little scary if you're sitting in the programming chair's seat. One has to wonder how many early deals may get broken.

It's hard to say what this new system will mean to our division for the upcoming year. It does mean that we may all want to think about panel proposals for the 2015 conference before we even arrive in Montreal.

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Pay to Play: An Ethics Case Study for the Classroom

 by **Genelle Belmas**


Teaching Chair

Usually this column will focus on the teaching of media ethics and law together, as this is a common configuration of the classes, and an area of interest (and a bit of expertise) of mine. But I think you'll find this deviation to be an interesting case study in how media ethics and today's media environment intersect.

We've all heard it: Newspapers are dying. There's so much free news out there that why would anyone ever need to buy a paper? Just a few clicks takes you to more news than you could ever realistically consume. But yet, newspapers survive. How?

I hate to slam the hometown team, but the *Orange County Register* has found a revenue-generating model that raises several ethical issues that would be great fodder for classroom discussion. The *Register* came under new leadership last year, bought by Freedom Communications, and owner Aaron Kushner took over the reins as chief executive officer and publisher. Kushner made it known that he would be focused on long-form investigative journalism and (gasp!) the print edition of the paper. The online content went behind a paywall last April, and apparently the organization is doing fine: in August, Freedom debuted a new print paper for Long Beach: the *Long Beach Register*, which competes with the *Press-Telegram* for readership.

So how is all this funded? I don't know for sure, but I do know that several universities helped: the University of California, Irvine; Chapman University; and California State University, Fullerton, all three large institutions in Orange County. How? The public affairs offices at the three universities forked over more than \$250,000 each for weekly "sponsored" sections of the paper. Each Wednesday, *Register* subscribers get a taste of all the great stuff Cal State Fullerton faculty, staff and students are doing. Chapman and UCI get two other days. The articles are what you would expect from sponsored content: plays from the drama department, new faculty research, how the baseball team is doing, and more. The photo shows a sample of the inserts from past editions.

The masthead makes it clear that all editorial decisions are made by *Register* staff. But this arrangement caused consternation among some of my colleagues on the journalism faculty. How "independent" is the coverage really going to be if CSUF paid for it to be printed? The arrangement raises some of the same issues that advertising revenue always does, but on a larger scale. It'd be one thing to lose a low-level advertiser, or even a mid-range one. But to take a \$275,000 hit (which is the actual price CSUF paid for the insert) would hurt any organization. Is CSUF going to keep paying if it doesn't like the coverage? What if there's a scandal, and some faculty member or administrator is caught with his/her hand in the cookie jar, or worse? Is the "u-rah-rah" insert going to cover it? (Unlikely.) Moreover, if the *Register* does cover the university's dirty laundry in its regular pages, does it run the risk of losing the windfall for coming years, or, worse, looking like a hypocrite?

Other media organizations have weighed in about the sponsorship. My colleague Jeff Brody was interviewed by several news sources about the ethical issues involved (see the story from public radio station *KPCC* and a *Los Angeles Times* story on the arrangement). As he told me,

"Such a pay-for-play arrangement is a violation of the codes of ethics of the Society of Professional Journalists and the Public Relations Society of America. The Register has crossed the line and torn down the wall between advertising and editorial. And I don't think this bodes well for the university or the newspaper. The university should uphold the highest ethical standards as an example for students."

I think he's right. But others have pointed out, perhaps also correctly, that ours is a new media environment. With the amount of "news" out there, how can organizations get the good work they do covered? And is this really any different than other arrangements already out there,

like sponsored ads or posts on Yahoo or Google, or even other sponsored sections in the legacy media? As long as everything is transparent, where's the harm? Is there even harm? How much sponsorship do we take for granted, even expect, when we don't know for sure?

I don't have a good answer. But I do think these are important questions to ask, not only of journalism faculty teaching the next generation of reporters, but also of the journalists-to-be taking those courses. These are the sorts of issues that, along with more traditional issues of fairness, balance and justice, need to be addressed in media ethics classes. As advertising dollars become even more elusive for mainstream media, particularly newspapers, I bet we'll see far more of these kinds of arrangements. We should, at minimum, be ready to consider what's at stake, what news organizations are giving up in exchange for advertising revenue.

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