

Name: Dr. Kay L. Colley

Job Title: Associate Professor and Department Chair

Department: Mass Communication

School: Texas Wesleyan University

Mailing Address: 1201 Wesleyan Street

Phone Numbers: 817-531-6525 or 817-584-4691 (Cell)

Email Address: kcolley@txwes.edu

Title: Crisis! Zombie Apocalypse Descends on Campus:

Subtitle: Live News Coverage and Crisis Communications Management Practice for Mass Communication Students during a Simulated Crisis

Summary

Mass Communication students who plan to become journalists can learn about how to cover news events that happen on the spur of the moment, with no preparation, but they cannot practice this skill on a consistent basis, nor can they practice being editors who are tasked with editing copy, designing websites, informing readers and insuring that coverage is fair, accurate and complete during a breaking news story. Instead, they may get their first practice in this skill while on the job. Similarly, mass communication students who plan to practice public relations can learn about how to handle a crisis situation, but they are not able to practice this in a live, developing crisis situation. This live event allowed students the opportunity to practice all of these skills in a minute-by-minute, developing crisis when the campus experienced a Zombie Apocalypse. Courses that participated were MCO 2345 Integrated Media Reporting, MCO 3320 Digital Design and Editing and MCO 4346 Public Relations Campaigns and Programs.

Intended Student Learning Outcomes:

Journalism Students

- Practice the newsgathering process in real-time using social media and online modes of disseminating news
- Practice the editing process in real-time
- Create appropriate convergent journalism pieces to effectively tell a story in real-time
- Create accurate and informative stories to assist individuals on how to handle a crisis
- Practice working with public relations teams to gather information during a crisis
- Practice the behavior needed to gather information during a press conference
- Apply rules of ethical communication in a real-time, crisis situation
- Apply critical questioning to ascertain when information is fact and when it is rumor
- Work with a team to plan, direct and edit news in appropriate formats during a real-time crisis

Public Relations Students

- Create a timely, accurate and appropriate public relations crisis response to a real-time crisis
- Work with media during a crisis situation to inform the public of the situation and protect brand image
- Create any public relations-related collateral material in a timely manner for a real-time public relations crisis
- Work with a team to plan, direct and respond to a crisis situation as it develops
- Learn to adapt a crisis plan to real-life events as they happen
- Practice working with public relations teams to gather information during a crisis
- Practice how to remain calm and composed during a press conference
- Apply rules of ethical communication in a real-time, crisis situation
- Apply critical questioning to ascertain when information is fact and when it is rumor and when to release information

The content expected from the exercise was:

- A website that contained news stories and multimedia components—news coverage
- A website from the perspective of the institution—crisis communication

- Social media coverage of breaking news—accumulated and posted to website
- Overall video of the event, including pre-event coverage, event coverage of the coverage and post-event reviews
- A podcast from participants (actors)
- Podcasts from student participants (MCO—posted to TX Wes website)
- A podcast from judges—posted to social media and website
- A podcast from faculty members—posted to social media and website

Podcasts were used to assess the efficacy of the event during the debriefing session to determine the exercise's ability to provide the learning outcomes desired.

Students were assigned roles prior to the event based on the class the student was enrolled in. Students who were enrolled in more than one class participating in the event chose the class they wanted use as their role for the event. Students were evaluated based on their participation during the event and the feedback provided by the panel of professionals.

The date of the event was determined at the beginning of the semester, and all students were excused from their classes from 8 a.m. until 1 p.m. In addition to students from the three Mass Communication classes, Theatre students were scheduled to be the zombies and Criminal Justice students were the Zombie Task Force that stopped the invasion. Throughout the event, students were able to observe what was occurring, but a string of rumors and facts were disseminated to the crisis communication team throughout the morning to see how students would react to the information.

Because the date of the event was planned at the beginning of the semester, curricular needs were laid out at the beginning of the semester as well. A list of class visitors, professionals in the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex, and pre-event practice sessions allowed students to become more familiar with the skills needed prior to the event. While many of these skills were previously part of the curriculum for each class, the deadline of the crisis event kept classes more focused on how to integrate what they had learned into a set of usable skills.

Following the event, a post-event individual podcast from each student in Mass Communication who participated in the event answered the following questions:

- What was your role in the event?
- What did you learn from the live event?
- What did you wish you had known before the live event that you didn't know?
- What would you do differently now?
- What are ways to improve this event to make it a better learning experience?

Student Reaction:

Podcasts from the students found the event to be fun and challenging. Some students were still exasperated by the crisis situation a month after the event. Students felt a lack of control during the event, especially public relations students, and several walked away from their roles during the event.

The Take Away:

Offering smaller versions of this event prior to its planning would assist in preparing public relations students. Journalism students did have some of these small, incremental "tests," and their response to the challenges of the live event were more focused and more like first year professionals. Their podcasts were also more positive about the live event itself. Public relations students exhibited a

greater anxiety about their roles prior to and during the event, and their feedback was much more negative.

Website links:

Journalism students: Faux Rambler: <https://fauxrambler.wordpress.com/2016/03/30/texas-wesleyan-university-faces-zombie-attack/>

Press conference by PR students: <https://fauxrambler.wordpress.com/2016/03/30/wesleyan-speaks-about-zombie-attack/>

Public relations students: <https://crisiscommunicationmco4346.wordpress.com/>