

Television, journalism mature in wake of JFK assassination



Event changed TV coverage

Tripp J Crouse
tcrouse@qctimes.com

The relatively new medium of television captured the early moments of John F. Kennedy's presidential candidacy, the election and his subsequent shortened term making him America's first television president.

About 50 years later, television has grown into one of the standard forms to broadcast news, but in general, journalism as a whole

was changed forever on the fateful day an assassin's bullet killed the 35th president.

The fourth estate continued to evolve over the years into a bevy of radio, television, print and online offerings.

Frank Durham, 52, is an associate professor at the University of Iowa and teaches a survey course on American journalism history.

"It's interesting that 50 years can seem so immediate and yet so far away. I don't feel that old,"



Durham

Durham said, laughing.

Durham wasn't old enough to witness or remember the coverage of Kennedy's death, but the assassination had a lasting impact on his family, who shared their experiences with him as he grew older.

"When I was 6 years old my grandparents took me to Dallas and we visited Dealey Plaza. I was 6 in 1967 and so this was four years after the assassination," Durham said. "I have a certain personal connection to this 50-year anniversary because

— MEDIA | A3

MEDIA

From A1

I was a child, but my parents and grandparents were certainly very aware of the importance of that event. We did go to Dealey Plaza. We went to the book depository. We looked at the grassy knoll."

"While we were there we were not going to miss a chance to go see the scene of this tragedy."

That tragedy would change the face of television, still considered to be in its infancy, forever.

"Prior to 1963, the nightly news was restricted to 15 minutes and with commercials that might have been 10 or 11 minutes of broadcast time. It was only in 1963 that the networks had begun to go to a 30-minute newscast,"

Durham said.

"There were only three networks, and their approach to covering events like a presidential visit to a city somewhere in America like the Dallas visit was not nearly as comprehensive as it would be today."

Private citizen Abraham Zapruder had a home-movie camera and shot a silent, color motion picture sequence, often referred to as the Zapruder film. It remains the only recorded evidence of Kennedy's assassination and the events that followed.

"The fact that we have to rely on the Zapruder film instead of network film, they just didn't have cameramen covering every inch of what was going on," Durham said. "Things were just less developed and less sophisticated. It was a

simpler sort of approach."

Durham contrasts that simple approach with coverage of similar events today in which networks, newspapers and online news aggregates distribute reportage using Internet, video and digital media.

Don Wooten, 84, founder of public radio station WVik 90.3 FM, remembers that fall day in 1963.

"I went down to WHBF to report for work," Wooten said. "I went into the lobby and there were all kinds of people standing around and they were watching a monitor. That was when I found out that the president had been shot."

Three separate networks were responsible for broadcasting television at that time, and once news of the assassination broke,

the television stations switched over to network newscasts.

"That kind of wiped out all of our local programming. I was pretty much just a witness to what was happening via television as was everyone else," Wooten said. "It was three or four days that we didn't do anything but stick to the TV set. We actually watched and saw his assassin be killed."

"It was a terrible thing to live through."

After the assassination, local network affiliates began covering the various events that were predictable, such as Lee Harvey Oswald's transfer to city jail in which he was shot in the chest by Jack Ruby.

"They knew Oswald was going to be moved as opposed to the president's motorcade, which was not

doing anything that was particularly newsworthy. It was just driving through town," Durham said.

Networks began to focus more on live events, and with the increasing, widespread use of Internet, cellphones, digital images and video, media coverage grew at an exponential rate.

At "the Boston marathon, everyone in the crowd had a cellphone with a camera," Durham said. "In the Virginia Tech crisis several years ago, the first video we got out of it was shot on a phone. The media world is entirely different right now."

"The widespread use of new technologies at a consumer level certainly gives us access to immediacy," he said. "You can shoot the video and then post it on these various web platforms, then you're

certainly getting it out. But it's not clear that you're making the professional judgments about what you've seen that a journalist would be trained to make or participating in the system of journalism with editing, with news values, with professional practices such as distributing through a wire service to other designated, credible journalistic sites."

"I think that new media has presented a lot of challenges to the definition of professional journalism," Durham said. "Professional journalism has a lot to offer in terms of helping us figure out and verify what happened to do it with transparency."

"It's not all good and it's not all bad, but on the whole I'd rather that everybody had a cellphone."