

# **Power Producing**

A Producer's Diary On Producing And What It Will  
Take To Succeed In Today's Media Industry



***Immigration and the Mainstream Media* Capstone Project**

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I set out to complete my honors capstone in the hopes of further preparing myself to enter the field of television news producing. As an undergraduate in American University's School of Communication, I have developed a desire and passion to become a TV news producer. Under the direction of Professor Wendell Cochran and other editors and producers at the Investigative Reporting Workshop, I gained firsthand experience in the production process by contributing to a forthcoming PBS *Frontline* documentary on immigration detention. I assisted the editors and producers who were working on this project by looking into state and federal immigration policies; investigating lobbying efforts at both the state and national level; and analyzing the key political players behind the immigration debate in America, particularly those politicians who were involved in matters or policies concerning the topic of immigration detention.

As part of my honors capstone, I also produced a short documentary regarding the media's portrayal of immigrants in America. The process of producing my own short doc introduced me to many of the obstacles producers face along the way as they work from the drawing board to the finish line. This experience allowed me to better understand the skills and qualities that are necessary to be a successful producer in today's media industry.

In the paper that follows, I will describe the life cycle of the production process that I experienced while producing my documentary, *Immigration and the Mainstream Media*. I will convey in this journal not only what I learned about producing, but also a step-by-step account of what it was like to produce this documentary and the obstacles that I faced and overcame. This project was my first solo production. Therefore, it gave me firsthand experience in producing and allowed me to further explore this craft and career more thoroughly. In completing this honors capstone, I accomplished my goal of learning a skill set and reaching a better understanding of working in the field of broadcast journalism and producing in general.

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### **The Drawing Board**

The first stage in any production is finding and articulating the idea, issue, or problem that you plan to convey to viewers. My original idea for my capstone was to shoot a short documentary on “anchor babies,” a controversial term that is used by some politicians and people in the media to describe children born in the United States to unauthorized immigrants. The term is used to imply that the baby U.S. citizens act as anchors that help parents and other relatives who are in America illegally obtain citizenship and other benefits. I came to this topic while researching immigration detention issues at the Investigative Reporting Workshop and finding that it had received little press in comparison to other immigration-related topics.

While there was some media coverage concerning “anchor babies,” I was intrigued by the fact that many people I talked to did not have a full understanding of the term or the current debate surrounding “anchor babies.” I also found it interesting that there was not an identifiable character behind this story, essentially an “anchor baby” talking on camera and in detail about what it was like to be born in the United States to parents who are here illegally. I was also troubled by the fact that the term was being used by politicians and some in the mainstream media as a scare tactic and a label without a thorough and unbiased explanation. The media has a common tendency of picking buzz words and using them without realizing the consequences. I wanted to further explore this issue and find an “anchor baby” through all the noise so that they could share their story. My plan was to include voices from all sides on this issue in order to produce a documentary that would be both objective and informative. But the main focus of my piece was going to be an “anchor baby” telling their story. Finding an “anchor baby” to share their story was crucial in order to bring something new to the coverage that already existed. I planned to find this person by talking to immigration advocacy groups in the Washington area.

The main debate regarding “anchor babies” is that some politicians and immigration-restrictionist groups are currently calling for the Fourteenth Amendment to be amended. Under the birthright citizenship clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, which was ratified in 1868 in order to ensure citizenship for newly emancipated African Americans, “all persons, born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States.” With this current standard in place, anyone born in the United States is automatically a U.S.-citizen even if their parents are not. Politicians like Representative Ron Paul, Arizona State Senator Russell Pearce, and Senator Lindsay Graham (just to name a few) are calling for an end to the birthright citizenship policy in the hopes of curbing America’s problem with illegal immigration. Part of their argument is that they say illegal immigrants are coming to the U.S. and deliberately giving birth here in order to have an easier time gaining citizenship. Immigration advocates, on the other hand, say that this is far from the truth and that there is no hard evidence to support such claims. Advocates also argue that ending the birthright citizenship clause would not stop America’s illegal immigration problem, it would actually make the matter worse because it would mean that there would be even more undocumented immigrants in the country.

While an August 2010 study from the Pew Hispanic Center did find that about 1 in 15 children born in the U.S. in 2008 had a parent who was an illegal immigrant, this study did not have evidence proving that immigrants deliberately crossed the border illegally to give birth here. Most immigration advocates say that immigrants come here for economic reasons. Furthermore, the report was only able to conclude that 340,000 of the 4.3 million children born in the U.S. in 2008 had *at least one* parent who was an illegal immigrant. In other words, this figure also included children who could have potentially been born to a parent who was in the U.S. legally on a visa or other permit. As a result, some advocates say the Pew figure sheds little

to no light on the birthright citizenship debate. If anything, it shows that immigrants live in “mixed status” families. Clearly, this is a very complicated and complex issue, and therefore, one that I felt was worth exploring.

What was surprisingly missing from the media coverage on this topic were the so-called “anchor babies” themselves. It was also interesting to see how loosely the term “anchor baby” was being used in the media given the fact that immigration advocates and some journalists themselves condemned it. The National Association of Hispanic Journalists (NAHJ), for instance, denounced the term and said that it was racially derogatory. My intent was to explore this topic, find a so-called “anchor baby” to tell their story, and to present the facts and opinions on both sides of this issue so that viewers could get the whole story and then make up their own minds. This was an ambitious goal and vision that over the course of the semester changed due to unforeseen obstacles and the realities of producing. But it was a start, and one that I believe helped make this project both a success and a teaching moment. In the end, it is better to aim high than to aim low—a lesson that I am sure I will learn time and time again in this business.

### **Reading, Reading, and More Reading**

One thing that I learned early on about producing and journalism in general is that it is all about reading. A journalist needs to constantly be on top of current events and also needs to have a firm understanding of events that happened in the past. Journalists do not necessarily need to be a walking almanac, but they do need to know how and where you can find the most reliable information. Therefore, I hit the ground running in terms finding as much information as I could unearth on this topic of “anchor babies.” I looked at reports in all the major newspapers in the U.S., cable and network television broadcasts, and also academic journals and texts. I needed to gain a firm grasp on this topic so that I understood it before it was time to go out in to the field. I

also wanted to make sure that I was not covering a story that had already been comprehensively covered by another media outlet.

In completing my research, I found the “anchor baby” debate to be far more polarizing than I originally thought it would be. The media coverage tended to focus more on the politics of the matter rather than the human aspect of the story, and with politicians on both sides of the issue at two different extremes, there was little room for a middle ground. As a result, it appeared to be more difficult for the immigrant story to make it through all the noise. Unsurprisingly, I also found that both pro and anti immigration groups were skewing data to plead their respective cases. With a topic concerning immigration—a hot button issue right now in both politics and the media—I should have anticipated this before I started my research.

After reading up on this issue and gaining a firm grasp of what both sides of the debate were saying, it was now time to begin looking for people that could talk about the matter. My goal was to find subjects from both sides of the “anchor baby” debate to include in my piece. I reached out to local immigration advocacy groups and told them about my project in the hopes of finding a so-called “anchor baby” to tell their story. I wanted to find someone who had a parent go through an immigration detention process. The reality is that it is extremely difficult and unlikely that a child born here in the U.S. to illegal parents successfully “anchors” the family here and makes it easier for their parents to receive U.S. citizenship themselves, let alone a visa. There are strict limits on such parents getting relief from deportation:

- According to Politifact, a nonpartisan politics fact-checking Web site, only 4,000 unauthorized immigrants can receive such status per year, and the alien has to have already been in America for at least 10 years.
- Citizen children in the U.S. cannot sponsor their parents or other family members for citizenship until they themselves turn 21 years old.

Because of these facts, I realized early on that finding an “anchor baby” who did go through the process of successfully sponsoring their parents for citizenship would be like finding a needle in a haystack. So I reached out to immigration advocacy groups and immigrant services organizations by telling them the project that I was working on and the type of person I was trying to find. I figured this was the best route to take because these organizations deal with the immigrant community on a daily basis and have the most access to potential candidates who could share their story. Most news stories, especially visual stories, are told better through a character—someone who can carry the piece and that viewers and/or readers can relate to. This storytelling technique makes issues more real to people and also easier to understand. People are far more likely to remember someone’s experience or struggle through a personal account versus hard data and talking points regarding an issue, especially when the story is being told visually.

In order to produce an unbiased documentary, I also reached out to both pro-and-anti immigration groups and nonpartisan fact-finding institutes here in DC. Some of the organizations I contacted are as follows: Federation for American Immigration Reform; National Association of Hispanic Journalists; Pew Hispanic Center; Immigration Policy Center; New America Media; Center for Immigration Studies; American Immigration Council; National Council of La Raza.

### **The Brick Wall**

The first unforeseen obstacle that I faced during this project was this process of reaching out to people and trying to find subjects who were willing to talk to me, let alone come on camera. I spent days and even weeks trying to get people to simply answer my emails or calls. While this is somewhat common for journalists, I think I faced an even greater challenge because I am a student. Because I was not coming from a well-established news organization, I needed to make clear to people what my project was about and why I wanted to talk to them. But due to the student-factor, I do think that I was last on people’s priority lists and even ignored at times.

Nevertheless, like any good reporter, I continued to send e-mails, make calls, and send follow up e-mails. At times, journalists do have to be annoying to get people to talk to them. I took to Twitter and Facebook to reach out to people. I also used my connections to gain access to people. The National Association of Hispanic Journalists, for instance, was not returning any of my e-mails or phone calls for some reason. So I turned to a professor who I knew was a member in the organization for help. She was finally able to put me in touch with the president of the association. Although I did anticipate having some trouble getting people to talk to me, I did not imagine that it was going to be as complicated and time consuming as it ultimately was.

Another unanticipated difficulty that I faced throughout the course of this project was finding an “anchor baby.” The advocacy groups and immigrant services organizations that I reached out to were not as enthused about my project as I was hoping. I think some thought that I was coming at this issue from a more political standpoint. I also was the least of their worries. Many groups told me off the bat that they were extremely busy and that they would try and tell their clients about my project, but that due to confidentiality purposes, they could not give me names or contact information. Therefore, I could not seek out these people myself and I had to rely on others to basically pitch to “anchor babies” why they should share their story with me.

As time continued to progress and my project was not moving in the direction that I originally envisioned, I began realizing that I needed to start considering what I could produce given the people who were willing to talk to me on camera, my resources, and the time that was left in the semester. There were logistical factors that simply could not be worked out given the time and budget I was working with. While Washington is typically a great place to find people to interview, for example, I think I would have had an easier time if I was in a place like Arizona or Texas where the issue of immigration and this “anchor baby” debate is more prominently



playing out. A producer that I spoke with during this process told me that one of the most important things about producing is to keep things moving; a project is never going to turn out exactly like one originally envisioned it. But my job as a producer is to stay calm, organized, and to make do with what I can accomplish. The only thing that does not change is the deadline, so it is all about producing the best project possible given the time that is left and the resources that are available. Every story has obstacles, and it is about overcoming these hurdles and finding the best story possible given the facts.

### **Back to the Drawing Board**

I was at least halfway through my project and the semester when I realized I did not have the visuals or the candidates necessary to tell the story I initially envisioned. But the job of producing is all about troubleshooting and knowing what you do have in order to present a compelling story. No matter what, the facts of the story can and will lead you in a direction. Over the course of my research, I was not thrilled with how the media—particularly cable broadcast channels—covered the “anchor baby” debate and immigrants in general. For this reason, I decided to shift gears and focus my documentary on the mainstream media’s portrayal of immigrants in the U.S. I not only could get the interviews I needed, I also had access to the visuals I needed to make a more compelling story. I had to be realistic with the time frame of the semester, my budget, and the resources at my disposal. I was satisfied with this new direction because this is a compelling story that I believe highlights a serious issue. The mainstream media has an unbelievable amount of power in regards to shaping the public’s opinion. Journalists also help direct the dialogue in this country. So if the mainstream media’s portrayal of immigrants is negative or poor, how is this affecting the immigrant community and the public’s attitude? At best the mainstream media is covering the immigrant’s story at all. Thus, I talked to working

journalists and immigration policy analysts to gain a better understanding of how the media is covering this story and the impact the coverage has on immigrants and the U.S. public in general.

### **Field Producing and Editorial Decisions**

Now with a feasible project in mind, it was finally time to go in the field and to conduct the on-camera interviews that I needed to complete my piece. I decided to include three voices in my documentary—a former race and ethnicity reporter; an immigration policy analyst; and a journalist whose area of expertise is in immigration. This was enough people to include given the length of the piece that I was aiming for; 10-12 minutes. I went into shooting with an outline in my head as to the story I wanted to tell and what I wanted the finished product to look like. My job as a producer was to make sure the subjects I interviewed gave the best arguments that they possibly could. Luckily, I found strong candidates who could articulate their thoughts well on camera. This is vital when the story is being told through audio or visuals.

Nevertheless, my project did take on a direction of its own once I was done shooting and in the process of editing. I realized that the strongest way to tell this story, for example, was in a non-narrative fashion. Interjecting my voice in the piece would be distracting and serve no real purpose. I also recognized that I needed to use examples of the media's reporting on immigrants in order to juxtapose what my interview subjects had to say regarding this topic. This made my piece stronger and also added visuals and a number of voices to my piece that I would not have had access to otherwise—Glenn Beck, Bill O'Reilly, and Lou Dobbs to name a few. It takes a little creativity, a vision, and plenty of thinking ahead and planning for a project to all come together. Although the final product may not be what I initially imagined when I began this process nearly four months ago, I do think that everything came to together the way it did in the editing booth because of my original concept, ambitious goal, and thorough job planning.

### **What it Takes to be a Power Producer**

There are several important things that I learned about the craft of producing while I completed my honors capstone. First and foremost, producing is all about organization. Every step of the way needs to be outlined and calculated. And with most projects, there will always be a little reorganization that is in order, so flexibility is also important. There is a lot of planning that goes into any production, no matter how “lowly” of a story or issue the project may be on. Everything from coordinating who to interview, to where to hold the interviews, and allotting enough time to edit is essential in producing a successful story. Editing is one of the more time-consuming parts of any project because you not only need to watch and transcribe the interviews, you also need to find the best sound bites that effectively tell a story and capture an audience.

A successful producer also needs to be a go-getter. Finding a story, picking an original angle, and getting people to talk to you are hard enough tasks for journalists as is. But in order to set a project apart from the rest, a producer needs to be ambitious. One of the more significant goals of this capstone for me was to take a risk. I knew that I was setting out to produce an ambitious project. Even though the documentary is not exactly what I had in mind at the beginning of this process, I am still satisfied that I tried and also with what I did accomplish. Not all stories or projects come to fruition; this is a reality of producing and journalism in general. With that being said, there are plenty of stories out there that are worth telling. A producer I spoke with said that at the end of the day, it is all about doing the best that you can and then moving on. Producing takes knowing when and where to start and also when and how to finish. In the end, it is better to take risks and to aim high because you will never know what the final product will look like into you actually do it. Above all else, I realized that producing is about looking at the big picture and deciding what is unique or the most telling aspect of a story, and then finding a way to tell it.

## **Conclusion**

The senior capstone project allowed me to explore my own interests and to engage in creative work that I otherwise would not have been able to. I was able to work closely with editors and producers at the Investigative Reporting Workshop on a forthcoming PBS *Frontline* documentary. This was a rewarding experience because it helped me realize how much research and planning goes into making an idea into a reality. The editors at the Workshop are some of the best faculty that American University has to offer, and the opportunity to work with them was a privilege that truly completed my experience here at AU. I feel like I have come full circle academically and personally over the course of my undergraduate career here. I remember when I came in as a freshman having an idea of what I wanted to study, and now I am graduating knowing exactly who I am and what it is that I want to do with my life after college.

The mission of the honors program and capstone project is guided by AU's Statement of Common Purpose, which advocates a commitment to interdisciplinary inquiry, international understanding, interactive teaching, research and creative endeavors and the practical application of knowledge. In completing my honors capstone, I was able to further explore my area of interest to an extent far greater than I ever would have imagined. I was also able to apply the skills that I have learned over the course of my journalism career at AU. After completing this project, I feel that I am better prepared to enter the job market and to apply what I have been taught over the years. This project opened doors for me in the sense that I was able to work with renowned faculty and also produce my own work to demonstrate the practical skills that I have learned as part of my experience in the journalism program at American University.