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Behind the scenes of a CU production class' final project

Colorado Daily staff
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BOULDER, Colo. -

Six sets of lungs drew in a single collective breath at 2:11 p.m. as the crew prepared for another take.

The students of the University of Colorado's JOUR 3644--TV 1 course had been rehearsing their broadcast for two hours, and they had another two hours to fine tune the show before deadline.

Given the gravity of this broadcast, it's easy to see why time was crucial: This was the broadcast-journalism students' final project of the semester.

"It's the culmination of eight weeks of work," said CJ Grammer, the course instructor. "Ninety-five percent of the kids don't know a thing when they come into the class. Eight weeks later, they're doing this -- they've really risen to the occasion."

Allie Mills, the CU student directing the broadcast, stared at a wall-mounted television displaying 10 screens, each the size of a Palm Pilot, showing different camera angles and computer readouts in the studio.

Mills walked the six assembled crew members in the control room and another half-dozen in the adjoining studio through the process leading to another run-through.

"Do we have speed?" she said, asking a student with headphones the size of hamburgers covering his ears whether a DVD player mounted on a wall of equipment, knobs and wires was recording what appeared on-camera.

"We have speed," said David Starcer, the student manning the player amid a massive wall of electronics, separated from the rest of the control room by a thick glass door, like a futuristic patio.

"Alright," Mills said. "We're ready to roll."

"Fade up," she said, instructing Starcer to slowly transition from an empty black start screen to the program's intro.

"Sound full," she said, ordering the sound engineer two seats to her right working a board of switches the size of a coffee table to adjust the audio level to a point where an audience could hear the broadcast at home.

"Roll intro," she said.

Just as show's title -- "Out of This World With: Justin T." -- flashed onscreen, a screech tore through the ATLAS building. The telltale screams of a fire alarm pierced the walls and echoed in the cavernous subbasement housing the studio.

"You've got to be kidding me!" Mills said, a tear forming in the corner of her right eye.

The students trudged outside, the alarm ringing their ears. They re-entered the building 15 minutes later -- 15 minutes off the clock. Time enough for a whole run-through of the entire broadcast.

"It's Murphy's Law -- something always goes wrong," said Greg O'Brien, technical supervisor and assistant for the class.

Earlier that day, the team could not find slides on the Chyron, a machine that stores computer-generated images for use in the program, such as captions introducing the host and guests. The slides were saved in the wrong file.

As the team members resumed their places at the controls and in the studio, everything appeared to be going right.

"Alright studio, let's rock this," Mills said as a new take began.

"Are you ready to blast off on another trip out of this world?!" said Justin T. (short for Teneyck), of the show's title, as a new on-camera rehearsal began anew.

"Cut," Mills said. "His voice is too hot."

In the studio, crew members worked to adjust Teneyck's microphone so it does not sound like he's talking into a metal trashcan.

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"The mic picks up vibration if it's too close to the throat," Grammer said. "And if it's too far away from the speaker's mouth, you don't hear anything -- you need to find a happy medium."

As the clock ticked, Mills jumped from her chair in the control room.

"I'm going to kick some ass," she said as she darted through the six-foot-tall gunmetal-grey door separating the control room from the studio.

"That's right, take control," Grammer said. "You can't be a director and a nice person; it doesn't work.

"Assert yourself."

On today's episode, CU's NewsTeam Boulder revealed how an infrared camera functions.

"An infrared camera helps us see in the dark," said Scott Kittelman, a researcher from the CU physics department and the program's guest. "With it, we can see light that we can't see with our own eyes."

Phil, a member of the team, sat in front of the regular studio camera. He represented what a normal person would see with regular vision.

"Visible light coming from the studio lights reflect off his face, goes to the camera and we see it," Kittelman said.

Then, the studio lights went down.

"He's disappeared!" Teneyck said as Phil -- and the entire room -- was enveloped in darkness.

Then, the infrared flicked on. Phil sat before the camera, his previously fleshly face a mess of reds, oranges, yellows and greens, like a monster with multihued skin in a B-horror movie.

"Everything with a temperature emits heat and energy, like a light bulb," Kittelman said. "The spots that are red emit more radiation and are hotter, while the blue spots emit less radiation and are cooler."

"Our eyes see the light reflected off of Phil's face, while the infrared camera sees the light projected from Phil's face," he said.

As the broadcast in the studio wore on, the clock on the wall read 4:28 p.m.

This was the final chance for a run-through before the deadline. The news team in the control room watched with anticipation, guiding the technical details and looking for potential mistakes as the broadcast entered its last two minutes.

Still, they found time to crack jokes.

"I see dead people," Mills said upon seeing Phil's creepy infrared appearance.

"I see hot people," O'Brien said after hearing Kittelman's explanation of how temperature and color corresponded on Phil's face.

Grammer sighed and shook her head, a grin across her face.

"Sometimes it's like herding cats in here."

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