

Chatting about the Radio Station

Anthony Ferretti

It's a typical Tuesday morning for Anthony Ferretti as he gets out of bed and heads to the campus radio station for his weekly newscast. Find out how cultural-historical activity theory, years before the pandemic hit, plays a role from start to finish as he prepares to go on-air.

Rise and Shine

RING! RING! RING! RING! It's a brisk Tuesday morning. I wake up to the annoying sound of the alarm on my iPhone. Part of me wants to hit the snooze button, but I know that if I do, I'll be late for my shift at the radio station. That wouldn't be good, especially since this is the career I want to pursue. Not to mention I've got to get from the 8th floor in Watterson to the basement of Fell Hall.

My passion to become a professional broadcaster began when I was younger. I'd watch (and still do watch) Blackhawks games and listen to the sports broadcasters, thinking about how they bring the game to life. However, I officially began my journalism career during senior year of high school when I wrote for the school newspaper. I wrote about what is going on around the school and I also created crossword puzzles that would be featured at the end of issues.

Once I arrive at WZND, Illinois State University's student-run radio station, there are a myriad of things I have to do during my shift. While it

was overwhelming at first, I was able to get the hang of it thanks to ISU's version of **cultural-historical activity theory**, or, **P-CHAT**. The ISU Writing Program uses P-CHAT to help us study and understand complex genres that we experience in our world. Specifically, I will look at production, representation, distribution, socialization, reception, activity, and ecology as they relate to WZND.

Radio Station Genres

A lot of my work at the radio station consists of different **genres**, or, the kinds of texts that have specific conventions we can use to recognize them. The Illinois State University Writing Program explains that identifiable genres can develop in any form of writing; I deal with a number of different genres as a reporter, including soundbites, actualities, wraps, news stories, and newscast. In order for me to successfully complete these genres, a **genre analysis** is necessary. Doing a genre analysis refers to the activities involved in looking very closely at a particular genre and the different features that are present or absent. I will break down each of the genres used at the radio station in the following paragraphs.

One of the most important genres I use is called a **soundbite**. A soundbite is a ten-to-fifteen second piece of audio on a certain topic which typically comes in the form of an interview or press conference. Interviews range from thirty seconds to five minutes. Once I am finished with the interview, I email the audio file to myself and find the best eight to twelve seconds from that interview. From there, soundbites help us create two new genres: actualities and wraps.

An **actuality** is that eight-to-twelve-second audio clip with writing that occurs both before and after the soundbite. Once I find the part from the interview I want to use, I convert the segment into its own file and save the file onto the computer. From there, I write a couple sentences that leads up to the audio file for the one concluding sentence. For example, if the Redbirds won their match 3-1, I would say something about how they had a strong performance on both sides of the ball and transition into a clip from the head coach explaining their emotions about the win. Then, I do a genre analysis to make sure the soundbite fits the time frame, is saved into the proper place, and the writing before and after it makes sense.

A **wrap** is a one-minute piece with two soundbites from the interview along with my words that explain what occurred during the game or what happened during an event. Although it is similar to an actuality, the composition is different. For a wrap, I would start with a brief introduction

for the anchor to read. From there, the wrap starts with some words from me leading up to the first soundbite followed by the soundbite. I complete this process once again before I sign off and the anchor reads a concluding sentence. Part of my **genre analysis** for making a wrap is to ensure that the pieces I recorded and the soundbites used all fit together smoothly so it doesn't sound like I put this together in two minutes. Both actualities and wraps are played on the air the following day during a newscast.

A **newscast**, in our case, is a broadcast of the latest news and sports stories along with the weather. It lasts roughly four minutes and is made up of three news stories, two sports stories, and a brief weather report. The news stories consist of two local stories (ISU, Bloomington/Normal, or Illinois) followed by a national news story. Then, we write a local sports story followed by national sports stories, mainly scores of a game or a short preview of the next game. Finally, the weather report consists of the current temperature and what the forecast will look like in the next few hours.

A final genre we often use at the radio station is a **news story**, which is a recap of the event or game written by the reporter who covered the event. They are relatively short in length and include a title, location of the event, a lead to recap the most important parts of the story, a couple paragraphs, and a quote. I have included an example of an article that I previously wrote for WZND (see Figures 1 and 2 on the next page).

Editor's Note

CHAT-ing About Radio

As I mentioned earlier, the P-CHAT terms are really important because they allow us to focus on the many elements in textual production. There are seven terms we use to help organize the world around us: production, representation, distribution, socialization, reception, activity, and ecology. Each of these terms helps us sense of literate activity, and I will break down each of these terms more as they show up as it relates to the radio station.

How a Newscast is Made

Everything that I am thinking about before I write my newscast up until I perform my newscast all goes into the **production** of my piece. Production deals with the means through which a text is produced. A newscast, much like everything else that's made, relies heavily on production. If I couldn't write anything for my newscast, then there would be no reason for the listeners to

"NORMAL — Redbird Women's Basketball showed heart on Valentine's Day after nearly taking down the Loyola Ramblers 86-85 in a double overtime thriller.

Illinois State came into the contest 1/2 a game behind the Ramblers in the MVC standings and looked to end a 2-game skid. Head Coach Kristen Gillespie said the Ramblers deserved to win given the team's slow start, but the Redbirds came up big in crunch time to earn a much-needed victory:

"I thought (Loyola) played an outstanding 40 minutes," said Coach Gillespie. "We really struggled to guard the ball but we did enough down the stretch just to get stop when we needed and made some big baskets."

The Redbirds trailed the Ramblers 64-58 with 0:41 seconds left, but a quick three-pointer by Lexi Wallen and a basket from Tete Maggett off her own steal cut the deficit to a 1-point game. With more than a second to go, Wallen nailed a game tying 3-pointer, and overtime was needed.

The 5th year senior followed her performance late in the game with another game tying layup late in the 1st overtime. Then with :01 to go in the 2nd overtime and the Redbirds down 1, Wallen sunk both of her free throws to seal the victory for ISU.

Wallen finished with a career high 35 points, 10 of which came in the final 0:36 of the 4th.

The Redbirds return to the court Sunday afternoon when they take on the Valparaiso Crusaders. WZND will have live coverage of the game starting at 1:50."

Figure 1: Example of a news story about a Redbird Women's Basketball game.



Figure 2: Courtside image of the Redbirds warming up at Redbird Arena prior to their game against Loyola.

tune in. Part of the production process comes during our weekly meetings when we schedule who will do which newscast. This is essentially important because then we all know that there will be someone covering the news for that hour so it will be fulfilled. Computers are the main source of production we use to write our newscast. We could use our phones, but given the short amount of time we have to write and the stories we want to write about, a computer is the most effective tool we should utilize.

Establishing Credibility as Reporters

The term **representation** highlights issues related to the way that the people who produce a text conceptualize and plan it. In our case, this pertains to how the stories are written during a newscast and how we read them. When I'm writing a news story, it's really important to consider how I'm writing it. We don't want to sound biased as reporters. Our primary goal is to inform the public on what's happening by reporting solely on the facts. For example, if the basketball team is struggling because they've lost six straight games, we'll mention that. Just because the radio station is affiliated with ISU doesn't mean everything should be positive. Since WZND is located on the campus of Illinois State University, our target audience is anyone living in Bloomington/Normal. There are certain news stories that pertain to ISU students while other stories affect parents with children in elementary school.

In addition, the tone in which I read the news stories during my newscast has to be consistent with the tone of the story. If the story is about somebody who passed away, I should not be reading the story as if I won the lottery. Instead, I should read the story as if I knew the person who died. If the story I'm reading is positive, my tone of voice should mimic that, and the same thing goes for stories that aren't meant to sound happy.

No Radio, No Problem

The **distribution** of the news considers where the newscasts can be heard around campus or around the world. Locally, WZND can be heard at the Bone Student Center and via 103.3 F.M. on the radio. For those that aren't local but still want to hear the newscast such as my family, it can also be streamed on *wznd.com*. So, if you have a smart phone, computer, or anything else with internet access, you can listen to ISU's campus radio station. The fact that WZND can be streamed online is important because we're always thinking of ways to reach a larger demographic. We are also able to distribute our content throughout our social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

Interaction with Our Listeners

Socialization describes the interactions of people and institutions as they produce, distribute and use texts. The production of our newscasts involves communicating with a DJ in the studio when it's time to do the news. We also go around campus and pass out fliers for events or organizations that we are promoting, so we interact with students as we make our way through campus. Festival ISU is a chance for us to socialize with students to try and recruit them to join the radio station. For the freshman who might not be aware, Festival ISU is a HUGE festival on the quad with a ton of clubs and organizations on campus as well as local businesses. Did you know that WZND started Festival ISU?! Sadly, it was held virtually in 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic, but it's a lot of fun if you get the chance to go in person.

Did You Hear?

According to the ISU Writing Program, **reception** deals with how a text is taken up and used by others. Not only does it take into account who will read the text, but also how they might repurpose it. Like I mentioned before, our newscasts are received either on 103.3 FM, wznd.com, or in the Bone Student Center. Our listeners also receive various content on social media such as news/sports stories, specialty shows, and station promotions/events. In terms of trying to repurpose our content, someone can like, comment, or share anything we post. Although we may not see it, there's a chance people discuss what they heard or saw from us with their friends. They could be sitting on the quad and talking about that one story we wrote, whether it be positive or negative. Maybe they are talking with their roommate about a recent music or sports-talk show that caught their eye. Or they heard a story during the newscast relating to lowering tuition costs.

The To-Do List for a Newscast

There's no question that a lot of **activity** is involved when writing a newscast, which refers to the practices an individual goes through while they're creating text. The first activity is scheduling the newscasts at our meetings, which starts way before our assigned shift. The next activity is walking to the radio station to write your newscast, followed by opening the door, walking down the steps, entering the station, sitting down at the desk, opening up a document, typing words into sentences to make a story, you get the idea. Then once I'm finished, reading through the newscast out loud would be the next activity. Those are just a handful of activities involved in producing a newscast. If I wanted to list them all we'd be here all day, but the fact of the matter is **activity** is *exactly* how it sounds.

There's No Place Like Fell Hall

Each time I'm scheduled to do a newscast, I head down to the basement of Fell Hall, which relates to the **ecology** of my newscast. The ecology of a situation relates to the environmental factors that exist when an individual is writing. They're the physical and biological forces that exist beyond the boundaries of any text we are producing. The environment that I am writing in is in a small office at the radio station with three computers and three TV's on silent. Sometimes I'll have to bring a sweatshirt with me because the temperature can get quite cold, especially in the studio. The amount of people at the station during the time of my newscast also relates to the ecology. Sometimes there are dozens of people in the lobby or in their offices, which makes it hard to concentrate given all of the noise. However, that all changes when I enter the studio. It's just the DJ and I sitting across from one another. It's nice once I go on-air because the studio is quiet, and I can take a couple seconds to clear my head before I start to speak.

... And We're Clear

Whew! Much like a newscast, that was a lot of information to go through in a short period of time. Throughout the last few pages, I've discussed the different genres I've encountered at the radio station, the genre analysis involved, and how P-CHAT relates to the preparation of a newscast. When I first began writing this article, I struggled to figure out how the P-CHAT terms relate to my experiences at the radio station. But as I started to unpack what I've learned in my introductory English class, I understood that P-CHAT ironically plays an important role at the radio station where "chatting" is part of the process. Because of cultural-historical activity theory, I have a better understanding about the various elements involved as it relates to the production of something that was right in front of my eyes. They say you learn something new every day. Who would've thought?

Works Cited

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Anthony Ferretti is an aspiring sports play-by-play broadcaster who graduated from Illinois State University in May with a degree in journalism. Anthony has always been a big sports fan ever since he stepped onto the ice as a kid. He grew up listening to broadcasters Mike “Doc” Emrick calling NHL games in hopes of being in their shoes one day.