



DATELINE: THE WEST

Building Credibility

**Using Hypothetical Discussion
to Examine Media Coverage**

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...DATELINE...

The West

Dateline: The West was a conference presented by the Andrus Center for Public Policy, *The Idaho Statesman* and Gannett Co. Pacific Group on December 6, 2002. It brought together decision-makers, the public, and the media for a regional discussion of media credibility and bias. Virtually all participants agreed that the conference helped everyone gain a better understanding of the decisions that affect the public's understanding of the issues and often the resulting public policy that emerges.

The idea wasn't new. Local newspapers from Spokane to Tucson have sponsored and organized Credibility Roundtables under the auspices of the Associated Press Managing Editors' Credibility Roundtables Project, funded by the Ford Foundation. The APME Credibility Roundtables Project was a sponsor of *Dateline: The West*. The roundtables have allowed more than 70 news organizations in 43 states to discuss directly with the readers, viewers, and listeners the issues important to each of their communities.

These roundtables, which use real-world examples, are ideal when one news organization is having a discussion with its own readers, viewers, and listeners. But when several news organizations are involved, the discussions become more complex.

Using a format similar to the one used in *Dateline: The West*, several news organizations and perhaps journalism schools in Western communities can address these issues on a wider basis, one that provides relevance to a wider audience. Also, editors from across the West could benefit by coming together to share their challenges in covering local issues of national importance, such as natural resources. In such a forum, the hypothetical format is especially helpful in demonstrating the various reactions of the many players.

This brochure is designed to help sponsors of similar local hypothetical, Socratic panels get started.

How do we start?

First, choose a subject that is relevant and works. The subject can be an issue that is currently in the news or on



the horizon. In choosing the subject, a group should consider who the players are and who would be on the panel. The issue should be interesting enough to capture the public's attention and have a clash of values and a mix of interests. It has to be something that would be of interest to television, print, and radio journalists. It ought to force a diversity of views on how a story could and should be presented.

Who should be the moderator?

Choosing the panel is the second most important decision sponsors will make. The first is picking a moderator. The moderator must be quick on his or her feet, engaging, well-informed, and considered a fair arbiter. They can't have a dog in the fight. That rules out a local journalist but might allow one from somewhere else. A journalism or political science professor might work or perhaps a public affairs expert or a professional mediator. The moderator will make or break the success of the hypothetical by carrying the discussion where it should go, both logically and creatively.

How do we pick the panel?

These should be people involved in the issue, but also able to step out of their day-to-day reality and carry their values into a hypothetical debate. They need to be the decision-makers of the issue you choose, but also good speakers who are willing to honestly show how they would react to the actions presented by the moderator and other participants. A sense of humor helps. A true mix of the local media, reporters, editors, producers, and anchors allows the moderator to walk the audience through the media's decision-making.

How big a panel?

It should be big enough to capture the wide range of views and the differing ways each medium might cover them. It can

become unwieldy if it is too big, but without enough people, the discussion can drag or end too quickly.

How do we direct the discussion?

The key to a good hypothetical panel is a script and homework. The organizers need to spend several hours—the more the better—preparing a script based on their estimations of how the players might react and where they may take the discussion. The moderator needs a dense script with several alternative paths in order to be well prepared before the panel begins. Organizers should role-play the hypothetical themselves beforehand to ferret out possible traps and to help the moderator in his or her timing of plot changes or introduction of new ideas.



Give us an example.

Here is the lead-in that Marc Johnson, President of the Andrus Center for Public Policy and a former television newsman, used for his hypothetical in *Dateline: The West*:

JOHNSON: "Let me set the stage for our first hypothetical. It's sometime in the not-too-distant future. President George W. Bush, after two terms in the White House, is retired back to Crawford, Texas. The new president was elected largely on a campaign pronouncement that she (*I told you this was hypothetical*) was going to roll back some of the environmental excesses of the Bush Administration.

The electoral votes that elected this new president came not from the Rocky Mountain West but from the left coast—Oregon, Washington, and California —and from New England and places like New York and the rust belt. To carry out this mandate of rolling back the excesses of the previous Administration, this new president has decided, as a symbolic and very substantive first move, to create, under the Antiquities Act without any Congressional approval and certainly without much consultation with

folks in the West, a massive new national monument to commemorate Lewis and Clark. This new monument will stretch all the way from Montana to Oregon and cover the entire route in those states of the Corps of Discovery. Of course, the new Administration has leaked this story to the *New York Times*.”

Johnson then worked the panel of national reporters, editors, and current and former decision-makers through the scenario with each playing either their real role or a possible role. For instance, Patrick Shea, a former Deputy Assistant Secretary at the Department of Interior, played the role of Interior Secretary.

What do we do when it’s done?

This is a good time to get the audience involved. After a short break, the moderator may take and direct questions, not on the issue but on the responses of the decision-makers and the press. This is not about their position on the issues; it’s about the process. Make sure the public understands that. Have the questioners write their questions on cards so the moderator can edit them for the best use.

What about media coverage?

Make sure the media recognize that the positions people take on the hypothetical are designed to illuminate the process, not to forward their positions on the issues. Sometimes when the discussion gets really good, political leaders will drop their guard and show how they might be able to reach solutions or compromises if the process was different. Reporting these frank statements as political positions would stifle such discussions and would probably be considered inaccurate.

How can I learn more?

Read the entire transcript of *Dateline: The West* at www.andruscenter.org.





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The Andrus Center was founded in 1995 by Cecil D. Andrus, four-term Governor of Idaho and Secretary of the Interior in the Carter Administration. It is dedicated to independent, non-partisan research, analysis, discussion, education, and policy formation on critical issues confronting Idaho and the western United States. The Center is non-profit, privately financed, and housed on the campus of Boise State University.