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MMC Interview

Scholar Seminar: Tuesday 1:50 – 2:45

I was very interested in interviewing Jon Johnson, creative director of the Avalanche Audio Video Production Company. He reflects much of what I aspire to be professionally: a young, independent creator who has established himself through his work. Because his work is based in traveling, Jon Johnson does not currently own an office. Instead, he communicates with clientele through email and his personal phone. Johnson’s work atmosphere is ever changing, as his work is on location. I interviewed the young professional in the hotel lobby of where he would be filming promos for a weekend chiropractic convention. Himself and his Director of Photography, Todd Mobley, were an incredibly relaxed pair throughout my interview. They both agreed their style of work calls for a casual, inviting atmosphere.

During my time with Jon Johnson, I learned more about his personal reflection on career choice than anything else. Originally, Johnson studied English at Kent State University, although this did not interest him. He admitted that he would regret not “suffering” through the mundane general education to progress further, though this choice to drop out did not hinder his career. Johnson actually left school to pursue an internship with Cleveland’s House of Blues, which aided his career in audio and video work. Formal education, Johnson believes, is not an integral component in the world of production. Job and internship experience is truly the qualifying element in the media production field. However, production requires many skills and wisdom of the changing competition. Johnson stressed to me the importance of equipment knowledge throughout our interview. Avalanche Audio and Video is essentially a two-man production company, therefore they do not have the manpower or cash supply of bigger organizations. Jon Johnson and Todd Mobley rely on knowing the newest, most efficient recording equipment to rent for jobs rather than buy. Buying, as Johnson had told me, is almost impossible. Recording technology such as cameras and microphones is constantly evolving; one cannot buy the best equipment because the best will be obsolete in a matter of a few years. In a sense, one of the most desired skills in media production is to work smarter, not harder, than your competition. Johnson knows all too well the value of personal touch on his product. He explained to me the importance of truly listening to your client and their desires as it is their brand being advertised – not yours. Word of mouth and good reviews set a creative director apart from other media production companies. While creativity is a necessary skill, it matters less when working for specific companies and organizations. Johnson explained that most companies in the Cleveland, Columbus, and Cincinnati area do not need a fresh, new advertising strategy but rather a vehicle to advertise. Avalanche Audio and Video has done numerous projects where the creative director is nothing more than a figurehead, unfortunately. In lower levels of this career choice, I can see why companies may not give a small production company full creative control. Johnson tells me that there is a huge problem concerning the literal versus creative approach in production. When producing ads, most companies do not see past the very literal in their campaigns. Companies may sometimes find creative advertising concepts hard to understand. Johnson recalled a job in which he explained to his clients a new and exciting way to market their restaurant. He pitched the idea of taping a bird’s eye view of the restaurant’s beautiful scenery. They would take breathtaking shots of the restaurant’s scenery and surrounding area from an aerial drone. The clients’ response? They wanted to know where Johnson would put the restaurant’s title in all of this. Sometimes the literal approach of business executives can be harrowing in the creative process. Johnson stressed that one needs to compromise, learning from those who hire production companies to succeed in this field.

The future of media production is to be very bright. Every day, Johnson’s phone is ringing more and more. This spike in business may be from word of mouth, or because more companies are beginning to realize the importance of branding in a digital age. With the need to brand, production companies must become more competitive to acquire jobs and appease their clients. A creative director must be well versed in all forms of social media/ways to target demographics. There is a lot of flexibility in media production, from what Johnson explained. Audio and video production is very broad and can be as big or little as one makes it. For Johnson, his job differs from project to project. Mostly, he attempts to always keep the client’s core values in line with the media he intends to produce. The old adage that “the customer is always right” is very true in the field of media production. However, the future of media production will most likely show that creative directors should have more control of projects. The field of audio and video production will become broader and all encompassing in the coming years, as Johnson’s range of employers now show. Johnson’s production company caters to a wide range of companies and interests, all very different but all seeking to be branded properly. As for internships from Avalanche Audio and Video, Jon Johnson told me that anyone willing to contact an employer such as himself is welcome to be considered. Media production is sometimes very based on connections rather than qualifications, Johnson mentioned. It is truly about who you know when beginning a career in audio and video production. As expected, Johnson agreed with me when I surmised that experience is also more important than an education in this industry. Employers primarily look for a fresh perspective and ability to operate equipment, rather than a degree.

Personally, the interview was very telling of how media production operates. I appreciated Jon Johnson’s honesty and was also happy to find out about how relaxed the industry can be. Johnson’s workplace did not even feel like work to me, as his profession is always moving, creating, and recording. It was very important to me that his interview exemplified qualities I look for in any kind of project I choose to involve myself with. I learned that I value spontaneity and change in a job, rather than routine. I think that this interview helped guide me in the direction of what area I’d like to focus on in media production. Although a career as creative director would be interesting, I would not like to work on as many ad campaigns and promos as Jon Johnson does. Instead, I think I would be more inclined to work on projects of my own vision and direction. Whatever I choose to establish myself in, I know it will be fulfilling because I will have taken the time to explore different areas of the field and my interest in them. Until then, the interview with Jon Johnson was very informative and helpful to me on my quest to find a career field.

