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## EVALuation: Writing, Performing, and Producing a Comedy Show to Critically Examine Social Issues

Eva Elizabeth Andersen  
*University of Northern Iowa*

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EVALUATION: WRITING, PERFORMING, AND PRODUCING A COMEDY SHOW  
TO CRITICALLY EXAMINE SOCIAL ISSUES

A Thesis or Project

Submitted

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Designation

University Honors

Eva Elizabeth Andersen

University of Northern Iowa

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This Study by: Eva Andersen

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has been approved as meeting the thesis or project requirement for the Designation  
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Bettina Fabos, Honors Thesis Advisor, (Communication Studies)

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Date

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Jessica Moon, Director, University Honors Program

## ***I. Project Explanation***

Upon completion of my experience in the UNI Honors Program, I wanted to create a thesis project that demonstrated my performance skills gained in communication coursework at UNI, as well as my capability as a writer, director, and producer. For me, a creative project was an obvious choice. I wanted nothing more than to have a tangible, professional piece of work to hand to entertainment industry producers and be able to say, "I created this during my undergraduate career at the University of Northern Iowa."

In order to fulfill these goals, I chose to create a show that was intelligent yet entertaining, using comedy and impersonations to critique social issues. I chose the title *EVALuation*, which was a play on my name that also incorporated the last step of the critical process (Description, Analysis, Interpretation, Evaluation). In order to create a professional project with high production value, it was necessary to collaborate. Since I wanted to be the writer, producer, and director, I needed people to film and be in charge of graphics. I chose two capable students, Morgan Johnson and Kelsey Hammer, to fulfill these roles. By using their work as an independent study to receive credit in Electronic Media and Interactive Digital Studies, they were able to benefit from the project, and I was able to explore my role as a director.

## ***II. Steps Taken***

The steps taken to complete the project were split into three categories, characteristic of any television production process: pre-production (planning meetings, selection of issue, script writing), production (the actual filming of the project), and post-production (editing, addition of graphics, application of audio and visual effects).

### *Pre-Production*

In the beginning planning process, I called many production meetings to make decisions about the show's topic, style, objective voice, and target audience. This is where I really exercised my role as a producer. I typed up itineraries for most meetings in order to meet specific goals and stay on task. I sent emails to all of our team members and advisor, checking in to make sure deadlines were met. Morgan, Kelsey, and I met around once per week and as needed. Our production team met about twice per month with our advisor, Bettina Fabos.

First we selected a topic. In order to do so, we brainstormed a number of issues, keeping several things in mind. What topics were relevant to our target audience? What issues could be parodied and satirized? What topics lent themselves to impersonations and humor? Which one would be easy for me to maintain an objective voice as a host? After much deliberation, we chose the issue of tanning beds. The issue of tanning had three components that made it easy to develop into a show: the history of tanning, the cultural issues surrounding tanning beds, and the politics involved with the tan tax.

As a performer, I made several important creative choices during the script writing process and development of impersonations. I chose to do three character impressions, with one to cover each aspect of tanning. They were Sarah Palin, Snow White, and *Jersey Shore's* Nicole "Snooki" Polizzi. These characters were realistic to perform within my vocal and physical capabilities. Also, this selection included characters who were both real and fictitious, as well as characters who were both old and young. This allowed for creative freedom and a variety of voices.

Script writing was a challenge that included plenty of research as well as trial and error. During this process, I would write a script for a given character, perform it for someone, and ask

them to critically review it. I made changes as needed. I viewed several video clips of each character, including existing impersonations and parodies, to hone my vocal skills as well as mannerisms that accurately reflected each character.

Kelsey and I collaborated to choose shot locations to shoot and costumes for each of these characters. I created documents on my computer for each character--Snooki, Palin, and Snow White--that included pictures of what I wanted my outfits to look like. I wanted these characters to be fully-fleshed and well-developed, and their locations needed to make sense.

During preproduction, Kelsey and I selected a musician, Clint Griffin, to compose electronic music to be used as the show's official theme.

### *Production*

Production was the quickest part of the process, yet it was the one in which we encountered the most difficulties. Since all of the costumes, scripts, characters, and locations had been decided upon, it was now a matter of executing our planned shots. For Snow White, we trekked into the woods of the Cedar Falls nature reserve. We shot Sarah Palin in Lang Hall on campus, where there were wood-paneled walls and furniture that reflected that of a governmental office. For Snooki, we went to the Lava Lounge so we could have a realistic bar setting.

The production process helped me realize, once again, the value of collaboration with skilled individuals. While I was getting ready memorizing my lines and finessing my costumes, Kelsey was busy checking audio input and making sure that the camera settings were just ideal. She paid great attention to detail and was wonderful at trouble shooting.

One of the problems that we encountered during the production process was audio difficulty. We chose to shoot interviews with two international students, Yuying and Catherine,

to discuss other cultures' views on tanning. The first time we shot the interviews, it was windy and we did not have ideal microphone settings, so we decided to rebook the interview. We planned for another day when the weather was calmer, in a more isolated location. Though the audio turned out well this time, when we brought the footage into Bettina, she said that the shots were visually poor. We ended up shooting the interviews in a news studio for the third, and last, time. I felt bad to keep rebooking the interviewees, but they were very cooperative. If I went into the production process expecting everything to go seamlessly, I would be in for an unfortunate surprise.

The other major difficulty was the inability to stick to our timeline. During the production process, we realized that our project as a whole was taking a bit more time than anticipated. We had created a timeline, but we found that in order to create a high quality production, it was going to take more time. We consulted Bettina and made the decision to stick with one episode on tanning, rather than trying to scramble and complete two episodes. It ended up being a worthwhile decision.

#### *Post-Production*

The bulk of Morgan's work was in the post-production process. She was in charge of designing the graphics for the show and the official logo, composing the introduction and credits on after effects, and drawing/animating images for a historical component. I met with her frequently to give input and direction.

Since Kelsey had filmed everything, it was my duty to take the footage and edit it as needed. I put together a rough cut of the show, and Kelsey applied chroma key and audio effects.

Editing was by far the most tedious process. It took several weeks and was an ongoing endeavor that overlapped with production (we were still filming the international student interviews while I was editing).

### **III. Description of Final Work**

*EVALuation: on Tanning* in its final form consists of a nine-minute pilot episode, complete with an introduction, music, and credits. The show begins with an introduction that outlines the critical process: Description, Analysis, Interpretation, and Evaluation, featuring stills of each character impersonation and the objective host, Eva. The stiletto heel used in the logo is a visual thread that ties the production together through the use of a bug and lower third graphic.

The body of the work includes the following components, in this order: the host's introduction of the issue of tanning; an animation detailing the historical context of the issue; a discussion with Snow White about the "decline in popularity of pale"; interviews with international students to discuss cultural perspectives on tanning; further commentary on cultural tanning from Snooki; the host's introduction of the tan tax; a discussion with Palin on the issue of the tanning tax; and finally, a conclusion.

### **IV. Originality of Work**

There are distinct aspects of *EVALuation* that make it a unique contribution in the world of media. First of all, *EVALuation* uses original graphics, music, and impersonations to examine an important social issue. Everything from the logo to the animation to the music was made from scratch and in no way replicates any preexisting media.

Secondly, there is no other show in the media that includes a host who interviews him/herself impersonating other characters, all tying in one central theme. The original impersonations coupled with the real interviews create a one-of-a kind show.



I plan on taking this piece of work into the entertainment industry as a personal performance reel and demonstration of my abilities as a producer/director/performer. By showcasing it to others, I aim to make this unique contribution public.

#### **V. Value of Experience**

Because of *EVALuation*, I now feel that I have maximized my experience at UNI. I will leave this school with all of the tools and experience necessary to succeed in the entertainment industry. I will never again have the opportunity to create a professional piece of work with free equipment and a free production staff. Completing my Honors Thesis has made me feel fully prepared to enter the entertainment industry with confidence.