

## **J301F Fundamental Issues in Journalism**

**Fall 2012**

Unique No. 07260

Tues. and Thurs., 8 to 9:15 am

WCH 1.120

Instructor:

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### **The Lede\***

*“News is what somebody somewhere wants to suppress; all the rest is advertising.”*

So said Lord Northcliffe, a British newspaper baron at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It’s a harsh verdict, but a suitable jumping-off point for our course because it gets to the heart of what good journalism is all about. It’s not enough for journalists to report and write accurately the things that people in authority tell them. The truth is often something else entirely. And the truth is what real journalists---with all of their annoying, maddening, ridiculous imperfections, untidy habits and sublime willfulness---are forever pursuing.

But the stuff we call journalism and the people we refer to as journalists very often don’t live up to this high-minded ideal. Like the society they function in, they are deeply flawed, and they struggle and too often fail to meet the demands of the times. And with the rise of the digital media revolution and the collapse of old media business models, journalism itself is under siege. Yet the need has never been greater for reliable, accurate and fair-minded reporting that sorts through the secrets, lies and myths that people in power seek to perpetuate and provides us with

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*\*Merriam-Webster defines the lede as “the introductory section of a news story that is intended to entice the reader to read the full story.”*

accurate information to make decisions about our lives and our democracy.

Welcome to J301F. This course will introduce you to what journalism is and how journalists think. It serves as a gateway and prerequisite for enrolling in the advanced courses offered in the School of Journalism. But the course is not just for people planning to major in journalism. It's for anyone who is curious or concerned about the state of the news media and for anyone who wants to become a more critical and skeptical consumer of news. How do you tell good stories from bad ones? Reliable reports from flimsy ones? How do you tell the difference between genuine journalism and all the other stuff that we are bombarded with every day? And why does it matter?

## **Aims and Objectives**

This course is designed to help you think more critically about the world we live in and become more critical consumers of news media in all of its various forms and platforms.

In practical terms you will learn to:

- Assess the unique mission of the press in a democratic society and place it in its historical and ideological context.
- Identify the obstacles---political, financial and institutional---that impede that mission.
- Distinguish between legitimate news reports and other kinds of information, such as propaganda, opinion and the vast flow of infotainment.
- Gauge the reliability and credibility of news reports.
- Gain insight into how journalists do their job and how news decisions and ethical choices are made.
- Detect deception and manipulation as practiced on the Internet, TV and elsewhere.

In more practical terms, the course will help you develop and apply an intellectual toolkit to both the specific pieces of journalism that you will read for class and to the coverage of major contemporary events such as the Iraq War, the Global War on Terror, global warming, the 2012 presidential election campaign and coverage of women and minorities. These are the basic questions in the toolkit:

- Who is the author of the report and whom do they work for?
- Are the headline and the lede paragraph supported by the main points of the story?
- Has the author done original reporting and research or relied on previous reports?
- Is the evidence direct or indirect?
- Are the sources reliable:
  - a) Are they independent or self-interested?
  - b) Are they multiple sources or single ones?
  - c) Do they verify information or simply assert "I believe."
  - d) Are they authoritative and informed?
  - e) Are they named or unnamed?
- Is there transparency---does the reporter explain where and how he or she obtained the information?

- Does the reporter place the story in context?
- Are the key questions answered or addressed?
- Is the story honest and fair and was it done ethically?
- Can you find opposing points of view in this story?
- Is there a viewpoint that is missing?
- Finally, is the information conveyed actionable? Can it be used to make a civic or moral judgment?

## **Attribution**

Since good journalists always attribute their work, let me add that this course owes many of its themes, concepts and rhythms to the News Literacy course at Stony Brook University and to Prof. Robert Jensen here at UT.

## **Grades**

Here's how we'll assess your progress and understanding:

- 10 short multiple choice quizzes (worth 20 points overall)
- Three exams (20 points each---60 overall)
- One written essay of up to 800 words that critically analyzes the conclusions, evidence and presentation style of a major piece of contemporary journalism (20 points)

A = 93 to 100 points

A- 90 to 92

B+ 87 to 89

B = 83 to 86

B- 80 to 82

C+ 77 to 79

C = 73 to 76

C- 70 to 72

D+ 67 to 69

D = 63 to 66

D- 60 to 62

## **Exams**

There will be three scheduled exams, each worth 20 points toward your final grade. Each of the exams will be 40 questions, multiple-choice or true/false, and each correct answer will be worth a half point toward your final grade. The exams will cover the lectures and readings for a single segment of the course. Please note: *There is no final exam.*

## Quizzes

There will be 15 unscheduled quizzes throughout the semester, and your 10 best scores will count toward your final grade. Each quiz will consist of four questions that draw on the material from recent classes and readings. Each correct answer is worth a half point toward your final grade, plus you'll receive a bonus half point for showing up. The quizzes will be administered by I-Clicker usually during the first few minutes of class. If you aren't present when the quiz is administered, or if you arrive in the middle of the quiz, you will miss that quiz. There are no makeups.

## Essay

You'll have one written assignment: to take a significant piece of journalism and evaluate its value, credibility and shortcomings according to the criteria we'll have discussed and established in class. I'll choose the piece---I haven't decided whether to offer you a choice between two or have everyone write about the same one. The TAs and I will grade these pieces on a scale of 1 to 20. Each point counts as a point toward your final grade. While clear writing is important in any context, the essay will be graded on content and clarity of thought.

## Attendance

Despite the early hour, I expect you to attend class regularly, be on time and stay for the entire 75 minutes. The 15 short quizzes during the semester are designed in part as an attendance taker. You'll need to be in the lecture hall by 8 a.m. for each one, and you'll need to have attended the previous class in order to pass them. Without regularly attending class it will be difficult to earn a good grade.

In return for your regular attendance, I and our two TAs pledge to be available when you need us, and respond quickly to your emails. This is a very large lecture course, so it's helpful if you show up a few minutes early and grab a seat near the front.

## An Important Note about Computers and Cellphones

Students may not use computers or cellphones during class except in cases involving special needs. Please see me if you would like to make a request. The only digital media allowed in class are the I-Clickers you will purchase for class participation.

## Textbooks and Other Purchases

This being the digital age, I'm requiring you to buy one digital device, one online subscription and one old-fashioned paperback.

The digital device is the *I-Clicker*, the simplest most basic version, which we'll use for class discussions and participation. It costs about \$40 at the University Co-op. As with a textbook, you

can sell it back to the Co-op after the course ends. But I'd advise you to hang onto it---many future lecture courses are likely to require it.

*The New York Times* is an extraordinary product of daily journalism. It probably hasn't been part of your lives before, and may not be after this course is finished, but for the next 15 or so weeks I want you to read it online or on paper, think about it and use it. Fortunately, the Times offers deep discounts to students. A digital subscription covering online and smartphone app costs \$1.88 per week---\$28.20 for a 15-week semester. The print edition is considerably more--\$106.40 for the seven-day-per-week package, including digital, for the semester. To order the digital version, go to [www.nytimes.com/CollegeDS](http://www.nytimes.com/CollegeDS) and be ready to with your email address and a credit card. For print, call 1-888-698-2655 or visit [www.nytimes.com/CollegeRate](http://www.nytimes.com/CollegeRate).

You'll also need to buy *Blur: How to Know What's True in the Age of Information Overload* by Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel (New York: Bloomsbury, 2010). The paperback version came out in 2011. You can get it at the Co-op or online.

Finally, and free of charge, I expect you to read the *Daily Texan* every day. It's a great window on news events and issues on campus. You can pick up a paper copy on your way to class or read it online. When relevant, we'll be discussing stories from it, both the good, the bad and the ugly.

## Blackboard

Blackboard serves as our digital meeting house where you can go to see assignments, participate in discussion boards and check your grades. I'll be emailing you announcements and occasional assignments using Blackboard, therefore it's essential that you are registered there with your correct UTEID and a functioning email address. Here's where you find Blackboard:

<https://courses.utexas.edu>

It's also the place where you can register your new I-Clicker, a process we will walk you through during class.

## Schedule

Because we're doing journalism, themes and assignments may change, depending on events and the availability of guest speakers, making the following timetable somewhat tenuous. I'll be posting reading assignments on Blackboard as the course proceeds.

1. Thursday, August 30 Welcome to J301F
2. Tuesday, Sept. 4 Introduction: The Crisis  
Assigned Reading: Kovach and Rosenstiel, "What Is Journalism For?" in *The Elements of Journalism*, Chapter. One
3. Thursday, Sept. 6 Early Days: Tom Paine, First Amendment, Democracy and the Press
4. Tuesday, Sept. 11 The Modern Media Comes of Age: Civil Rights Movement and Vietnam

5. Thursday, Sept. 13 Watergate Scandal: Process and Impact
6. Tuesday, Sept. 18 How Do You Do Journalism?  
Reading: *Blur* by Kovach and Rosenstiel, Chapters 1, 3 and 4
7. Thursday, Sept. 20 The Struggle for Information (Guest speaker: Prof. Wanda Cash)
8. Tuesday, Sept. 25 How Do You Read Journalism?  
Reading: *Blur*: Chapters 4, 5 and 6

**9. Thursday, Sept. 27 EXAM NO. 1**

10. Tuesday, Oct. 2 The Press Strikes Out: The Global War on Terror and Iraq  
Reading: *Blur*, Chapters 7 and 8
11. Thursday, Oct. 4 The Press Strikes Back: Dana Priest and the NY Times, Haditha
12. Tuesday, Oct. 9 Woman and the News (Prof. Regina Lawrence)
13. Thursday, Oct. 11 Campaign Coverage
14. Tuesday, Oct. 16: To Be Announced: Sports Journalism?
- 15.** Thursday, Oct. 18 Pseudo Events and Other Realities of TV News (Prof. Mary Bock)
16. Tuesday, Oct. 23 Summing Up at Halfway
17. Thursday, Oct. 25 How I Do My Job: David Carr of the NY Times
18. Tuesday, Oct. 30 How I Do My Job, Part Two: Rajiv Chandrasekaran of the Washington Post

**19. Thursday, Nov. 1 EXAM NO. 2**

20. Tuesday, Nov. 6 Celebrity Journalism
21. Thursday, Nov. 8 Global Warming (Prof. Kris Wilson)

**MONDAY, NOV. 12, 9 AM: PAPER IS DUE**

22. Tuesday, Nov. 13 Who Is a Journalist? Stewart, Limbaugh, O'Keefe
23. Thursday, Nov. 15 *To Catch a Predator*

24. Tuesday, Nov. 20 “The Marriage Cure:” Accountability, Ethics and the Distinctive Value of Long-Form Narrative

**Thursday, Nov. 22 THANKSGIVING---No Class**

25. Tuesday, Nov. 27 Digital Revolution (Prof. Robert Quigley)

26. Thursday, Nov. 29 Arab Spring and Foreign News

**27. Tuesday, Dec. 4 EXAM NO. 3**

28. Thursday, Dec. 6 Summing Up  
Reading: *Blur*: Epilogue and Afterword

### **Reading Assignments**

Besides chapters from *Blur*, which are listed above, reading assignments will be posted on Blackboard a week before class. In addition, I will regularly be sending you news and enterprise stories to add to your reading from the New York Times website and other sources. I also invite you to post stories on the Blackboard discussion page from the Times or other sources that you believe illustrate major themes from the course or that you believe are of significance.

### **Religious Holy Days**

The Texas Education Code specifies that an institution of higher education shall excuse a student from attending classes or other required activities, including examinations, for the observance of a religious holy day, including travel for that purpose. A student whose absence is excused under this subsection may not be penalized for that absence and shall be allowed to take an examination or complete an assignment from which the student is excused within a reasonable time after the absence. A student who misses classes or other required activities, including examinations, for the observance of a religious holy day should inform the instructor as far in advance of the absence as possible, so arrangements can be made to complete an assignment within a reasonable time after the absence.

<http://www.utexas.edu/student/registrar/catalogs/gi03-04/ch4/ch4g.html#attendance>

### **Students with Disabilities**

Please notify me of any modification/adaptation you may require to accommodate a disability-related need. You will be requested to provide documentation to the Dean of Student's Office in order that the most appropriate accommodations can be determined. Specialized services are available on campus through Services for Students with Disabilities.

<http://www.utexas.edu/diversity/ddce/ssd/>

## **Scholastic Dishonesty**

The University defines academic dishonesty as cheating, plagiarism, unauthorized collaboration, falsifying academic records, and any act designed to avoid participating honestly in the learning process. Scholastic dishonesty<sup>0</sup> also includes, but is not limited to, providing false or misleading information to receive a postponement or an extension on a test, quiz, or other assignment, and submission of essentially the same written assignment for two courses without the prior permission of the instructor. By accepting this syllabus, you have agreed to these guidelines and must adhere to them. Scholastic dishonesty damages both the student's learning experience and readiness for the future demands of a work-career. Students who violate University rules on scholastic dishonesty are subject to disciplinary penalties, including the possibility of failure in the course and/or dismissal from the University.

[http://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/sjs/acint\\_student.php](http://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/sjs/acint_student.php).

## **UT Honor Code**

The core values of the University of Texas at Austin are learning, discovery, freedom, leadership, individual opportunity and responsibility. Each member of the University is expected to uphold these values through integrity, honesty, fairness, and respect toward peers and community.

*The TAs and I are looking forward to working with you this semester. Please take advantage of our office hours, especially if you have questions or need additional information.*