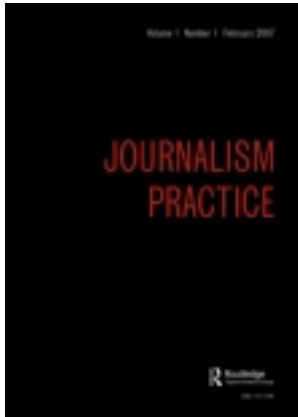


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# TEACHING JOURNALISM HISTORY TO JOURNALISTS

**Andie Tucher**

*This article is rooted in the experience of helping to develop and introduce a range of required and elective journalism-history courses into a professional school whose jam-packed one-year curriculum has always been dominated by hands-on training in the skills and techniques of the craft. Some of the challenges have been practical and logistical. We decided early on, for instance, that all assignments would involve reading or viewing works of journalism, not secondary sources, but it was harrowing to have to choose no more than three dozen or so pieces to represent three centuries' worth of evolution. And since our limited time required us to focus mainly on journalism history in the United States, we had to decide how elaborately to explain events like the US Civil War that American students had studied from the cradle but that some of our international students could not date within a half-century. But the most interesting, and rewarding, aspect of these courses was watching the changes in the students' thinking about the complexities and conundrums of their chosen profession: the achievements and also the missteps of their predecessors, the contingency of conventions and the mutability of values, the ideas about what journalism is for and how it should be judged. We have not won all of them over yet on the need to spend some of their precious time every week on a course that will not directly contribute to getting them a job. But we do make them think more widely about what that job means. This article charts the institutional and intellectual challenges in constructing a suitable history syllabus at the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism.*

**KEYWORDS** American history; Columbia Graduate School of Journalism; journalism history

## Introduction

It is undeniable: students who come to a school of journalism tend to be much more attuned to seconds and minutes than to centuries, much more interested in *today* than in, say, 25 September 1690. That was, of course, the publication date of the first known newspaper in the English-American colonies. But smallpox and ague no longer threaten Boston, New England has given up its invasion of Canada, the lurid rumors about the King of France and his daughter-in-law have died down, and anyway, *Publick Occurrences* is not hiring.

So why on earth would the students at the Columbia Journalism School spend class time reading a 320-year-old rag?

The case can be tough to make. Not only do many students tend to see history in general very much as the character in the 2008 movie *In Bruges* did who dismissed it as "just a load of stuff that's already happened". Not only is the institution of journalism as a whole facing the kind of challenges and pressures—economic disarray, the wild-west uncertainties of the new digital world, the crumbling distinctions between public and professional—that suggest it is the future rather than the past that stands most in need of attention. Not only are there always new skills and techniques to cram into a curriculum already full to bursting. It is also true that journalism history frequently just has not been

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taught—or studied—very well, that it has too often taken on a triumphalist tone, focusing myopically on the press as an agent of democracy and the public good, and has treated journalistic work as merely an archive of public intelligence or a top-down information system rather than as a dynamically created cultural text (Barnhurst and Nerone, 2009, pp. 24–6; Carey, 1997 [1974]; Collins, 2009).

In the required and elective courses on journalism history that we have added to our curriculum at Columbia over the past decade and more, we have taken a different approach. Journalism, we contend, is both a participant in its culture and a product of it, and to study the history of journalism is at bottom to study the changing ways that societies have told themselves the stories that they recognize as significant and are willing to accept as true to life. Just as the conventions, understandings, values, and expectations that govern fiction have evolved over the years—compare *Clarissa* with, say, *Ulysses*—so too are the particular ways that we tell our truthful stories, even the ways we think about *how* to tell what is truthful, shaped by contingency and context. Our goal is to introduce students to a selection of some of the most important, enlightening, or eloquent journalistic works of the past; press them to recognize and put aside their preconceptions about what journalism now is or ought to be; and lead them to ponder the social relationships, professional assumptions, technological constraints, and cultural contexts that shaped not just the way journalists and their publics created stories together in the past but also the way the students themselves are doing so in the present.

This paper offers some general comments on the state of journalism history in journalism education as well as personal observations on how Columbia's venture has been working.

### Journalism History in the Curriculum

Telling journalists what to do has never been simple, but their temperamental and Constitutional resistance to most kinds of regulation seems to have spilled over into any effort to impose order on their education. Just as no one has to go to journalism school in order to become a journalist in the United States, no journalism school has to offer a specific curriculum in order to bestow a journalism degree. The Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (ACEJMC) sets standards for degree-granting professional programs and judges their compliance through a process that includes both the institution's own self-study and an independent evaluation by a visiting committee of peers chosen by the council. Undergoing the process is, however, entirely voluntary, and while 112 US programs (and one in Chile) are listed on the council's website (ACEJMC, 2011) as having passed muster, about three-quarters of all the degree-granting programs in the country have chosen not to participate. That apparently does not hurt them; one researcher concludes there is no evidence that accredited schools are "strongly or clearly superior in major ways" to unaccredited schools (Seamon, 2010, pp. 17–18).

Even the schools that choose to undergo the evaluation do not get much direct instruction in *what* they should be teaching. The council "recognizes that each institution has its unique situation, cultural, social or religious context, mission and resources" and thus it "does not define specific curricula, courses or methods of instruction" (ACEJMC, 2004). Among its standards for evaluating curricula is whether students can "demonstrate an understanding of the history and role of professionals and institutions in shaping

communications”, but the specifics are left entirely unstated. In any case, a survey by the American Journalism Historians Association (AJHA) of schools with graduate mass-communication programs found 52 that reported offering at least one course in history, but another 140 said they offered none (AJHA, 2008).

So the nation’s journalism schools have been devising a variety of strategies for accommodating the latest pressures on the profession. Some are envisioning a reorientation of their programs toward the new technologies. The University of Colorado at Boulder, for instance, recently announced that it would be “discontinuing” its School of Journalism and Mass Communications as of 30 June 2011 and terminating its bachelor’s degree in journalism. At the same time an exploratory committee was recommending the creation of two new entities, an Institute for the Global Digital Future and a college or school of information, communication, and media technology that would fold the study of journalism into an interdisciplinary program affiliated with film, engineering, business, computer science, law, and other fields. (Also in development is a new dual-major bachelor’s degree in journalism and another discipline, which would allow current undergraduates to finish their programs.) Some journalists have been arguing that subsuming journalism into a technologically oriented academic program risked elbowing out instruction in the core skills and values of the craft. But Chancellor Philip P. DiStefano defended the proposed restructuring as “visionary work” that would prepare students for “the new media and networked Information Age environment” (DiStefano quoted in CU-Boulder Office of News Services, 2010; also Brainard, 2011; CU-Boulder Office of the Provost and Executive Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, 2011).

Other programs are taking a different perspective on the question of how to prepare journalists for the increasingly complicated task of explaining an increasingly complex world. In 2005, with the support of the Carnegie Foundation and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, five research universities—the University of Southern California, the University of California at Berkeley, Harvard, Northwestern, and Columbia—began an initiative on the future of journalism education. Declaring that professional schools ought to function as “the intellectual wing” and the “consciences” of their professions, the five institutions are devoting particular attention to the “enrichment” and “reinvigoration” of the standard journalism curriculum with the stated goal of offering “a deep and multilayered exploration of complex subjects like history, politics, classics and philosophy to undergird their journalistic skills” (Carnegie-Knight Initiative on the Future of Journalism Education, nd a, nd b).

### **The History of Journalism History at Columbia**

As the second-oldest free-standing journalism school in the United States, Columbia had been revamping, revising, and rethinking its curriculum for nearly a century before its involvement in the Carnegie-Knight Initiative, and its emphasis on history and on academic courses in general has waxed and waned and waxed again in that time. When the School first opened its doors in 1912, its main business was, as its founder Joseph Pulitzer had intended, the awarding of a Bachelor of Letters degree to those young men and women who had completed some combination—the precise proportion constantly under adjustment—of practical training and traditional liberal arts courses taken either within or outside the School. But beginning in 1934, when the School reconstituted itself

as the first *graduate* journalism school in the United States, the one-year Master of Science curriculum inevitably narrowed. Laboring five days a week in the School's own newsroom, taking mainly required courses in a range of reporting, editing, and production skills, the typical journalism student essentially earned a graduate degree for having survived nine months as a cub reporter.

In the early years the busy curriculum did manage to squeeze in a required course of some kind whose title had something to do with the history of the profession, but its approach was always more utilitarian than conceptual. In the School's annual bulletin for 1935–6, for instance, its first as a graduate institution, the required course in "The History of the Press" was described as devoted to "the development of the modern newspaper with reference to existing conditions and the light they may throw on the theory and practice and journalism in relation to public affairs". And as James Boylan (1988, p. 30) recalled, in the 1950s version of the history class he and his fellow students were assigned "to produce chapter drafts of a group-book (never published) about former Pulitzer Prize winners. Illustrious forbears who had not won Pulitzers, such as Benjamin Franklin, Horace Greeley, or Ida Tarbell, remained unmentioned".

The vast changes in both postwar journalism and the world it covered brought new strains to the jam-packed one-year curriculum. The basic boot-camp-style courses in reporting and writing were constantly being reconfigured, expanding to accommodate broadcasting and splitting into segments to allow students some choice of specialties like cultural affairs or business reporting. The tiny footprint of journalism history in the curriculum, meanwhile, was eroding even more. The 1966–7 bulletin, for instance, listed a one-credit required course in "History and Theory of Communication". Ten years later, the School no longer mandated a history course but it did insist that students choose an elective either from outside the School or from among a short roster of academic-inflected internal offerings that included "History of Journalism" and "The First Amendment". Ten years after that, in 1986–7, the list of electives was both longer and unequivocally practical, and the School offered no full-semester course in journalism history at all.

Over the past 12 years, however, journalism history has been creeping back into the School's curriculum, gaining a larger presence each year. I came to the School in 1998 as the junior professor in Columbia's brand-new Communications PhD program, which had been created by the media scholar James W. Carey and was chaired by him until his death in 2006. The small interdisciplinary program marked the first real departure in more than 60 years from the School's close focus on professional education. Advised by a committee of faculty members from Arts and Sciences, the Business School, and Teachers College as well as the Journalism School, the program allows students to pursue individual plans of study drawing on the graduate resources of the entire university. They have taken classes in everything from Sociology, International Affairs, and Political Science to Architecture, History, and Law in support of their research into such topics as political narrative and "fake news"; mass-mediated terrorism; shifting forms of newswork and cross-institutional journalistic collaboration; a history of Latin American literary journalism; social innovation and wi-fi hotspots; and the subject's experience in the journalistic interview.

My own background as a journalist, a historian, and the author of a book about the nineteenth-century origins of the urban mass press in the United States inspired me to develop as my first offering a survey course in the history of American journalism that I expected would be of interest mainly to our PhDs. I was both surprised and pleased, however, to find that each year at least half a dozen or so of our MS students chose to take

it as their spring elective instead of more career-oriented alternatives such as computer-assisted reporting or sportswriting. (Their motives, I allow, were mixed. While many said they had become interested in the topic because of the two 90-minute lectures surveying the profession's history that I always presented during the August orientation period, or were happy for the chance to take something that "felt more like the kind of college classes I'm used to", some clearly relished the respite that my reading-centered course gave them from yet another subway ride to nethermost Queens or the back of the Bronx for yet more shoelather reporting.) Just as gratifying was the interest of students from other parts of the university: over the years I have had at least one person from almost every division at Columbia, from the undergraduate colleges to the medical school. While some were pursuing specific research plans in aspects of communications history, most said they were simply interested in journalism and eager to explore how it worked.

Teaching a class whose students brought so wide a range of backgrounds, interests, preparations, and goals was often challenging, but the range of their experience could often add an unexpected pungency to the discussion. For the first class, for instance, I assigned students to browse through the single known issue of that pioneering sheet *Publick Occurrences*, the full text of which is available online.<sup>1</sup> Among the secondary readings assigned, which were required only for the PhD students but "warmly recommended" for everyone else, was David Paul Nord's incisive article (1990) arguing that the roots of the modern news system were planted in the intensely theocratic culture of seventeenth-century New England long before the appearance of anything that looked like a modern newspaper. The empirical accounts of miracles, comets, and monstrous births that appeared so often in pamphlets, ballads, printed sermons, and almanacs, Nord suggested, were in fact *news*, conveying important current public information about the most essential possible object of attention: God's plan for humankind.

So the students who read Nord's piece came to class well primed to lead a conversation about why editor Ben Harris described as the *first* of his three goals the dissemination of "Memorable Occurrents of Divine Providence", or about the close attention his paper gave to the suicide of a recent widower of whose "Melancholly" the "Devil took advantage". The entire class was prepared to debate the contingency of what the definition of *news* was and who had the power to define and direct it. But then an MS student immersed in the importance of the Five W's raised an intriguing set of questions that her more academically inclined classmates had not considered. Why did the Devil have a name in the suicide story when the dead widower did not? What does that suggest about another of Harris's goals, to use "the best fountains for our information" to ensure that everything he printed was true? Why would an element that we have come to regard as the "first W" have been seen as unimportant or unnecessary? What is a "fact", anyway, how do readers use facts to judge the credibility of a story, and what is the relationship between fact and truth? That 320-year-old rag clearly maintains the power to inform the thinking of the 10-times-great-grandchildren of editor Ben Harris.

For several years, my elective was the only formal offering in history in a busy curriculum that remained largely practical. In 2002 the coincident arrival of Lee C. Bollinger as Columbia's new president and the School's search for a new dean offered a wide-open opportunity to review and rethink not just our own curriculum but also the state of journalism education as a whole. President Bollinger, a legal scholar with a particular interest in the First Amendment, convened a task force that included both working journalists and faculty members from the School, the larger university, and beyond. Their

mandate was to explore the question of “how journalism education in a great university can contribute to the process by which the media adapt to a new world”, as President Bollinger wrote in a statement on the future of journalism (2003). The chair of the task force was Nicholas Lemann, the author of five books on history and current affairs who had also served on the staffs of *The New Yorker*, the *Washington Post*, and other prominent publications.

The report that Lemann wrote summing up the deliberations of the task force stressed the special responsibilities, opportunities, and challenges afforded by the School’s unique position (Lemann, 2003). Nearly all of the degree-granting journalism programs in the United States are based at public universities, whose traditional mission of emphasizing utilitarian and vocational instruction has continued to encourage the view of journalism as one more kind of practical trade. Columbia, on the other hand, as a major private research university, is in a position to conduct all of its professional schools including Journalism “in a manner consistent with its overall commitment to honoring intellectual life”, Lemann wrote (2003), “and to maintaining a critical distance from the field in which its graduates will be employed”. A professional school within a private research university can embrace some of the goals that pervade the larger institution, Lemann continued, among them to offer curricula that “try to teach their students ‘how to think’, in ways that are distinctive to the profession and that will be useful for many years, rather than simply teaching them entry-level job skills”, and to “try to place the profession in a larger context that will enable students not to be imprisoned by its automatic assumptions, and, institutionally, to be an improving force within their professions”. Upon the disbanding of the task force, in 2003, Lemann was named Dean of the School.

### Columbia’s Changing Curriculum

Changes soon began percolating through the curriculum. In 2005–6, with the help of a Carnegie-Knight grant, the School launched a new Master of Arts degree in Journalism that forges an intellectual link between the School and Columbia’s faculty of arts and science. The program, open to MS graduates and working journalists with commensurate skills, in effect turns general-assignment reporters into skilled specialists in one of four topics of public interest and importance: science and the environment; arts and culture; business and economics; and politics. Each student takes a year-long seminar in his or her major, co-taught by journalists from our faculty and academics from other departments, that combines intensive journalistic work with immersion in the intellectual substance of the field. Also required are two new Journalism courses designed especially for this program: “Evidence & Inference”, conducted by Dean Lemann and others, which teaches advanced research skills geared for news professionals, and “History of Journalism for Journalists”.

Intended as it is for students who are both professionally experienced and academically ambitious, the MA History course takes an expansive and thematic approach to exploring the basic question of how the organized human activity of journalism works and how it has varied over time and across national traditions. The course has been taught for the past five years by Michael Schudson, a sociologist who has written often about historical matters and who has a knack for raising provocative questions. The syllabus lists the topic for the fourth week, for instance, as “Does Jefferson Belong on His Pedestal? If

There Was a First Amendment in 1791, Why Was There a Sedition Act in 1798?" In other weeks the class examines Tocqueville's European vision of the "strange Americans", takes an excerpt from Walter Lippmann's *Liberty and the News* as the basis for asking "Does Democracy Need Journalism—If So, What Kind?", and wades fearlessly into the debate over "Entertainment, Vulgarity, and Democracy: Is Vulgarity Bad for Us?" While the focus of the course remains on US practice, Schudson's 2010 syllabus reflected the students' expressed interest in a more international approach by incorporating aspects of media development in France, Japan, India, the Netherlands, and Sweden.

The MS requirements were the next to come under scrutiny. For many years the School had introduced students to the standards and traditions of the profession through two all-class foundation courses. On Friday mornings most of the students gathered for "Journalism, the Law, and Society", taught by two legal scholars who discussed key court cases in press law and such fundamental First Amendment issues as libel, prior restraint, and the protection of sources. (A separate section provided international students with a more intensive introduction to US politics and society.) The afternoon was devoted to "Critical Issues in Journalism", team-taught in Socratic style by Prof. Carey and Prof. Stephen Isaacs, who pressed the students to ponder a range of ethical and practical issues: What does "independent" journalism mean? What qualifies as "news"? Can a journalist be both truthful and humane? Some of the topics necessarily drew on historical examples, but the emphasis was on present-day dilemmas.

A growing sense among faculty members that those courses were not keeping up with the twenty-first-century media landscape led to a radical reconfiguration of not just the content but also the structure of the old courses. In 2009–10 the School launched its new requirement, a four-credit package that we are calling "Journalism Essentials" and that consists of four mini-courses of half a semester each. Each mini-course is offered four times; in random order each student takes two during the first half of the semester and the other two in the second half. Three of the four new courses will surprise no one: "Business of Journalism" covers both institutional and newer stand-alone models for the business of gathering and publishing the news; "Ethics of Journalism" relies heavily on in-depth case studies of contemporary professional dilemmas; and "Law of Journalism" addresses the practical legal issues that reporters are likely to face whether they are working for an organization or on their own. The fourth was the first *required* course in journalism history for MS students that anyone here can remember.

The goals are simple. As Dean Lemann summed up in a recent conversation with me: "we want to give students both a *canon* and a *context*"—to acquaint them with some of the great works of journalism but also to make clear the relationships between journalism and the contemporary stream of activity that produced it. We hope that students will thus be inspired to think broadly about the origins, purposes, and effects of the conventions they themselves follow, or at least to understand that they are not the first journalists in the world to think of *this* or worry about *that*. (As Lemann put it, "they should know that we've fallen off the cliff before.")

The challenges, however, are plenty. That very word "required", of course, automatically casts an "eat your spinach" aura over a course that many students were instinctively viewing with attitudes ranging from indifference to alarm, but it comes with added complications. The course is big; with between 60 and 70 students in each section, it is too unwieldy to work as a discussion-centered course. It is short; deciding what to cover and, worse, what to leave out in our seven two-and-a-half-hour meetings requires



hard-nosed choices. It has a wildly diverse student body; in 2009–10, our inaugural year, nearly one-third of the 263 full-time students hailed from outside the United States and reported 31 countries of origin ranging from Canada to Ethiopia and the United Arab Emirates. And to top it all off, it meets on Fridays, the end of a long, busy week that generally involves students in constant reporting trips by bus, subway, or foot.

To put together the syllabus I worked with Dean Lemann, himself a historian, who in the first year taught one of the four sections. We decided early on that for so varied a group with only a modest store of common knowledge and without much experience in the conventions of historical research and scholarship, direct encounters with works of historical journalism would be more enlightening and engaging than would assignments in secondary sources. And although we wanted to make sure that the students read some of the best examples of their predecessors' work, canons can, of course, be misleading. In compiling our reading list, we were determined to avoid the too-common response of reveling in the profession's heroic mode—the First Amendment, World War II, the Pentagon Papers, Watergate—but quietly eliding the many misjudgments and gaffes that mottle its record. Yes, ambitious young correspondents might well find their own inspiration in the cunning of Martha Gellhorn, who talked her way aboard a hospital ship on D-Day, turned in to *Collier's* a harrowing yet eloquent account of the carnage on Omaha Beach, and in the process scooped her hypercompetitive husband, Ernest Hemingway, who never actually made it ashore. Weary young metro reporters might well find the strength to dial one more number or knock on one more door by recalling the doggedness of Woodward and Bernstein, who refused to accept the common wisdom that the break-in at the Watergate office building was no more than a third-rate burglary. But aspiring journalists should also benefit from the cautionary examples of the scabrous partisanship of the 1790s, the lurid excesses of the yellow press, the faintheartedness of the McCarthy era, or that time when the Watergate reporters' *too* dogged pursuit of grand-jury testimony earned them a rebuke from a federal judge.

And we made the difficult decision to focus mainly on US journalism. Logistical justifications were powerful: with just seven sessions at our disposal, any attempt to cover the entire world would reduce us to a dreary and uninformative recitation of bullet points, and since we are basing the course on primary sources everyone is presumed to have read, our only common language is English. But our decision was rooted in good intellectual reasons as well. Most of the students come to the School to learn to be the particular kind of journalist known as the reporter, and it was the United States that essentially invented that job description beginning in the 1830s, when the rise to dominance of the mass commercial press established many of the traditions, standards, and rules that reporters nowadays either follow or decide to transgress.

We organized the seven-week curriculum in a generally chronological order but defined and explored each era thematically according to the most distinctive developments in the ways that journalistic work was conceived, viewed, and carried out at the time. The chronological boundaries were loose; we felt free to root or follow a given theme forwards or backwards in time in an intellectually coherent way rather than marching straight ahead through the decades. An overview of the Fall 2010 syllabus is given in Appendix A.

It was, of course, painful to choose the small handful of pieces that would represent three centuries' worth of evolution across the spectrum of media and genres from the

alternative paper to the evening news broadcast, from the daguerreotype to the blog, from the investigative unit to the sports page. In the end, we fudged our numbers a little, generally listing only four or five items as required for all but adding half dozen or more “recommended readings” each week. The final exam asks students to choose and analyze some of those.

Also challenging was our own commitment to do justice to diversity while still acknowledging the reality that for a large part of its life, US journalism, like so many western historical institutions, was dominated by white men. Determined not to follow the common practice of ghettoizing works by women or people of color into a single unit under some deprecatory rubric like “other voices”, we sought whenever we could to move beyond the usual suspects and draw our assignments from a wide variety of writers. We did, indeed, devote a week to the particular character of journalism produced by and for self-identified communities or publics, but among the examples of that journalism we included the US Army’s newspaper *Stars and Stripes* along with the NAACP’s *Crisis* magazine, the conservative commentator William F. Buckley along with the feminist Susan Brownmiller.

Into every week’s topic we integrated a range of voices. The Civil War reporter Thomas Morris Chester of the *Philadelphia Press*, for instance, was typical of the war correspondent of the era in every way save one: he was a free black man. Our week on the traditionally aggressive and “male” art of investigative reporting could not and did not ignore either Woodward and Bernstein on Watergate or Seymour Hersh on the My Lai massacre. But it also easily accommodated an excerpt from *Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson’s long 1962 exposé of the damages caused by the overuse of chemical pesticides, and Vera Connolly’s “Cry of a Broken People”, about oppressive conditions on Native American reservations, that had been published in 1929 in (of all places) the quintessential women’s magazine *Good Housekeeping*.

We did not always get it right. Our first syllabus included a selection from Addison and Steele’s *Spectator*, for instance, but my attempt to introduce the idea of the “public” through a description of classic coffeehouse culture left too many students wondering what the art of the elegant essay had to do with Starbucks. Many of them simply did not get Alexis de Tocqueville; many found Ida Tarbell tedious (well, so do I) or Norman Mailer bombastic (ditto). And since journalism is so often written for the moment, some of the most interesting practitioners—H. L. Mencken and I. F. Stone among them—can be a chore for readers lodged in their own and much later moments to comprehend.

We saw as one of our paramount tasks the opening of their historical imaginations, but that meant more than just pressing them to test their assumptions; for many students the greater challenges lay in recognizing that they even *had* assumptions in the first place and in accepting that the present was not automatically better than the past. So for the first class meeting, I chose pieces that smelled like news accounts but directly challenged the conventions and understandings that most of us bring to our engagement with present-day journalism. We discussed how Christopher Columbus established (or abused) his credibility in his widely published and un-fact-checkable letter about his voyage to the New World, considered the presence of the divine in *Publick Occurrences*, and pondered the placement of Blackbeard’s head.<sup>2</sup> That came in the story from the *Boston News-Letter* for 23 February/2 March 1719 about the great sea battle between the royal navy and the “Notorious and Arch Pirate Capt. Teach”. The relatively long article slowly unfolded a

thrilling narrative: the scene was set, the enemy sighted, the frantic combat described blow by blow, and, finally, the pirate beheaded. At first the students snickered knowingly about the buried lede, and when asked how they themselves would write the story for tomorrow's *New York Times*, effortlessly served up the kind of first sentence any editor nowadays would love: "Holding aloft the severed head of the pirate Blackbeard, Lieutenant Robert Maynard of *H.M.S. Pearl* returned home today..." But we eventually worked our way around to a very different view of the question. Given, on the one hand, a story with a beginning, a middle, and a particularly rousing end, and on the other, an account that divorces cause from effect, warps chronology, and steps on the punchline, which is really the weirder narrative strategy, and what purpose does it serve?

An even greater challenge to their assumptions was the unsigned article in the *Boston Gazette* of 12 March 1770 describing the "Boston Massacre", the violent confrontation between British troops and rebellious citizens that helped edge the colonies closer to their revolution. The article popped with outrage as it described how a small group of Redcoats armed with cutlasses, muskets, and clubs began chasing and assaulting unarmed citizens in the streets. When the Bostonians responded by lobbing snowballs, the soldiers opened fire and dropped a number of men into the snow. "But what shewed a degree of cruelty . . . was an attempt to fire upon or push with their bayonets the persons who undertook to remove the slain and wounded!" The descriptions of the victims' injuries were explicit: Crispus Attucks had been gored in the lung and "most horribly" in the liver; a ball had carried off a chunk of Samuel Gray's skull; and a widow's son, "a promising youth of 17 years of age", had taken a ball in the belly and died after it was "cut out at his back".

The students were skeptical of the story, and proud of their skepticism. They were not surprised to learn that the Bostonians had actually been taunting the Redcoats with weapons much less benign than snowballs; some of them even knew that the death toll of the "massacre" was five. So when I asked them to describe what the newspaper had been up to, the answer was swift: it was bias, pure and simple. The newspaper was violating every tenet of objective reporting.

What makes you expect, I asked them, that the newspaper *should* have been objective?

Well, they said, in those days reporters were not as professional; they let their bias show. Clear in the students' answer was the subtext: *we* would not have been so primitive.

Again I asked: what makes you expect that the newspaper should *not* have been biased?

They grew a little restive—hadn't they answered that already? Well, they ventured, in wartime readers do not *want* a newspaper to be balanced, they *want* propaganda. Subtext: a really responsible journalist would not have given it to them.

I asked my question again: what makes you expect that the newspaper *should* have been balanced? It took several more tries before one of them grasped the point that maybe the *Gazette* was not actually "violating" any rules of objectivity; maybe there were no such rules at the time to violate. Some seemed shocked to learn that for the first half-century of its life, the new nation intended and expected its newspapers to take a direct role in shaping political opinion and fostering political debate, the tone of which could range from hearty to over-excited to vile. But as we went on to explore the proposition that the very words they had been using—biased, unbalanced, not objective—embodied

concepts that no reader or editor of the time would have recognized, they began to toy with the radical notion that since the ideal of objectivity had not, in fact, been handed down to journalists on a stone tablet in the mists of the past, maybe it could stand some reappraisal in the present.

A key element of the course was performance: teaching a Friday-afternoon lecture class in a topic that many students *expected* to find boring inspired me to discover and liberate my inner ham. Plentiful props and visual materials also helped keep things lively. My collection of real and facsimile newspapers from various eras helped students visualize the changes in the work that produced those pages, and their answers to my standard question “What do you *not* see?” evolved over the weeks: illustrations, then photographs; headlines, then decked headlines; display ads, then front-page ads. To the first class I brought a purchase from the local toy store: the foot-high G.I. Joe action figure fully equipped with a tiny newspaper, a miniature typewriter, and dog tags identifying him as “Ernie Pyle”, the beloved reporter who covered World War II one ordinary soldier at a time. Proof positive, I said, that sometimes the public actually *likes* journalists. I am not sure, however, that I will add the new “TV News Anchor Barbie” doll, complete with microphone, camera, and tight pink ruffled miniskirt, to my collection.

Some of the two dozen or so slides I projected each week from my computer were simply photographs, video clips, or excerpts from the pieces under discussion, but other slides were designed to inveigle, unsettle, or startle the students into engaging with the historical context. Discussing the birth of the reporter in the nineteenth century, for instance, I wanted to make a larger point about how different in general were nineteenth-century assumptions about education, vocational preparation, and the very idea of a “profession”. So I displayed an excerpt from the popular medical handbook *Gunn’s Domestic Medicine and Poor Man’s Friend*, first published in 1830, which assured the reader that if he had a large carving knife, some strips of linen, and enough helpers to hold the patient down, “any man, unless he be an idiot or an absolute fool”, could amputate a limb.

The class was too large for intimate discussion, but I often lobbed juicy questions at them (Did Walker Evans’s photographs of poor sharecropper families exploit his subjects? Do you agree with the *New York Times’s* decision to soften the Bay of Pigs story when the Kennedy Administration invoked “national security”? Do you trust Truman Capote?), and encouraged anyone with a question or comment to speak up. And to make sure everyone opened his or her mouth at least once, each student was expected to prepare a brief commentary of three to five minutes about “something you find interesting, puzzling, provoking, or weird” in one of the required or recommended readings and present it to his or her classmates. That meant that each week eight or ten different students would be speaking in class about something that intrigued them.

Each class meeting had its moments of contention, surprise, and illumination. But one of the most memorable exchanges came when I least expected it: in response to a story I had assigned from the 15 April 1971 issue of the alternative weekly *Village Voice* called “On Goosing”.

It was for the session on “Journalists and Their Publics” that we read Susan Brownmiller’s droll yet pointed account of her impulsive retaliation against a stranger who made an offensive sexual advance. Mindful that English was a second language for many class members, I started by asking “Do you all understand what goosing is?” But the rows

of blank looks I got quickly made clear that even some of the students raised on American slang were unfamiliar with the term.

"It's like pinching, right?", ventured one.

Well, sometimes, I said, but it often refers to something rougher, as in this case: the aggressive groping of a woman's crotch in public by a man she didn't know.

As several of the young women gasped audibly, one blurted: "Why on earth would anyone want to do that?"

I couldn't help it. "I can't tell you how happy I am that all this is news to you," I said. "I'm younger than Brownmiller, but in the seventies my female friends and I just accepted that when you were out in the street you might be goosed at any time. We all were. This is one giant leap for humankind!"

That broke the ice for a zingy class discussion. One of the students who had been assigned to comment on the piece said that Brownmiller had undermined her credibility by quoting the "extreme" feminist argument that rape was a metaphor for all male-female relationships. Other students leapt into the fray to defend or criticize. Then one pointed out that Brownmiller's essay had appeared just a few years after Valerie Solanas shot Andy Warhol and wrote her "SCUM Manifesto" advocating the destruction of the male sex, "which just goes to show", he said, "that feminists really *were* extreme". Injecting some good old objective balance, I pointed out that many women, then as now, rejected feminism—the most effective opponent of the Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution was Phyllis Schlafly—but that most feminists rejected Solanas, too. As for the rape metaphor, I said, evaluate it in its historical and legal context: until state laws began to change in the late seventies, a man was generally exempt from prosecution for sexual assault or abuse if the victim in question was his wife.

Some jaws dropped. Some clenched.

The conversation gradually turned to some of the questions I had had in mind when I chose Brownmiller's work for assignment. What does advocacy journalism do that objective journalism cannot? Whom was this journalist writing for? What kind of relationship does advocacy journalism build with its readers and how is it different from what objective journalism does? Someone pointed out how surprising it was to find a piece of unabashedly opinionated journalism that was also funny. Yes, said someone else, it's especially refreshing to find a funny feminist given their reputation for humorlessness. A piece they had read earlier by W. E. B. Du Bois, she went on, was an important and passionate argument on behalf of civil rights for African Americans, but it was also so grim and accusatory that she could not imagine that anyone who did not already agree with Du Bois would want to read it. Brownmiller's sprightly style could be inviting even to people who were not necessarily feminists—or women, either.

But the conversation pushed into territory that was new even to me when a young woman in the back of the room asked, hesitantly, whether I would mind talking about how I had felt when I was goosed. Did I fight back? Did I report it? Nonplused at finding myself on the other end of the questioning, I tried to answer honestly. I had felt angry and demeaned but in no way seriously damaged, and no, I had done nothing about it; it had never occurred to me that I could protest.

"Then Brownmiller was writing for you. *You* should have been reading the *Village Voice!*", she said.

That conversation realized many of the hopes I had had for the course. The students were using a journalistic work that happened to be from the past in exactly the ways most

people initially use journalism: to encounter new information or points of view, to challenge and shape their own thinking, to launch a debate with others. But they were also evaluating the way the piece worked as journalism, drawing conclusions about tone and style that they could bring to their own work and analyzing the various ways that other readers might use the journalism for themselves. They were, in short, understanding journalism as a social instrument, as both a participant in its culture and a product of it.

The course, about to enter its third year, is still evolving. The students have voiced criticisms; some have told us they wish we spent more time on international topics or that the group were smaller to make conversation easier. Some still grumble about squandering precious time and energy on a subject that will not teach them a skill or get them a job. Many, however, have come to the same conclusion and expressed it with the same sense of surprise. They never thought, they said, that history could be either interesting or informative. But even journalists can find value in things that did not happen today.

## NOTES

1. See [http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Public\\_Occurrences\\_Both\\_Foreign\\_and\\_Domestic](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Public_Occurrences_Both_Foreign_and_Domestic).
2. Clark (1994, pp. 218–19) makes a similar point using a much shorter version of the Blackbeard story that ran in the previous issue of the *News-Letter*.

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## Appendix A

### *Fall 2010 Syllabus*

*Week 1: Journalism Before Reporters.* Regularly printed sheets containing current information were being produced in Europe by the early seventeenth century, but general assumptions about the content, purpose, and readership of these new-fangled newspapers were very different from those now taught in J-school.

Readings included: Christopher Columbus; *Publick Occurrences*; Thomas Paine; the *Boston Gazette* on the massacre; Marat on the execution of Louis XVI; partisan papers of the 1790s.

*Week 2: The Emergence of the Reporter.* The independent, entrepreneurial reporter is born, and we'll be exploring how he or she went about defining the job.

Readings included: Edgar Allen Poe and Walt Whitman; Civil War reporting; Mark Twain in the *Territorial Enterprise*; Nellie Bly's undercover investigation of an insane asylum; Richard Harding Davis in Cuba.

*Week 3: Reporters and their Publics.* Reporters have always served many different publics and forged many different kinds of relationships with their readers/viewers. Here we consider the nature of the reporter's role toward self-identified publics and explore the deep roots and long appeal of opinion journalism.

Readings included: opinion pieces by W. E. B. Du Bois, H. L. Mencken, William F. Buckley, and Kathleen Parker; T. Thomas Fortune in the *New York Globe*; Sgt. Alexander Woollcott in *Stars and Stripes*; Brownmiller's "On Goosing".

*Week 4: Reporters and Their Tools.* Every generation of reporters is faced with its own new technologies, but questions about the things each new technology can and can't do are always accompanied by other, often harder ones: what are the things each new technology should and should not do?

Readings (and clips) included: the Associated Press following the assassination of Abraham Lincoln; Edison films, both authentic and staged, on the Spanish–American War; photographs by Jacob Riis and Walker Evans; radio and television reporting by Edward R. Murrow; World War II newsreels.

*Week 5: Reporters and the Powers That Be.* The press in the United States has always been expected to serve as a watchdog on those in power, a duty recognized in the first amendment to the Constitution and resoundingly upheld two centuries later in the Pentagon Papers case. Yet while many journalists have assumed the watchdog function, others have acted more like lap dogs or even hot dogs.

Readings included: muckraking by Samuel Hopkins Adams; Vera Connolly; *I.F. Stone's Weekly*; Rachel Carson; Seymour Hersh; Woodward and Bernstein; civil rights coverage by Harrison Salisbury and John Herbers; the *Wall Street Journal* investigates President Lyndon Johnson's wealth; CBS's Morley Safer in Vietnam.

*Week 6: Reporters and the New Journalisms.* Reporters are constantly reinventing, rethinking, and reworking the rules, expectations, and traditions of journalism; there have been many "New Journalisms". What do they accomplish that "old-fashioned" journalism doesn't? Do they do anything they shouldn't?

Readings included: A. J. Liebling, John Steinbeck, Martha Gellhorn, Joan Didion, Gay Talese, Truman Capote, Hunter Thompson, Susan Orlean, Isabel Wilkerson, Tom Wolfe.

*Week 7: Journalism After Reporters?* Just as the telegraph and the radio did, just as Benjamin Franklin Bache and Tom Wolfe did, the Internet is changing journalism yet again, and the job of the reporter along with it. What's next?

Readings included: citizen journalism on Huffingtonpost.com; crowd-sourcing on Talkingpointsmemo.com; criticism of the mainstream media on LittleGreenFootballs.com; live-blogging of protest and tragedy; Yoani Sanchez's bilingual blog from Cuba.