

This is a generic version of an actual syllabus available the first day of class or shortly before.

Journalism and Society: Covering the Earth
V54.0503.004 (Journalism), V36.0503 (Environmental Studies)
Fall 2008

Instructor: Dan Fagin
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Director of the Science, Health and Environmental Reporting Program

Tuesdays, 10-12:20, Room 654, 20 Cooper Square

Overview

Environmental journalism is hot again, and not only because the climate is warming – though that helps. As web-based platforms increasingly dominate mass media, what specific forms should the “new” environmental journalism take? This class will begin by tracing the development of traditional environmental journalism from John Muir to John McPhee and will then look closely at how the field is adapting to a fast-changing media landscape. With the help of guests and timely readings, we will confront thorny questions about environmental advocacy, citizen media, issue framing, risk balancing and the scientific process. And yes, we will produce stories that matter on the biggest news beat of all. This advanced seminar will include intensive journalistic writing assignments, as well as extensive readings for in-class discussion.

Writing Assignments

This is not a “writing class” per se, but you will write a critique, an essay and a feature story, among other assignments. The writing assignments are not lengthy, and that makes them more difficult because you need to think carefully about every word. (Word limits will be strictly enforced.)

It’s important that you type all of your assignments; don’t hand-write them. All assignments should be written in Microsoft Word (.doc files), so I can edit them and send them back with comments. If you need to use some other word-processing program, it’s your responsibility to make sure it’s a program I can work with. Unless I tell you otherwise, e-mail all of your assignments as attached files to dan.fagin@nyu.edu.

Readings

The assigned readings are not “extras” and they are not optional; they are central and essential to what we will accomplish together in this class. I expect you to do the readings as assigned and on time, and to be prepared to talk about them.

You should purchase two books for this course: Aldo Leopold’s *A Sand County Almanac* and John McPhee’s *Encounters with the Archdruid*. Both are available in paperback at the NYU bookstore and are absolute classics in the genre. In fact, you may already own them, as anyone who cares about environmental issues should.

I will also assign other readings just about every week in this class. They will either be hand-outs or freely available on the Internet (I've supplied tinyurls to make it easy to find these online).

Here's a tentative list of readings, subject to change:

Maxwell T. Boykoff and Jules M. Boykoff, "Balance as Bias: Global Warming and the U.S. Prestige Press," *Global Environmental Change*, Vol. 14 (2004), p. 125-36 (<http://tinyurl.com/2rxyhx>)

Maxwell T. Boykoff, "The Real Swindle," *Nature Reports Climate Change*, Feb. 21, 2008 (<http://tinyurl.com/35ehpf>).

Jeff Donn, Martin Mendoza and Justin Pritchard, "AP Probe Finds Drugs in Drinking Water," March 9, 2008 (<http://tinyurl.com/254n8d>).

John Fleck, "The Media and Climate Change: Revisiting Boykoff and Boykoff", blog item at <http://tinyurl.com/2vy5lj>.

Grist magazine, "They Walk the Line: Top Environmental Reporters Talk About Journalism vs. Activism," August 24, 2006 (<http://tinyurl.com/2o6yb3>).

U.S. Senator James Inhofe. *A Skeptic's Guide to Debunking Global Warming Alarmism* (<http://tinyurl.com/ydh2jg>).

Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (available for purchase at NYU Bookstore and elsewhere).

John McPhee, *Encounters with the Archdruid* (available for purchase at NYU Bookstore and elsewhere).

Chris Mooney, "Blinded by Science," *Columbia Journalism Review*, November/December 2004 (<http://tinyurl.com/2o2o8j>).

John Muir, "A Wind-Storm in the Forests," Chapter 10 in *The Mountains of California* (<http://tinyurl.com/36nr6e>, click on 'books', 'books by John Muir', 'The Mountains of California' and '10. A Wind-Storm in the Forests').

Matthew C. Nisbet and Chris Mooney, "Science and Society: Framing Science," *Science*, April 6, 2007, Vol. 316, No. 5821, p. 56 (available via Medline at NYU Home).

John Stauber and Sheldon Rampton, "The Sludge Hits the Fan," Chapter 8 in *Toxic Sludge is Good for You*, (<http://tinyurl.com/2dk552>).

Henry David Thoreau, "Walking" (<http://tinyurl.com/23z8d3>, all three parts).

Critiques

Just as important as the assigned reading will be the news articles that you find and read on your own. "Mainstream" environmental coverage is in flux and struggling for new forms as audiences increasingly seek information elsewhere, especially on the web. Critiquing conventional environmental coverage will thus be an important part of this class.

I will set aside some time each class to dissect recently published environmental stories, and will assign one or two people each week to lead the discussion. When it's your assigned week, I expect you to write a 500- to 700-word critique of a recently published story you will choose. You'll hand in your critique after the discussion. (Please make copies of the article you found for everyone.) The articles you pick for your critiques should be: a) on environmental topics, b) written for a broad, non-specialized

audience, c) between 500 and 2,000 words long, and d) less than perfect (because how do you critique a perfect story?) but not so awful that your criticisms are obvious.

The point of the critiquing exercise is to ask and answer questions such as: Was the writing effective? Was the sourcing complete? How could the piece have been organized better? How would your reporting strategy have been different? Your job is not just to show what went wrong in a piece of journalism, but more importantly to figure out what you would do differently to improve the piece.

There are, of course, many places you can find mass-market environmental stories to critique. If you're stumped, here are a few ideas, some obvious and some less so: newspapers such as *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Boston Globe*, *Chicago Tribune*, *USA Today*; magazines such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, *US News*, *Harper's*, *Esquire*, *Mother Jones*, *Smithsonian*, *Discovery*, *Outside*, *E Magazine*, *Audubon* and *Chemical and Engineering News*; web sites such as livescience.com, discover.com and many others. Every weekday, the Society of Environmental Journalists also posts a daily selection of new and notable environmental stories from around the country. To find it, go to sej.org and click on "EJ Today". (You don't have to join SEJ to get access to EJ Today, but if you're interested in environmental reporting you'd be nuts not to join.) Other excellent compilation sites include the "in the news" links at environmentalhealthnews.org and grist.org.

Discussion

This class is a seminar. Its success depends on robust discussion. Newsrooms are full of skeptics who question everything, and you should emulate them. No dubious assertion, especially by the professor, should go unchallenged. The best journalists take nothing for granted and everything with a grain of salt. So come prepared to contribute, to question, to argue – and to be called upon if you're too quiet.

Deadlines

Coping with deadlines is one of the most valuable skills you are learning at NYU. If you can't meet a deadline for a written assignment in this class, you're expected to have a very good reason. Even the best reason will not be good enough to avoid being marked down for lateness.

Grades

Your final grade in this class will be a combination of your written work and class discussion. Here's the formula:

Story critique: 700-word analysis plus five-minute presentation – 10 percent
Feature story pitches: Three at 200 words each – 10 percent
Debunking analyses: Two at 400 words each – 10 percent
Observational nature essay: 300 words – 10 percent
Website critique: 200-word blog posting plus presentation – 10 percent
Feature story: 1,200 to 1,500 words – 25 percent (10 percent initial version, 15

percent rewrite version)

Class participation (including attendance) – 25 percent
Scheduling and Attendance

This class will meet Tuesday mornings from 10 to 12:20 in Room 654. Because discussion is such an important part of the course, and because we are going to move quickly through a lot of material, I expect you to show up for class each week. If there's some reason you can't, you need to let me know beforehand via e-mail or telephone.

Contacting Me, Contacting You

You're welcome to contact me any time at dan.fagin@nyu.edu. If you prefer good old-fashioned interpersonal communication (and who doesn't?) you can call me at my NYU office (212-998-7971) or my home office (516-801-2477). Better still, you can find me in person at my office (Room 712 of 20 Cooper Square) after class on Tuesdays and also Thursday afternoons from 3 to 5. It's also important that you give me your current e-mail address in case I need to reach you, and that you check your e-mail regularly.

Course Sequence

We may detour as the term progresses, but here's the tentative plan:

Week One – Introduction

Week Two – Progenitors: Thoreau and Muir

Week Three – The standard model

Week Four – Pitch slam

Week Five – Nature writing: Leopold and McPhee

Week Six – Thunder on the right: advocacy, ideology and “selling papers”

Week Seven – Thunder on the left: phony balance, framing, corporate influence

Week Eight – Finding and vetting environmental data in a world of spin

Week Nine – Environmental health writing: risk in perspective

Week Ten – Peer editing

Week Eleven – New platforms

Week Twelve – New models

Week Thirteen – New audiences

Week Fourteen – New marketplaces

Assignment Sequence (subject to change)

For Week Two: Read Thoreau and Muir

For Week Three: Find five story ideas, read Donn

For Week Four: Write three 200-word pitches

For Week Five: Read Leopold and McPhee

For Week Six: Write nature observation, read Inhofe and Grist Q&A

For Week Seven: Write first debunking, read Nisbet, both Boykoffs and Fleck

For Week Eight: Write second debunking analysis, read Stauber

For Week Nine: Read Fagin, Easterbrook

For Week Ten: Turn in feature

For Week Twelve: Prepare website critique and blog item
For Week Fourteen: Turn in feature rewrite