Journalism as Social History: 
Or Can We Wean America from the Kardashians? 
School of Journalism and Mass Communication 
019:169:003 
JMC:3832:0003 

College of Liberal Arts and Sciences 
The University of Iowa 
Fall 2012 

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OFFICE AND HOURS: Adler Journalism Building (AJB), Room W-313; Wednesday 2 — 5 p.m., or by appointment. 

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CLASS LOCATIONS AND TIMES: E246 AJB, 12:30 – 1:45 p.m., Tuesday and Thursday 

CLASS GREETINGS, GOALS AND OBJECTIVES: 
Personal confession: I’m a book, Internet, newspaper, and magazine junkie. I’m a sucker for great nonfiction writing and can’t-put-it-down journalism. I go weak at the knees in the presence of a skilled storyteller. Terrific writing and journalism can make for a lofty goal: to create meaning out of the world. It’s what effective writers do — make meaning out of seemingly disparate events that combined, illuminated, and told in a compelling manner, create a new and important vantage point from which to assess the world (or more likely, a part of the world; usually, your part of the work). That’s what makes good writing great, and what transforms great writers into extraordinary writers. 

This syllabus gives a general outline of what to expect in this class. It breaks down the semester into weekly segments. Throughout the semester, we’ll dissect several books and articles. We’ll hone students’ skills in appreciating information-gathering, organization, thinking the story through and writing it. The first several classes will be a walk-through of some basic journalistic practices and tenets. The rationale: to make certain everyone is (more or less) on the same level. After that, we begin to fly. 

The overarching goal of this course will be to study, assess and probe the long-term convention of U.S. journalism and publishing, which mandates an institutional “top-down” perspective. U.S. media (as are almost all global media) are decidedly government-centric. What the government says gets reported — usually on page one or immediately in our 24/7 “feed-the-beast” media machine. When the president/congressperson/Fed chairman/mayor/coach opens his/her mouth, whatever comes out gets reported. It’s news. Or, so they say, it’s news. 

But it’s also self-serving public relations. 

When it comes to feature stories, or coverage of arts, science, fashion, sports, business and culture, what we often get from the popular media is similarly filtered public relations. “News” about celebrities is concocted by teams of publicity agents; what they say seldom has basis in fact. If it does, the “news” lacks a larger framework or context. Anyone who’s anyone in today’s media landscape has spokesmen/women, press secretaries, reps, or just “people” who primp and groom their clients’ public persona and the project it for all to see. In many ways, the media is
complicit in such meaningless reporting. When Jenn announces she’s expecting twins, it’s the lead story in thousands of magazines, blogs, newspapers, TV shows. It’s what Jenn’s people want, what millions of media consumers seem to crave, what bean counters live for. Everyone makes out nicely, thank you. But is Jenn’s twins’ pregnancy that important? Is it news?

Such non-event coverage isn’t new or different; it’s how the media have operated for more than a century. But because media outlets have become so bottom-line, profit-driven over the last decade, and because more and more journalists have lost their jobs in the same time period, what gets printed, broadcast or blogged today is often exactly what public-relations press offices have packaged for public consumption. There’s little or no journalistic filter. Controlling the press has never been easier. A ravaged, eviscerated U.S. media is a serious casualty in any democracy; more and politicians and image-makers are turning this malady to their advantage.

In the daily/hourly/minute-by-minute news mix that we get, seldom do we find stories of working-class, middle-class, or poor people. Untelegenic people need not worry. Their stories will be ignored. Stories of the butcher, baker, bartender, barber have no place in today’s star-struck power-media landscape. Main Street has ceded any relevance it may once have had to inside the Washington Beltway, or to the nation’s twin citadels of media muscle — New York and Los Angeles. It’s a redux the famous 1976 Saul Steinberg New Yorker cover (with D.C. and L.A. all grown up).
If there’s a compelling story outside the customary geographic contours, it’s about a hurricane, tornado, fire, earthquake, perhaps multiple murders (Aurora, Colorado, case in point). Pestilence must reign. Riveting images are essential. If it bleeds, it leads. Stories about ordinary people in out-of-the-way flyover country just don’t make it into the mix. If they do, their toast after several days. The rare story outside our comfort zone is an outlier. Mainstream American consumers are apparently accustomed to (and seemingly comfortable with) such a impoverished media menu.

And woe to you if you’re a media consumer who’s interested in in-depth foreign news. Forget it. Such coverage in the U.S. press is by and large nonexistent. Bye-bye world.

Some journalists, though, are breaching this longtime “top-down” convention in a refreshing, invigorating fanfare to the common man and woman. Such “bottom-up” journalism may even be gaining a small, tentative foothold in our media, particularly with the blossoming of different and exciting forms of social media. That such reporting may be showing signs of life may even reinvigorate the century-old credo, “Comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.” As importantly, such grassroots reporting may also serve to underscore a basic tenet of democracy.

During the next 15 weeks, we will read historical, as well as contemporary exemplars of such “bottom-up” journalism. We will discuss its power and utility. We will also seek to understand media consumers’ fascination with celebrity journalism, and attempt to figure out whether such a fixation has a fighting chance to be tempered through powerful narratives about everyday men and women.

In other words: Can we wean America from the Kardashians?

Someone’s got to do it.

Journalism as Social History is an intensive course. There is an awful lot of reading and writing required for this course. Students MUST NOT fall behind. Every class session will be based on the previous session. Like learning a foreign language or math (or building blocks), unless students have a solid foundation, anything they try to build will come tumbling down. We meet a total of 150 minutes a week, which isn’t much time, really. By the end of the semester, we will have met for the equivalent of less than one working week at a professional media job. (Think about that!) By necessity, much material will be slotted into each session. Be prepared to immerse yourself in a host of fascinating, cutting-edge issues over the next 15 weeks. Do more, not less, in preparing for each class session. Be prepared to discuss the readings and lectures.

REQUIRED TEXTS:
GRADING:
Students don’t have to be interested in becoming professional journalists to enroll in this course or to do well in it. Students ought to be intrigued about the topics at hand, want to read drop-dead gorgeous prose (the author’s books are an exception), write incisively about what they read, and actively participate in class discussion (it counts towards your final grade!).

Below is a breakdown of the components that make up students’ final grades:
1. Class discussion: 15 percent
2. Response Paper No. 1: Someplace in America: (Due Sept. 18) 15 percent
3. Response Paper No. 2: The Oxford Project: (Due Sept. 25) 15 percent
4. Response Paper No. 3: The Art of Fact: (Due Oct. 16) 15 percent
5. Response Paper No. 4: Postville (Due Nov. 6) 15 percent
6. Final Project: 25 per cent

Response Papers No 2 – 5 should be about 1,000 words each. The Final Project ought to be presented in a tight, condensed framework of 10 – 12 minutes.

Students will notice that the above grid includes 15 percent for class participation. Involve yourself by sharing your thoughts and perceptions. Fully engage. Your grade will depend on it.

THE FINAL PROJECT:
The Final Project is an exercise that attempts to challenge Iowa students’ creativity and ingenuity (GO HAWKS!) The idea is to place coverage of everyday people within the context of social history. In the past, I’ve had students create photo essays; short plays; creative PowerPoint presentations; research the gender, social, and political implications graffiti in campus bathrooms; audio interviews with ordinary but extraordinary people; and make YouTube videos. These are class presentations, so they ought to have both a visual and audio component. I will split the class into 10 sections of four students each. Since the combined massive brainpower of four students will go into final project, I’m expecting these efforts to be outstanding. Each group must advise me of its proposed topic by the deadlines set forth below, so I can give you feedback. For all Final Projects, students will conduct interviews with real people; if this poses a problem, students may want to reconsider enrolling in this course. Each group must present to me an explanation of the specific tasks undertaken by each student in the group so that parity of work is noted. Please supply me with a flashdrive of the final project. Student groups that opt to present their project before Thanksgiving break will receive an automatic five-percent bonus. Only two (of ten) groups will be able to opt to present earlier, so the sooner your group alerts me of this, the better. In no way ought the quality of the material presented by the groups that present before Thanksgiving break be any less excellent; the grading criteria will be exactly the same as for those groups that present after the break. The issue here is time: we need all groups to present before the end of the term.

Grading is an inexact science, particularly when it comes to writing and analysis. If you are distressed about your grades in this course, please meet with me as the semester progresses. (It’s a good idea to meet with me, by the way, even if you’re NOT distressed about your grades.) Don’t wait till the last week. Your assignments will be evaluated on several factors: thoroughness, organization, originality, enterprise, focus, clarity, precision, concision, spelling, punctuation and grammar. Don’t pad your papers. Every single word ought to be essential.
Below is a breakdown of basic standards used in evaluating student work, with pluses/minuses as indicators within each letter range. The designation of A+ will be awarded only in extraordinary cases:

- **A--** Exceptionally well written; arresting and probing, thoroughly researched and analyzed. Publishable as is.
- **B--** Basically clear, cohesive, well thought out and well researched, with minor problems of style and organization. Needs some further revision or additional material.
- **C--** Superficial, with organizational, stylistic, punctuation, grammar problems; missing vital detail. A major rewrite and additional research required.
- **D--** Serious problems in both form and content. Requires substantial additional research and thought before a successful rewrite can be attempted.
- **F--** Incomplete, confusing, fatal grammatical and syntactic flaws, which makes the piece unacceptable.

Students should expect to spend at least two hours per week per semester hour, preparing for this class and completing assignments. This means a minimum of six hours per week. As you and your group prepare for the Final Project, the work load will incrementally increase.

Exceptional work is expected.

**OTHER NOTES:**

1) This is not a class in journal writing, poetry or creative nonfiction. It asks students to assess some potent exemplars of “bottom-up” journalism, as well as to probe coverage of events that transpire during the semester. One of the cornerstones of this class (and journalism) is the constant notion of audience. I’m particularly interested in students writing well-constructed, provocative, well-reasoned essays in clear, concise and understandable prose. Journalists are always aware of audience; the journalist’s job is to snare, impress and otherwise wow readers by making the stories they write (or edit) so compelling and vital that readers won’t know what came over them as they devour the words. Think about this when tackling assignments for this class.

2) Students must deliver their assignments by deadline — the beginning of the class when the assignment is due. NO LATE PAPERS WILL BE ACCEPTED. No paper will be accepted unless it is typed and double-spaced. Binders are not necessary, just the assignment (stapled, no paperclips). Students should always keep a backup disk of their work. Proofread your work; use a spell-checker; read your work again. Then read it again. Then again. Polish it. If you use an adverb, make sure it absolutely needs to be in the sentence. Be your own best editor.

3) ATTENDANCE IS MANDATORY. If you must miss any class because of illness, an emergency, or a University-sanctioned activity, you must e-mail me prior to the beginning of class. No kidding. If you miss two classes without notifying me, you are courting trouble. The class will be run as a large seminar, and as such, your ongoing attendance, engagement and participation is vital to its success. Fellow students and I will be depending on you to bring clarity to our discussions. If you don’t show up, we may worry about you, too.

4) Arrive on time. Late arrivals interrupt the class and are a discourtesy to other students. Recurrent tardiness is a sign of immaturity, bad planning, personal transportation issues (all bad raps for writers, journalists, academics, anyone). Don’t be late.

5) Turn off your cell phone and portable computer during class. Note taking must be done by hand. No text messaging will be allowed. Ever.

6) Discuss your work with me. No questions are stupid. Given a couple of days, I will gladly read drafts of a paper in progress. I am here to serve you. If you’d like to talk about the readings or about a career in journalism/writing, I’d welcome a visit.
7) Plagiarism, or the use of others' work as one's own, is a serious violation of university, academic, and journalistic standards. Anyone who plagiarizes will receive a grade of F in the course. If you have any questions about what constitutes plagiarism, please ask. Students who commit academic fraud, dishonesty, or cheating will be subject to the rules and regulations of the Department, College, and University. Students are expected to be honest and honorable in their fulfillment of assignments.

8) Students have a responsibility to the rest of the class to help create a classroom environment where we all learn. Students are expected to follow all guidelines set by the Department, College, and University.

9) If students want to publish their work, do it after the piece is submitted for this class.

10) Students who have a disability that may require modification of course requirements in any way are encouraged to contact the instructor so that appropriate arrangements may be made. It is the student's responsibility to contact Student Disability Services. For more information, please visit www.uiowa.edu/~sds/ and obtain a Student Academic Accommodation Request form (SAAR). The site will specify what course accommodations are judged reasonable. Your instructor will endeavor to make all accommodations for students with any physical or learning disabilities. I also welcome hearing from anyone who has a disability that may require seating modifications or accommodations of any other class requirements. The instructor will keep all such requests confidential.

11) Students with suggestions or complaints about anything that happens in this course should not hesitate to talk to me. If a problem cannot be resolved within the structure of the course, students are encouraged to contact David Perlmutter, the director of the School of Journalism and Mass Communication (335-3482). If a satisfactory outcome is not obtained, students are urged to discuss such issues with personnel in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (the administrative home of the School and this course) and submit a complaint to the Associate Dean for Academic Programs, 120 Schaeffer Hall, (335-2633). Please consult the Liberal Arts Bulletin for a full discussion of grievance procedures.

12) Sexual harassment undermines the mission of the University and threatens the wellbeing of students, faculty, and staff. Sexual harassment in any form will not be tolerated.

13) University policy specifies that students are responsible for all official correspondence sent to their University of Iowa e-mail address (@uiowa.edu). Please check your university email daily.

14) In severe weather, class members should seek shelter in the basement of BCSB or Adler Journalism Building.

**TENTATIVE CLASS SCHEDULE**

Week One
Lecture No. 1 and discussion
Tuesday and Thursday, August 21 – 23, 2012
— Introduction; course overview; expectations; assignments; grading. The flashlight: shining a light into dark corners. Pass around Chicago Tribune vending machine: “Ideas Sold Here.” Writers make sense out of the world. Who I am; who you are. Journalistic terms: a glossary. What actually is news?
— Beginning of Bloom multimedia show.
— Discussion of Final Project.
Week Two
Lecture No. 2 and discussion
Tuesday and Thursday, August 28 – 30, 2012
— Continuation of Bloom multimedia show.
— Choo-Choo Train lecture: Engines (ideas); coal car (nut graphs); box cars (informational graphs); and the caboose (powerful endings). Look up. Opera scenario: Manny and Edna.
— Paper-based newspapers vs. the Internet: Examples of the possible.
— We look at the New York Times’ One-in-Eight-Million series; the Lexington Herald-Leader’s Healthcare in Rural Kentucky, Tobacco Cutting Contest.
— We listen to Bruce Springsteen, and make meaning out of the lyrics to several songs.
— From Multi-media Show: Journalism as Social History: The case of William Laurence and John Hersey. The case for bottom-up journalism.
• Assignment:
  — Start Someplace Like America, read pages IX — 181.

Week Three
Lecture No. 3 and discussion
Tuesday and Thursday, September 4 - 6, 2012
— Iowa Journalists Oral History Project video.
— What exactly is a response paper?
— Bill Wundrum’s story of Pinky.
— Who are Dale Maharidge and Michael Williamson, and what are they trying to do with Someplace like America? We look at video blogs for Someplace like America, https://www.facebook.com/someplacelikeamericathebook
— We prepare for a Skype interview with Maharidge next week. Questions you’re dying to ask. Each student comes up with two questions.
• Assignment:
  — Finish Someplace Like America.

Week Four
Lecture No. 4 and discussion
Tuesday and Thursday, September 11 - 13, 2012
— We Skype with Maharidge Thursday.
• Assignments:
  — Write Response Paper No. 1, reflecting on what Maharidge said in the interview, as well as a specific take on your impressionistic reading of Someplace in America, due next Tuesday.
  — Read The Oxford Project

Week Five
Lecture No. 5 and discussion
Tuesday and Thursday, September 18 – 20, 2012
— “Dancer Falls” video.
— Vandalism lecture.
— Discussion of Final Project: Groups coalesce.
— Begin discussion of The Oxford Project.
— Watch YouTube video of The Oxford Project.
• Assignment: Write Response Paper No. 2, reporting on The Oxford Project, pulling out text and drawing links and connections between those interviewed and photographed, due next Tuesday.
Week Six  
Lecture No. 6 and discussion  
Tuesday and Thursday, September 25 – 27  
OPEN  
• Assignment:  

Week Seven  
Lecture No. 7 and discussion  
Tuesday and Thursday, October 2 – 4, 2012  
— Discussion of *The Art of Fact: A Historical Anthology of Literary Journalism*.  
— Groups meet for Final Project  
• Assignment:  
  — Truman Capote (pages 161-168), Ted Conover (pages 331 — 335), James Agee (pages 417 — 421), Piers Paul Read (pages 183 — 198).

Week Eight  
Lecture No. 8 and discussion  
Tuesday and Thursday, October 9 – 11, 2012  
— Discussion of *The Art of Fact: A Historical Anthology of Literary Journalism*.  
— Discussion of Final Project, examples.  
• Assignment:  
  — Write Response Paper No. 3 comparing at least two stories in *The Art of Fact*, due next Tuesday. What makes them work *for you*? Provide supporting documentation.  
  — Groups submit one-page outline for idea for Final Project, due next Thursday.

Week Nine  
Lecture No. 9 and discussion  
Tuesday and Thursday, October 16 – 18, 2012  
OPEN; FINAL PROJECT groups meet  
• Assignment: Read first half of *Postville*, plan to finish Oct. 30.

Week Ten  
Lecture No. 10 and discussion  
Tuesday and Thursday, October 23 – 25, 2012  
— IPTV documentary of Postville; Begin discussion of *Postville*.  
• Assignment: Student Projects.

Week Eleven  
Lecture No. 11 and discussion  
Tuesday and Thursday, October 30 – November 1, 2012  
— Discussion of Postville, and Final Projects.  
• Assignment:  
  — Student Projects  
  — Response paper on *Postville* due next Tuesday.
Week Twelve
Lecture No. 12
Tuesday and Thursday, November 6 – 8, 2012
— Possible student presentations of select Final Projects.

Week Thirteen
Lecture No. 13
Tuesday and Thursday, November 13 – 15, 2012
— Student presentations of select Final Projects.

THANKSGIVING BREAK

Week Fourteen
Lecture No. 14
Tuesday and Thursday, November 27 – 29, 2012
— Student presentations of Final Projects.

Week Fifteen
Lecture No. 15
Tuesday and Thursday, December 4 – 6, 2012
— Student presentations of Final Projects.
— Wrap-up.

This schedule is tentative and subject to adjustment as the term unfolds. It does not cover all issues in a course that tracks ongoing events and how the media cover them. News happens. Our ongoing job is to discuss how specific news gets covered or ignored.