

**JRN 492: Senior Seminar** **Fall 1997**  
**Case Studies in Science, Environmental & Health Controversies**

**Com Arts 236 10:20 to 11:40 a.m. Tuesdays and Thursdays 3 credits**

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This seminar will focus on the role of the media in reporting about science, environmental and health controversies. It is a capstone course aimed primarily at seniors and graduate students. It is a discussion course and students will be expected to read extensively, participate in class discussions and write an in-depth analytical piece about a controversy not discussed in class. Students will also be asked to help lead at least one of the class discussions and to turn in two take-home exams, consisting of short-answer questions and an essay. A variety of outside speakers will participate in the discussions either in person or by speaker phone. The class may involve one or more field trips.

The class will begin discussing the role the media played in covering some historic environmental and health controversies such as the role of the Muckrakers in covering the Great Alaskan Land Fraud controversy of 1903 to 1911 and the Donora Smog episode of 1948. We will compare some of these cases with more recent coverage of environmental and health controversies.

We will then discuss one of Michigan's most controversial health and environmental cases -- the PBB contamination of cattle and agricultural livestock in the early 1970s. We will also take a brief look at how the media has covered controversies involving tobacco and health.

Then, we will look at how the media reported about a number of dramatic events of the late 1970s and 1980s -- the nuclear accidents at Three Mile Island (1979) and Chernobyl (1986); the explosion of the space shuttle Challenger in 1986 and the Exxon Valdez oilspill in 1989.

We will then focus on how the media covered a number of controversies involving scientific research conducted by environmental organizations and universities. We will look at the media's coverage of the Alar apple scare of 1989 and of cold fusion research in 1989. Then, we will examine how the media has covered -- and is covering -- scientific research involving a potential future threat -- global warming. We will also examine the issue of environmental racism and the media's role in reporting about population and possibly other issues.

We will also undoubtedly discuss the media's coverage of scientific, environmental and health controversies that occur during the fall semester. Students are encouraged to bring to class examples of media coverage to share with members of the class.

Since this is the first time this course is being offered, there will undoubtedly be changes made in some of the assignments and when they are due. We may shift around the dates of some class discussions to coincide with dates when speakers can come. **Important note: Listen in class to find out about changes in this tentative schedule. I will try to give you as much advance notice of changes in assignments as possible.**

### **Grading:**

Class discussions and attendance -- 20 percent

Two take-home examinations-- 30 percent

Final project -- 50 percent

**Class discussions** -- Students are expected to attend classes and to participate in class discussions. Students are expected to have read the reading materials prior to class. The instructor will ask each student to help lead at least one of the class discussions during this term. Since class discussions are a crucial part of a seminar course, attendance will be taken and students are expected to come to class.

**Take-home Exams**-- On Tuesday, October 7 and Thursday, Nov. 13 take-home exams, consisting of short answer questions and an essay questions will be distributed. Students will have one week to work on each of these exams out of class and must return them by Tuesday, October 14 and Thursday, Nov. 13, respectively. These will be open-book exams designed to test whether students have been doing the readings.

**Final project** -- Students will be asked to write a 15 to 20 page analytical paper on the media's coverage of a science, environmental or health controversy that is NOT one of the major case studies used in the class. The idea is to develop a case study that might be used in future classes. Students will be able to select a controversy to examine, subject to the approval of the instructor. In addition to the analysis, students will be asked to turn in supporting readings and documents. The first draft of the analysis will be due on Tuesday, Nov. 17 and the final paper is due on Thursday, Dec. 4, 1997.

**Textbooks** -- There is no single textbook that will be used in this course. We will draw upon selected chapters from Mass Media & Environmental Conflict: America's Green Crusades by Mark Neuzil and William Kovarik (Sage 1996); Media and the

Environment edited by Craig LaMay and Everette Dennis (Island Press 1991); Health in the Headlines by Stephen Klaidman (Oxford University Press 1991); Toxic Sludge Is Good For You by John Stauber and Sheldon Rampton and many newspaper and magazine articles, academic research papers and other sources.

### **Assignments:**

**Tuesday, August 25** -- Introduction to class. What is news? What is the media's role in covering controversies? A short videotape, "Covering the Environment: Front Page or Yesterday's News," edited by John Chancellor will be shown and discussed.

**Thursday, August 27** -- Read Introduction (pp. ix to xxvi) and Chapter 3 "The Media and Social Change: Mother of the Forest" (pp. 53 to 82) in Mass Media & Environmental Conflict. What is the true power of the mass media, according to sociologist Robert Parks? Does the mass media help or hinder social movements such as environmentalism? What was the role of the media in creating Yellowstone and Yosemite national parks? Which media had the greatest influence in shaping public opinion in the Nineteenth Century?

**Tuesday, Sept. 2** --Read pp. 9 to 18 and pp. 325 to 340 in "The Muckrakers" by Louis Filler. Also read "The Media and Social Change" (The Great Alaskan Land Fraud) pp. 83 to 104 in Mass Media & Environmental Conflict. Compare to "Open for Business" series in The (Bergen County) Record. Some questions to ponder: Who were the Muckrakers? Why did they grow in importance in the early 20th Century? What pressures were brought to bear on Collier's Magazine? How is the Ballinger case similar to the Watergate scandal of the 1970s?

**Thursday, Sept. 4** -- Read "The Importance of Dramatic Events" (pp. 163 to 193) in Mass Media & Environmental Conflict. (article about the Donora Killer Smog of 1948.) Questions: Who first reported the people who died at Donora? Why was news about efforts to cleanup air pollution put on the women's pages of the newspapers? Why do dramatic events change the public's perception about situations? Also read clips from The New York Times on the Minamata Bay mercury poisoning episode in Japan. What role did W. Eugene Smith's photographs play in this tragedy?

**Tuesday, Sept. 9** -- Discussion begins on the media's coverage of PBBs in Michigan. Read packet of articles about PBB episode. These include: "PBB" in Who's Poisoning America by Ellen Grzech; articles by Dick Lehnert of The Michigan Farmer; "Michigan's PBB Incident: Chemical Mix-Up Leads to Disaster" by Luther Carter in Science; and other articles.

**Thursday, Sept. 11** -- Discussion about PBBs continues.

**Tuesday, Sept. 16** -- Discussion of PBBs in Michigan continues.

**Thursday, Sept. 18** -- Read "A New Kind of Contagion" in The New Yorker about the Mad Cow Disease episode in England. How does Mad Cow Disease compare with the PBB contamination of Michigan?

**Tuesday, Sept. 23** -- Discussion begins about the media's coverage of tobacco and health. Read "Blowing Smoke" and "Smokers' Hacks" and other articles in packet. Showing of Bill Moyers' video on Edward Bernays, the father of the public relations' industry, who used the mass media to convince women to smoke.

**Thursday, Sept. 25** -- Continuing discussion about tobacco, public health and the media's role.

**Tuesday, Sept. 30** -- Discussion begins about media's coverage of radiation. Read "The Radium Girls" in Mass Media & Environmental Conflict. Also, read "Radon: A Tale of Two Towns" from Health In the Headlines.

**Tuesday, Oct. 2** -- Discussion on radiation, nuclear energy and the media continues.

**Thursday, Oct. 7** -- Discussion about Three Mile Island. Read packet of articles about Three Mile island, including "A Case of Benign Neglect: Coverage of Three Mile Island Before the Accident" by Sharon Friedman, "Not Just Another Day in the Newsroom" by Ann Marie Cunningham, "At Three Mile Island" by Peter Sandman and Mary Paden and other articles. Continuing discussion about Three Mile Island and its aftermath. Showing of excerpts from "The China Syndrome" and other videos. **Take-home exam is distributed.**

**Thursday, Oct. 9** --**Continuing discussion on Three Mile Island.** Read "A New Species of Trouble" by Kai Erikson in Communities at Risk.

**Tuesday, Oct. 14** -- **First take-home exam is due.** Continuing discussion about nuclear power. Read "Spinning the Atom;" "Nuclear Power: How Safe is Safe Enough" and other articles.

**Thursday, Oct. 16** -- Continuing discussion about nuclear power and the media.

**Tuesday, Oct. 21** -- Discussion about Chernobyl and media's coverage of radiation issues. Read packet of articles from The New York Times, The Philadelphia Inquirer and other articles. Also read "How the News Media Reported on Three Mile island and Chernobyl" by David M. Rubin; "Did Network Television Sensationalize Chernobyl Coverage" by Carole Gorney; and "Risk Analysis and the Construction of News" by Lee Wilkins and Philip Patterson in Journal of Communication. Showing excerpts of "Back to Chernobyl" video with Bill Kurtis.

**Thursday, Oct. 23** -- Continuing discussion about Chernobyl.

**Tuesday, Oct. 28** -- Discussion about the Exxon Valdez Oilspill. Read packet of materials, including "Exxon Valdez: How to Spend Billions and Still Get a Black Eye" by William J. Small in Public Relations Review.

**Thursday, Oct. 30** -- Discussion about the Exxon Valdez oilspill continues.

**Tuesday, Nov. 4** -- Discussion about the explosion of the space shuttle Challenger. Showing of CNN videotapes. Read “NASA and the Spellbound Press” by William Boot in Columbia Journalism Review; and other articles.

**Thursday, Nov. 6** -- Second take-home open-book exam will be distributed. More discussion about media coverage of the Challenger Disaster.

**Tuesday, Nov. 11** -- Discussion about the Cold Fusion controversy of 1989. Read packet of articles from Time, Newsweek, The Philadelphia Inquirer and other publications. Also, read “Shamans & Criers” by Ronald Hart in The Quill.

**Thursday, Nov. 13** -- **Second take-home exam is due.** Discussion about Alar and the media’s coverage of contaminated grapes and apples.

**Tuesday, Nov. 18** -- **First draft of final paper is due.** Discussion about the media’s coverage of scientific research involving global warming. Read “The Life Course of an Environmental Issue: Claims, Frames and Global Warming” by Craig Trumbo; excerpts from The Heat Is On by Ross Gelbspan; “The Future of The Planet” in The Philadelphia Inquirer by Jim Detjen and Mark Jaffe; and other articles.

**Thursday, Nov. 20** -- More discussion about global warming.

**Tuesday, Nov. 25** -- Discussion about environmental racism.

**Thursday, Nov. 27** -- No class. Thanksgiving.

**Tuesday, Dec. 2** -- Discussion about under-covered issues, such as population. Read “Does Media Framing Keep Population off the Public Agenda?” by Michael Maher and other articles.

**Thursday, Dec. 4** -- **Second draft of final paper is due.** Final class. Wrap-up.