

## **JRN 892 Section 1 Spring 2004**

### **Reporting about Health, Science and Environmental Controversies**

**Com Arts Room 236 6 to 8:50 p.m. Thursdays 3 credits**

**Instructor:** Professor Jim Detjen, 382 Communication Arts Building. Phone: 353-9479.  
E-mail: Detjen@msu.edu . **Office hours:** 2:30 to 4:30 p.m. Tuesdays and Thursdays

This graduate seminar will focus on the role of the media in reporting about science, environmental and health controversies. It is a discussion class 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 write a "tip sheet," offering advice on how to report about a scientific, health or environmental issue. 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. We will also discuss the Donora Smog episode of 1948 and 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 discuss more recent food controversies, such as Mad Cow Disease, and the media's coverage of tobacco and health. We will examine how news organizations have reported about some complicated public health controversies involving AIDS, SARS and exposure to Anthrax.

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); and the explosion of the space shuttles Challenger (1986) and Columbia (2003). We will then focus on how the media reported about a number of controversies involving scientific research, such as cold fusion and cloning. 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 media's role in reporting about population, pseudo-science and possibly some other issues.

We will also discuss the media's coverage of scientific, environmental and health controversies that occur during the spring semester. Students are encouraged to read daily newspapers, such as The New York Times or Chicago Tribune, and to bring to class examples of media coverage to share with other students.

There will undoubtedly be changes made in some of the topics we discuss, class activities and possibly the assignments. Please listen in class to find out about changes in this tentative schedule. I will try to give you as much advance notice of changes as possible.

**Grading:**

Class discussions and attendance -- 30 percent  
In class exercises -- 10 percent  
Tip sheet -- 10 percent  
Final class presentation -- 20 percent  
Case Study/final project -- 30 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. Students are encouraged to be creative in finding ways to make the classes as interesting and stimulating as possible. Since class discussions are a crucial part of a seminar course, attendance will be taken and students are expected to come to class. Please contact me in advance if your work schedule or personal affairs require you to miss a class.

**Exercises** -- There will be some in-class exercises. Some of these will be designed to test whether students have been doing the readings. Please read the assignments *before* each class and come prepared to discuss them.

**Tip sheet** -- Students will also be asked to develop a “tipsheet,” offering practical tips on how to cover a specific environmental, health and science controversy. Copies will be made and distributed to members of the class. These should be about two pages long. Due date: Thursday, March 4.

**Final project** -- Students will be asked to write a 15 to 20 page case study 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. They will also lead a class discussion on this topic during one of the last three classes of the semester. 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 the paper they will give a history of the controversy, outline the arguments of each side, discuss the media’s coverage of the issue and list key resources and suggested readings. 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 April 8 with the final paper due April 22.

**Textbooks** -- There is no single textbook that will be used in this course. We will use a course pack, which will be available at Budget Printing in Trowbridge Plaza and a special 2004 issue of the *Nieman Reports* on science, environmental, health and medical journalism. Our course pack will include selected readings 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.

**Class Schedule and Assignments:**

**Thursday, Jan. 15** -- 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. Dave Poulson, assistant director of the Knight Center and a former environmental reporter for Booth Newspaper, will discuss news coverage of some of the environmental controversies he has worked on. Students will write a short biographical sketch of themselves.

**Thursday, Jan. 22** – Topic: Early news media coverage and the Muckrakers. Assignment: In the course pack, read Introduction and Chapter 3 "The Media and Social Change: Mother of the Forest," "The American Plan," "The Ballinger Case" and articles about saving the Adirondacks, Yosemite and birds. Also, read a modern example of investigative environmental reporting, "Open for Business." 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? Compare 19<sup>th</sup> Century reporting to the "Open for Business" series. 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, Jan. 29** – Topic: Discussion of dramatic events and the impact of photojournalism. Assignment: Read "The Importance of Dramatic Events" and "Not a blade of grass grew" about the Donora Killer Smog of 1948. Also, read pages 60 to 62 and 74 to 78 in Nieman Reports. 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 and the prologue to W. Eugene and Aileen Smith's book, "Minamata." What role did W. Eugene Smith's photographs play in this tragedy? How important is the inclusion of victims in reporting about public health and environmental controversies?

**Thursday, Feb. 5** – Topic: PBBs and Mad Cow Disease. Discussion begins on the media's coverage of PBBs in Michigan. Read articles about PBB episode. These include: "PBB" 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; articles from the Detroit News and "Thirty Years Later: The Lessons of PBBs."

Also, read pages 41 to 43 (reporting about food) in Nieman Reports and "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?

**Thursday, Feb. 12** – More discussion about Mad Cow Disease. We will also discuss influenza, SARS and other and diseases. Assignment: Read "How Now, Mad Cow," "Mad cow just one in a family of diseases," "Mad Cow and the Media," "Avoid the

Seven Deadly Sins of Medical Reporting” and the article about the flu crisis. Also, read pages 12-13, 28-29, 69 and 212-214 in Nieman Reports.

**Thursday, Feb. 19** – Discussion about the media’s coverage of AIDS. How good a job does the news media do in reporting about international and global health threats? Assignment: Read pages 24-26 (cultural assumptions), 87-88 (story telling) and 135-148 (health care and AIDS) in Nieman Reports.

We also will discuss how the media has reported about anthrax and bioterrorism. Read 114-119 (anthrax)

**Thursday, Feb. 26** – Discussion about chronic health threats, such as cancer caused by smoking, and exposure to lead. Discussion begins about the media’s coverage of tobacco and health. Read “Blowing Smoke,” “Smokers’ Hacks,” “Smoking Up a Storm” and “Media Strategies for Smoking Control.” On the subject of lead, read “Conflict Management and Scientific Understanding” about the 1920s ethyl leaded gasoline controversy.

**Thursday, March 4** – Discussion about business and economic pressures affecting medical research and health and science journalism. We will also discuss the increased restrictions journalists face in obtaining information about health and the environment from government agencies. Read page 37-39, 67-68, 157-162 (distrust in medical reporting and medical secrecy) and 205-208 (medical reporting in a highly commercialized environment) in Nieman Reports and “The Biotech Death of Jesse Gelsinger” and “How We Covered the Hidden Fatality in a Clinical Trial.” Also, read “Journalists Face New Restrictions on Information” and “SEJ tackles data controls.” Tip sheet assignment is due.

**Thursday, March 11** – No class. Spring break.

**Thursday, March 18** – Discussion of the explosions of the space shuttles Challenger in 1986 and the Columbia in 2003. What mistakes did the news media make before the Challenger explosion? Did it do a better job prior to the Columbia disaster in 2003? Showing of CNN videotapes. Read “NASA and the Spellbound Press” “The Challenger Explosion;” “The Return of the Shuttle Syndrome;” “NASA’s code of silence” and “The Columbia is Lost.” Also read pages 84-86 (covering breaking news) in Nieman Reports.

**Thursday, March 25** – Discussion of news stories involving radiation. We will first discuss some historic examples involving radon and radium. Then we will talk about the media’s coverage of the 1979 Three Mile island and 1986 Chernobyl nuclear accidents. Read “The Radium Girls” and “Reporting on Radon” in the course pack.

We will then discuss the Three Mile Island and the Chernobyl nuclear accidents. Read packet of articles about Three Mile island, including “Blueprint for Breakdown,” “Not Just Another Day in the Newsroom,” “A New Species of Trouble” and “Before and After TMI.” Also, read “How the News Media Reported on Three Mile island and Chernobyl,” “10 Years Later Chernobyl Still Kills in Belarus” and “Spinning the Atom.”

**Thursday, April 1** – Discussion of the news media’s coverage of climate change and global warming. What difficulties does the news media face in reporting about potential future threats? Read “The Greenhouse Issue Heats Op,” “The Heat is On,” “Mass

Media and Global Warming,” “Industry Plans on Climate Change” “The Top 10 Global Warming Myths” and other articles.

**Thursday, April 8** – Reporting about cold fusion, cloning of people and other flawed scientific research. How can reporters tell the difference between bogus and valid scientific research? What lessons can be learned from these episodes? Read University of Utah press release, “Scientists stir debate on fusion,” “Fusion or Illusion,” “Cold Fusion: End of Act 1;” “What ever Happened to Cold Fusion?” “Fusion or Confusion?” and other articles.

**Thursday, April 15** – Class presentations begin. If we have time, we will discuss some important issues that are undercovered, such as population growth, and explore the reasons why.

**Thursday, April 22** – Class presentations continue.

**Thursday, April 29** – Class presentations conclude.

#### UNIVERSITY POLICIES

Plagiarism: Students are expected to do their own work on all assignments. Students who cheat, fabricate or plagiarize will receive a 0.0 on the assignment and may fail this course. Plagiarism is defined as presenting another person’s work or ideas as one’s own. For additional information about this policy check the ”General Procedures and Regulations’section of the MSU Academic Programs publication.

Accommodations for Disabilities: If you are a student with a disability who requires reasonable accommodations, please call the OPHS Disability Resource Center at 353-9642 (voice) or 355-1293 (TTY).

Observing a Major Religious Holiday: You may make up course work missed to observe a major religious holiday only if you make arrangements in advance with the instructor.

Missing Class to Participate in a Required Activity: If you must miss class to participate in a required activity for another course, provide the instructor with adequate advanced notice and a written authorization from the faculty member of the other course.

#### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION:

Professor Jim Detjen joined the MSU Journalism School faculty in January 1995 as the Knight Chair in Journalism, the nation’s only endowed chair in environmental reporting. He is also the Director of MSU’s Knight Center for Environmental Journalism. He is a full professor with tenure.

Prior to joining MSU's faculty, he spent 21 years as a professional newspaper reporter and editor. He covered local government, police, agriculture and the environment for "The Poughkeepsie (N.Y.) Journal" from 1973 to 1977. He covered environmental issues, worked as an investigative reporter and wrote editorials at "The Courier-Journal" in Louisville, Kentucky from 1978 to 1982. He covered scientific, environmental and medical issues and served as a part-time editor on the science, state, city, national and foreign desks of "The Philadelphia Inquirer" from 1982 to 1994. He has also worked as a part-time correspondent for "The New York Times" and his work has been published in "The Washington Post", "The Chicago Tribune", "The Detroit Free Press", "The Boston Globe" and many other newspapers and magazines.

He has won more than 50 state and national awards for his reporting, including the George Polk Award, the National Headliner Award for investigative reporting, the Thomas Stokes Award for natural resources reporting (twice) and the Edward Meeman Award for environmental reporting (five times). His work has been nominated eight times for a Pulitzer Prize and he has been a finalist three times. In 1998 he was awarded the International Green Pen Award for his worldwide contributions to environmental journalism and in 1999 was named the outstanding teacher by J-School students at Michigan State University.

He is the founding president of the U.S. Society of Environmental Journalists and served as the president of the International Federation of Environmental Journalists from 1994 to 2000.

He has a B.S. degree from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, N.Y. where he was the managing editor of his college newspaper and a M.S. degree with honors from the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism.

He has also taught at Drexel University in Philadelphia and Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, N.Y. and he has lectured at Oxford, Yale, Columbia, Princeton, M.I.T., the University of Michigan, the University of Texas, the University of Tennessee and many other universities. During the spring 2002 semester he taught at Nankai University in Tianjin, China as part of a Fulbright Scholarship.

Professor Detjen and his wife Connie are the parents of two sons, Chris and Brad.