

Seminar in Public Affairs

COMM-710.001W
Spring semester 2007
Saturday, 9 a.m.–5 p.m.
American University
School of Communication

W. Joseph Campbell, Ph.D.

Office: 125 McDowell Hall
Office phone: (202) 885-2071
E-mail: wjc@american.edu
Online: www.wjosephcampbell.com
Office hours: Monday, 1–3:30 p.m.
Wednesday, 9 a.m.–12:30 p.m.
Friday, by appointment

Our Seminar in brief

Welcome to “Seminar in Public Affairs,” a discussion-based class designed to offer dimension, context, perspective, and texture to your graduate studies. I am pleased to be teaching the Seminar and will work hard to make our course relevant, challenging, and revealing.

Over the next several weeks, we will examine topics vital to contemporary journalism in the United States and consider as well as the roles of the news media in public life. Specifically, we will explore:

- The dramatic changes to the media landscape in the United States.
- The decisive moments that have helped shape American journalism.
- The importance of tolerating and promoting dissent in a democratic society.
- The exceptionality of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

The Seminar also will allow you to become acquainted with the exceptional, only-in-Washington resources of the Library of Congress, where you will conduct research for a paper due at our last class session in early May.

We will engage in what I expect will be an engaging blend of in-class discussions, lectures, weekly reading assignments, and individual research. We have a good deal of intriguing, vital, and intellectually challenging material to consider—and I trust that we will do so collegially, and in a spirit of open inquiry.

We’ll work hard over the next several weeks, and we’ll seek to have some fun along the way.

Readings in the Seminar

The Seminar's required texts are:

- *The Victorian Internet* (Berkley Trade, paperback edition, 1999. ISBN: 0425171698). Think the Internet is novel? Tom Standage asserts otherwise in his brisk, engaging study of the 19th century electric telegraph.
- *Why Societies Need Dissent* (Harvard University Press, paperback edition, 2005. ISBN: 0674017684). A law professor offers a thoughtful, lucid discussion about the importance of dissent in democratic societies.
- *The Year That Defined American Journalism: 1897 and the Clash of Paradigms* (Routledge, 2006; ISBN: 0275981134). The first-ever year study in journalism research considers pivotal moments in the field in 1897.

These books may be purchased at the AU Campus Store.

Numerous **supplemental readings**—typically recent articles from newspapers, journals, and trade publications—will be made posted at the class “Blackboard” site or, on occasion, distributed in class. These, too, will represent important assignments.

The vital importance of academic integrity

Matters of academic integrity are vitally important, and you are urged to become familiar with your rights and responsibilities as defined in the University's Academic Integrity Code. The Code may be accessed online at:

<http://www.american.edu/academics/integrity/index.htm>

Violations of the Code will not be treated lightly, not in this class. There is simply no place in the Seminar for plagiarism, cheating, tampering with quotations, or other forms of academic dishonesty. And make no mistake: I have taken—and I will take—disciplinary action if violations are discovered.

Please be sure to see me should you have questions about academic integrity as described in the Code or as the topic relates to this class.

Expectations and procedures

My expectations are high for our Seminar, and you are asked to do more than show up every week, take notes, and give it all back on the final exam in early May. Developing and sharpening skills of conducting research, and thinking hard and imaginatively about important media-related issues, are vital. Regularly joining class discussions is essential, and to participate meaningfully you'll want to keep up with what will be a fairly demanding schedule of reading assignments and bring to class your ideas, questions, and observations.

We'll convene promptly at 9 a.m. Saturday, and you are expected to attend. I consider late arrivals a discourtesy to all, so please be punctual. I will take attendance and do reserve the option to consider absences, late arrivals, and early departures in determining final grades.

A few requests: Please be sure that cell phones and other hand-held devices are switched **off** while we're in session. I'd rather you not use laptop computers during class; in my experience, they're just too distracting. And do let me know should illness or other personal reasons keep you from attending class.

Breaks? We'll take short breaks periodically during the day.

Food in class? It's OK, but in moderation. Be sure to dispose of waste and wrappings in the bins outside the classroom.

Late assignments? Nope. I **do not accept late papers** in this or any other class, unless truly exceptional circumstances intervene. And those circumstances tend to be quite rare.

I may be reached routinely via email—I check my AU email account, wjc@american.edu, quite often. You're also welcome to reach me through my campus telephone number, which is: 202/885-2071.

Seminar assignments

Grades in the Seminar will be determined by your work on the following assignments, which are listed chronologically, by due date:

- | | |
|---|-------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Review of <i>The Victorian Internet</i> , due March 24: | 15 percent |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Reaction paper , due via email March 26: | 5 percent |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Review of <i>Why Societies Need Dissent</i> , due April 21: | 20 percent |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Draft research paper , due April 21: | 5 percent |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Research paper , due May 5: | 30 percent |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Final exam (essays), given May 5: | 25 percent |

A detailed description of each assignment follows.

Book reviews

Please plan to write analytical

reviews of Tom Standage's *Victorian Internet* and Cass Sunstein's *Why Societies Need Dissent*. Your review of *The Victorian Internet* is due at the start of class March 24. We'll discuss your impressions of the book during class that morning. Your review of *Why Societies Need Dissent* is due at the start of class April 21.

In completing these assignments, plan to submit separate, well-written analyses of 4–6 pages (double spaced). The review of *Victorian Internet* should run 4–5 pp. The review of *Why Societies Need Dissent* should be longer and approach 6 pp.; that review should pay particular attention to the contents of chapters 5 and 7.

Both reviews should offer a brief **summary** of the content (and the emphasis is on *brief*), and then, in seamless fashion, discuss in some detail the book's:

- **strengths and weaknesses**: What are they, specifically? Was the premise adequately supported? How might the book have been improved?
- **writing style**: Is it clear, accessible, engaging? Could the writing have been improved? How and where, specifically?
- **takeaway**: What is the most significant or important insight that you've taken away from the book? Did this important "takeaway" come as a surprise to you?
- **relevance**: In what ways does the book resonate or correspond to deliberations in our Seminar? Include a recommendation about whether the book should be required reading in future sections of this class.

Be sure to cite **examples** from the books to support the points you make in your review. But be judicious, and refrain from quoting at length from the books.

Also try to avoid “fly-specking.” That is, don’t belabor a minor point or inconsequential shortcoming.

Keep in mind that these assignments are not collaborative efforts or group projects: The reviews are your work, so avoid teaming up in preparing and writing them. And refrain from reading reviews of the books posted at amazon.com and other sites.

Reaction paper

At mid-afternoon on March 24, we’ll attend the screening of “Invisible Children,” a documentary to be shown in Weschler Theatre as part of the School of Communication’s annual “Reel Journalism” festival. The documentary explores the plight of child soldiers in East Africa. Its promotional material asks: “Can a story change the world?”

“Invisible Children” has a run time of about an hour. We’ll adjourn for the day after the screening, although you are welcome to stay for the panel discussion to follow.

Please plan to write a well-crafted, 500-word reaction paper about “Invisible Children,” picking up on the question, “Can a story change the world?” Specifically discuss whether such a documentary can have a profound impact on policies and practices in East Africa. If so, how so? If not, why not? Also be sure to describe your own reactions to the documentary, and mention whether you’ve read or heard much in U.S. news media about child soldiers in Africa.

By noon Monday, March 26, send your reaction paper to me in the text field of an email message (that is, don’t send it as a Word attachment). I’ll return your graded papers March 31.

1995 research paper

The year 1995 may well be regarded as a watershed for American news media. It has been described as “the year the world went digital” and the “year of the Internet.” The much-hyped release of the Windows 95 operating system that year attracted unprecedented levels of national interest and attention.¹ Netscape went public in 1995 at \$28 a share on the strength of its popular and widely used Web browser—a browser that introduced millions of people to the Web. Netscape’s IPO signaled the start of the dot.com boom of the late 1990s.

What’s more, leading online sites such as eBay, salon.com, and craigslist.org all were established in 1995. The first PlayStation went on sale in the United States that year. The DVD emerged in 1995. The last original “Calvin and Hobbes” comic strip was published at the end of 1995. And the “trial of the century” unfolded that year, when O.J. Simpson was tried on, and acquitted of, double murder charges.

Through the exceptional resources of Library of Congress, you will research the crowded year of 1995 and offer an informed assessment as to whether it was recognized then as a watershed, and whether, in your view, 1995 deserves recognition as a pivotal moment for the news media.

¹ The *Washington Post* said then: “You can hide under a bridge, row a boat to the middle of the ocean or wedge yourself under the sofa, cover your ears and then hum loudly. But get near a newspaper, radio, television or computer retailer today and you will experience the multimillion-dollar hype surrounding the launch of Windows 95.” Microsoft spent an estimated \$300 million to promote Windows 95. See David Segal, “With Window 95’s Debut, Microsoft Scales Heights of Hype,” *Washington Post* (24 August 1995): A14.

This assignment will allow you to consult primary source material and, quite possibly, introduce you to an essential if extremely low-tech kind of research—that of cranking microfilm.

In researching this assignment, we will visit the Newspaper and Current Periodical Reading Room (see <http://lcweb.loc.gov/rr/news/about.html>) at the Library's Madison Building. There, you are to examine the **main news section** and the **editorial pages** of a 1995 newspaper published in your hometown or home state.

At a minimum, your review of the newspaper's content in 1995 is to cover:

- The week in which your birthday fell.**
- The week of Netscape's IPO (August 6–12).**
- The week of Microsoft's launch of Windows 95 (August 20–26).**
- The week following the launch of Sony's "Playstation" (September 10–16).**
- The seven days from Christmas to New Year's Eve (December 25–31), inclusive.**

You're welcome to review other weeks of the year as well.

In cases of overlap (say, for example, your birthday fell during the week Netscape went public), please choose the week immediately preceding.

At the Madison Building, here's what to do:

1. **Select** a seven-day-a-week newspaper from your hometown or your home state (or a state where you may want to live one day). Do *not* choose the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, or the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. **Why?** Because the digitized, full-text content of those newspapers is available at the ProQuest "historical newspapers" database, which may be accessed through the AU's library online site.

But there are plenty of other daily newspapers from which to choose, including these important regional titles:

- *Boston Globe*
- *Cleveland Plain Dealer*
- *Dallas Morning News*
- *Kansas City Star*
- *Philadelphia Inquirer*
- *Portland Oregonian*
- *Raleigh News & Observer*
- *San Francisco Chronicle*

Please note that you may place microfilm on the **reserve shelf** in the Newspaper Reading Room for as long as three days. Doing so will enable you to retrieve the microfilm promptly when you make a return visit.

2. **Submit** a request for microfilmed issues of the newspaper for the four weeks listed above. Please note that microfilm requests usually are filled within 20 minutes. Sometimes, though, it does take longer. Several newspapers are available in the Newspaper Reading Room on a **self-serve basis**. These titles include the *Boston Globe*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, and *San Francisco Chronicle*.
3. **Scroll through** the microfilmed issues of each week, **scanning** the front pages as well as the main news section and the editorial pages. You need not read *everything* on those pages and you need not take copious notes. *Scan* is the key word here; but do pause to read the articles you find particularly interesting, odd, shocking, or memorable. And make note of:

- the newspaper's **appearance**: *Does it look a lot like newspapers of today? What is most striking to you about the 1995 newspaper's appearance?*
- the **coverage** of the week's major topics: *What were the dominant news topics? Did they seem to fade quickly from prominence after a day or two? Did the Windows 95 release and the Netscape IPO attract much coverage? In reviewing the period of Dec. 25–31, did the newspaper carry any (or many) year-in-review articles? Did these retrospective pieces describe 1995 as an exceptional year for the media? What, if anything, did the retrospectives say about the emerging digital revolution? Were terms such as "digital revolution" used then?*
- the **editorials** during the weeks of your review: *What sorts of topics were discussed in the editorials? Were developments in digital or new media addressed very often, or at all? Did any editorial strike you as particularly perceptive? What about the year-end editorials—was there anything striking or insightful about them?*
- the **letters to the editor**: *What kinds of topics were readers addressing? Did any of them offer a sense that 1995 was an exceptional year? Were any letters particularly perceptive or insightful on topics specific to your paper?*
- any **articles** on the front page or **editorials** about topics that strike you as **odd, amusing, or naïve**: *For example, these could be reports or commentaries that pooh-pooed the digital revolution. Or they could be Utopian accounts about the expected glories of the digital world. So note anything that strikes you, from the perspective of early 2007, as odd, amusing, or naïve.*

Drawing on the material you gather in your research at the Library of Congress, aim to write a **15–17 page paper** (double spaced; the page length requirement includes notes) that discusses your impressions of the newspaper and covers the elements described in item 3. Also discuss in the **concluding section** of your paper whether your newspaper seemed to regard 1995 as an exceptional or decisive year. And to you, does the year seem to have been exceptional for the media? Does it seem to qualify as a decisive year? Please note there are no hidden answers to uncover in this assignment: The conclusions you reach are those drawn from—and supported by—your research.

You are welcome to attach **photocopies** to your paper, to illustrate or underscore your points, as you feel is warranted. But doing so is not required.

As with any research paper, be sure to include citations of the articles to which you refer. This is essential. I prefer **footnotes** and will discuss the footnoting method before the assignment is due. (An example of footnoting a newspaper article appears at the bottom of page 4 of the syllabus.)

A **draft** of your paper is due at the start of class **April 21**. Ideally, the draft will be nearly complete. I'll read and return your drafts, with comments and suggestions, on **April 28**. **Two copies** of the final version of your 1995 papers are at 11 a.m. on **May 5**, our meeting time that day. We'll briefly discuss your research and your findings that day.

Final essays

The final exam will be given **May 5**, shortly after we've completed our discussion of the 1995 papers.

You will be asked to write **two** detailed, analytical essays about topics drawn from assigned readings and class discussions. Specific details will be reviewed in class April 28, to allow time to prepare.

Seminar in Public Affairs, week by week

Our seminar will hew as closely as is practical to the following schedule. Unforeseen or exogenous events, may give rise to modest adjustments to this timetable.

March 17—Getting acquainted, getting going. We'll start by taking up the question: *Whiter the news media in a digital age? Does the specter of "Googlezon" lie ahead?* We'll also discuss the "Web sites that [supposedly] changed the world" and take up a bit of media theory in considering the stunning impact of the outpatient-care scandal at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center.

We'll also discuss writing a solid book review.

In the afternoon, we'll pay a visit to the Madison Building of the Library of Congress. Please plan to arrive there no later than 2:30 p.m. First stop will be the reader registration office on the first floor. There, we'll pick up the reader's card required for using LOC reading rooms. Then, we'll go down the hallway to the newspaper room, where you can get going on your 1995 research paper. Plan to stay till the newspaper room's closing time, 5 p.m.

For next time: Read and write a review of *The Victorian Internet*. *Also:* Please read "The Internet? Bah!" and "The Year of the Internet," both from *Newsweek* in 1995 and both available following class at the "handouts" tab of "Blackboard." *In addition*, please read "We are the Web" (a *Wired* article from 2005) and "Top 10 Tech of 1995," both available following class at the "online sites" tab of "Blackboard." Also read the item at info.cern.ch, posted at "online sites."

March 24—We'll discuss your reviews of *The Victorian Internet*, which are **due** at the start of class. We'll ruminate about how *new* the new media landscape really is. During the discussion, we'll consider the implications of blogs and blogging, asking: They're *democratizing* the media in unprecedented ways, aren't they?

We'll also take a look at 1995—"the year of the Internet"—and consider what made it such a decisive year.

In the afternoon, we'll attend the screening of "Invisible Children," in the School of Communication's "Reel Journalism" festival. You're welcome to stay for the discussion that is to follow.

For next time: Write a 500-word reaction paper about the "Invisible Children" documentary, which is due via email at noon on Monday, March 26. *Also* please read *The Year That Defined American Journalism*, and the *USA Today* article about advocacy among journalists, which will be available following class at the "online sites" tab of "Blackboard." While at "Blackboard," take a look at the item about "Citizen Kane," also at "online sites."

March 31— We'll renew and expand our consideration of "exceptional years" in American journalism, with a look at 1897, 1941, 1963, and 1972. We'll consider: *What makes these exceptional years? Are there commonalities among them? What other candidate years might there be?*

We'll view portions of a documentary about news coverage of the Kennedy assassination in 1963 and, if time allows, watch excerpts of the 1941 motion picture "Citizen Kane," arguably the finest film ever made.

In the afternoon, we'll return to the Library of Congress (by 2:30 p.m.) to renew research for the 1995 papers. Plan to stay till the newspaper room's closing time, 5 p.m.

For next time: Read and write a review of *Why Societies Need Dissent*. Also complete the draft of your 1995 research paper.

April 21— We'll discuss your reviews of *Why Societies Need Dissent*, which are **due** at the start of class. We'll consider the relationship of dissent and the explosion of news media options in the digital age, asking: *Aren't new media options broadening the range of dissenting opinions?*

Dissent is flourishing in an era of expanding news options, is it not?

We'll also consider the exceptionality of the First Amendment and take a look at the Freedom of Information Act.

For next time: Read the articles, available at "online sites" following class, about "greedy vultures," "hyper-local" reporting, "blogs to riches," and "citizen journalism." Please also read the *Wall Street Journal* commentary (to be distributed in class), "Buy This Newspaper!"

April 28— Your draft research papers will be returned, with my comments and suggestions. We'll talk about polishing the final versions, and we'll discuss ways of preparing for next week's final exam.

In addition, we'll revisit the question—*Whither news media* in the early 21st century? Are newspapers doomed? What about blogging? Will it become ossified?

In the afternoon, we'll return to the Library of Congress (by 2:30 p.m.) to conduct additional research the 1995 papers. Plan to stay till the newspaper room's closing time, 5 p.m.

For next time: Complete the 1995 research paper. A reading or two *may* be assigned.

May 5—We'll meet at **11 a.m.** to wrap up the seminar by discussing your 1995 research papers, which are **due**. We'll consider: *Does 1995 merit the designation of a pivotal moment for news media? Why or why not?* (Keep in mind there are no "right" answers to such a question.) Following a short break, the final essays will be written.