

WWS 528d

Mass Media and Public Policy

Instructor: Evan Thomas

Office:

Office Hours:

Course Assistant:

Course Description: Who controls the news? The so-called newsmakers or the press? And what can the public believe? An examination of the interaction of politicians, policy makers, and the media and the impact on policy, the national interest, and personal reputation, drawn from case studies involving national security issues, Washington scandals, and political elections. We will focus closely on how editors decide what to print (and what not to print). The last two weeks of the course will be a mini-seminar on writing, devoted to shaping an op-ed piece.

Format: We will meet once a week for three hours. The first hour and a half of each week will begin with a lecture from me, followed by discussion. The second hour and a half will begin with a debate between two students on topics to be assigned, followed by discussion. Students will be called on randomly and must be prepared (the reading is light but you **MUST** read it before class). Each week, a student will be assigned to discuss press coverage of an ongoing issue. We will have several guests, editors and public figures who have dealt with the press.

Requirements: a one-and-a-half hour midterm, a 1,500 word paper that will become an op-ed piece, plus at least one in-class oral presentation. Every student will be expected to read *the New York Times* every day.

Grading: 30 percent class participation, 40 percent paper, 30 percent midterm.

Course materials:

WEEK ONE

Tues. Feb. 6

Description of the course and historical overview

The purpose of the course will be to closely explore the interaction of the press and politicians and policymakers. At heart it is a struggle for control. "News" is very rarely delivered straight. It is a narrative produced by a complex negotiation between newsmakers and the media. We will look at who wins, who loses, and whether the public benefits. I will use a series of case histories based in large part on my own experience, which I will briefly describe at the outset. Each case history will deal with ethical, moral, and practical issues that tend to recur. We

will look at the art of leaking and spinning and questions of bias and competitive pressure. At the first class meeting I will describe how the balance of power between reporters and public officials has evolved over time. I will point out that public servants and the press have been using each other since the Founding Fathers, but focus more closely on the modern era since World War II. I will note that the press was relatively malleable and quiescent until Vietnam and Watergate, when the adversarial role of the press took over and created Washington's culture of scandal-until 9/11 changed the stakes again.

WEEK TWO

Tues., Feb. 13

Getting the Story

This, as Janet Malcolm once observed, is to a real degree a story of seduction and betrayal. I will examine how the best Washington reporter, Bob Woodward, extracts information-in large part, the use of information to get more information. This can be described roughly as the Trojan Horse method or more bluntly (by Woodward's critics as well as some of his admirers) as a kind of polite extortion-in the Washington phrase, "you play or you pay".

Readings:

Janet Malcolm, "The Journalist and the Murderer," *The New Yorker*, March 13, 1989. (read only first page.)

"Sharp Blows at the High Bench," *Time*, March 10, 1980.

Anthony Lewis, "Supreme Court Confidential," *New York Review of Books*, Feb. 7, 1980.

Armstrong, Scott and Bob Woodward, et al , "The Evidence of the Brethren: An Exchange," June 12, 1980, *New York Review of Books*, pp. 1-7.

WEEK THREE

Tues. Feb. 20

Controlling the Story

How policy makers try to control scandal stories and use "spin." I will use a case history, how the JFK Administration stopped the Ellen Rometsch sex scandal from breaking out, but at a tremendous cost (the quid pro quo from J.Edgar Hoover was permission to wiretap Martin Luther King). And I will compare and contrast the approach of the Clinton Administration with the George W. Bush Administration to spin and scandal control in a later era, when secrets are much harder to keep. We will consider the Scooter Libby case as an example of spin gone wrong--how the attempt to undermine an administration critic backfired.

Readings:

Evan Thomas, *Robert Kennedy*, pp. 240-268.

Marie Brenner, "Lies and Consequences", *Vanity Fair*, April 2006.

WEEK FOUR

Tues. Feb 27

To Publish or Not to Publish:

Reputation versus the Right to Know (1)

The first case history will be the suicide of Admiral Jeremy Boorda, the Chief of Naval Operations. Boorda killed himself when I and another Newsweek reporter were on our way to interview him about a combat decoration that he had worn but not won. We will discuss privacy issues, the public interest served (or not) by such exposes, time and reporting pressures.

Readings:

Evan Thomas, "A Matter of Honor," *Newsweek*, May 27, 1996.

Jonathan Alter, "Beneath the Waves," *Newsweek*, May 27, 1996.

Nick Kotz, "Breaking Point," *The Washingtonian*, December 1996.

WEEK FIVE

Tues. March 6

Reputation versus the Right to Know (2)

We will study the exposure of former Sen. Robert Kerrey's involvement in a massacre of civilians in Vietnam. At Newsweek, after interviewing Kerrey with out reporter Greg Vistica, I spiked the story. Two years later, Vistica published it at the *New York Times*. Who was right? Who was hurt? And what was the public interest?

Readings:

Gregory Vistica, "What Happened in Thanh Phong?" *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, April 29, 2001.

Evan Thomas, "Coming to Terms with a Tragedy," *Newsweek*, May 7, 2001.

James Stewart, "A Dark Night in Vietnam," *New York Times Sunday Book Review*, Jan. 26, 2003.

Roy Reed, "A Clash by Night," *New York Times Sunday Book Review*, June 9, 2002.

WEEK SIX

Tues. March 13

The Right to Know versus National Security

We will examine the issue of when public exposure harms national security, and when it actually serves it. We will start with some pre-Watergate background, the press's decision not to expose CIA covert actions in Guatemala and Cuba, and then turn to more recent case histories, the Pentagon Papers case and the Washington Post's decision to publish a story showing how U.S. intelligence was able to tap Soviet underseas phone lines, the so-called Ivy Bells case.

Readings:

Susan Tifft and Alex Jones, *The Trust: the Private and Powerful Family Behind the New York Times*, pp. 308-315, 480-493

John Stacks, *Scotty: James Reston and the Rise and Fall of American Journalism*, pp. 190-195

Benjamin Bradlee, *A Good Life*, pp. 310-323, 470-477

WEEK SEVEN

Tues. March 27

Midterm in first hour and a half.

Getting Fooled: the Traps of Competition, Bias, and Sloppiness

We will look at a shocking story, published by CNN and Time-that during the Vietnam War the U.S. military dropped poison gas on its own troops-that turned out to completely in error. What pressures allowed these two large news organizations to make such a large mistake? With what consequences?

Readings:

April Oliver, "Did the U.S. Drop Nerve Gas?" *Time Magazine*, June 15, 1998.

Evan Thomas and Gregory Vistica, "What's the Truth About Tailwind?" *Newsweek*, June 22, 1998.

Evan Thomas and Gregory L. Vistica, "Fallout from a Media Fiasco (Effects of an Inaccurate News Report)", *Newsweek*, July 20, 1998, pp. 24.

Eric Felton, "CNN and Time's Poisonous Smear," *The Weekly Standard*, June 29 1998.

WEEK EIGHT

Tues. April 3

Getting Fooled, Part 2: How the press missed the WMD Story.

We will look at the press's failure to uncover that intelligence hype before the Iraq War.

Readings:

Michael Massing, "Now They Tell Us," *New York Review of Books*, Feb. 24, 2004; Judith Miller and James Risen, et al., "'Now They Tell Us': An Exchange," March 25, 2004; Dana Milbank and Michael Gordon, "'Now They Tell Us': An Exchange," April 8, 2004.

Howard Kurtz, "The Post on WMDs: An Inside Story; Prewar Articles Questioning Threat Often Didn't Make Front Page," *The Washington Post*, August 12, 2004.

WEEK NINE

Tues. April 10

The Culture of Scandal

We will look at the decision to publish (or not publish) the Monica Lewinsky story at *Newsweek* and other publications (including Matt Drudge) and the Clintons' attempt to control the scandal.

Readings:

Michael Isikoff and Evan Thomas, "Clinton and the Intern," *Newsweek*, Feb. 2, 1999; "The Secret War," Feb. 9, 1999.

WEEK TEN

Tues. April 17

Campaign Coverage: Who Uses Whom?

We look at the interaction between the press and the candidates in the 2000 presidential election.

Readings:

Evan Thomas et al., "What a Long Strange Trip" *Newsweek*, November 20, 2000.

WEEK ELEVEN

Tues. April 24

The Art of Persuasion

Each student will write a 1,500 word paper describing an institution or a controversy he or she cares about. The paper will be due on Monday, April 23, at noon. The goal will be to capture the reader's attention, educate, and convey the importance of the issue or organization. We will workshop several of the students' submission with an eye toward towards writing an op-ed. The last two weeks of the course are in effect a mini-workshop on writing.

WEEK TWELVE

Tues. May 1

We will workshop more of the students' pieces and discuss effective journalistic advocacy.

Final drafts of Op Eds are due on Dean's Date.