

Fall 2012 Syllabus...

COMS 460-01 Special Topics: Portrayal of the Journalist in Popular Culture

Instructor: **Bob Stepno**, Ph.D.
email: rstepno@radford.edu
phone: 540-831-6220

Section 001, 5-7 p.m., Mon-Wed CoBE 163

office hours: Mon-Tue-Wed-Fri 11 a.m. -noon
or by appointment

For up-to-date information, check <http://www.radford.edu/rstepno/460/jpop> each week

Overview

Storytellers of all kinds – novelists, filmmakers, comic book authors, and creators of radio and TV dramas – have found “the journalist” a useful character to tell stories about, or with. Why? Journalists may like to believe it is because reporters and editors are *important* in a democratic society. Perhaps they agree with filmmakers that their profession is full of fascinating characters who lead interesting lives.

Journalists also have been quick to respond to *unflattering* portrayals of reporters and editors in the movies, and sometimes they nit-pick the details of even heroic accounts of journalists’ exploits. Outside the profession, critics of journalism can find loads of ammunition in some fictional works about irresponsible, unethical, biased or corrupt journalists.

In this course we will explore a wide variety of creative works *about* journalists and journalism, spanning most of the 20th century and into the 21st. At a time when journalism is in a great transition, thanks to interactive online digital media, perhaps looking at journalism through its popular-culture mirror will help us understand what it can mean to be a journalist in the present and future.

Formal course title:

COMS 460-01 Portrayal of the Journalist in Film, Fiction and Popular Culture (3)

Course-related website, blogs and podcast:

Main page: <http://www.radford.edu/rstepno/460/jpop>

Newspaper Heroes on the Air: <http://jheroes.com>
<http://jheroes.com/about/ru-course-fall-2012-journalists-in-popular-culture/>
(Go to jheroes.com, click on the “about” menu, and select that page.)

Book list:
<http://jheroes.com/about/ru-course-fall-2012-journalists-in-popular-culture/the-truth-with-a-dragon-tattoo/>
(Go to jheroes.com, click on the “about” menu, and select that page.)

Online film list: <http://stepno.wordpress.com/videos/newspaper-films/>

Those pages, organized by date, are samples of trailers, clips and presumably out-of-copyright films being uploaded to YouTube. There is no guarantee that the examples will remain online, as YouTube sorts out its policies and copyright permissions, but we will use some of them for in-class demonstrations; they may help in your research.

Texts, Equipment and News

Required text: [Journalism in the Movies](#) by Matthew C. Ehrlich.

Recommended research text: [A Short Guide to Writing About Film](#) by Timothy Corrigan

Suggested novels: *The Truth* by [Terry Pratchett](#), *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* by [Stieg Larsson](#), *Basket Case* by Carl Hiassen, *Dawn O'Hara, the girl who laughed* by [Edna Ferber](#), *The Dark Page* by Samuel Fuller, mystery novels by Edna Buchanan, and [many others listed on the novels page at jheroes](#).

Free online:

- See <http://archive.org> for novels, radio programs, films and books about journalists and journalism.
- See <http://ijpc.org> -- Joseph Saltzman's Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture database and research archive, part of the inspiration for this course. [Download his 185-page syllabus](#) as a secondary "textbook" full of film summaries, with a glossary at the back.
- See <http://spj.org> and <http://rtdna.org> for samples of modern media organization ethics codes.
- *Journalism 2.0* by Mark Briggs, http://www.kcnn.org/resources/journalism_20/ (The forward and introduction to this 21st century journalism text will help us identify issues for discussion of "what journalism is, has been and can be.")
- *News Writers Handbook*, by Rob Melton, http://www.scribd.com/doc/8641702/News-Writers-Handbook-by-Rob-Melton?autodownload=pdf-document_metadata (This free journalism textbook includes a "Rights and Responsibilities" chapter that will be useful when we discuss ethics, professionalism and related issues.)

Progress of the Class

In the first week, we will take inventory of class members' experience and interest – in journalism, films, books, radio, history, ethics, writing and other topics relevant to the course. That will help us make decisions about which films to watch in class, and what novels to read or films to watch in study groups. Meanwhile, start reading the Ehrlich text. Also read "[The Truth with a Dragon Tattoo](#)," my online essay about journalism novels, so that you can pick promising titles and form book-reading groups.

Be a News Addict:

While this is not a journalism "skills" course, it will help our class discussions of what journalists *do* if you try to keep up with the news. Make a Twitter account and follow the professor's suggested lists of area journalists: <https://twitter.com/#!/bobstep/nrvj>
Go direct: Try *The Roanoke Times* (<http://roanoke.com>), *The New York Times* (<http://nytimes.com>), *The Washington Post* (<http://washingtonpost.com>), *USA Today* (<http://usatoday.com>), *The Radford News Journal* (<http://ourvalley.org>), *New River Voice* (<http://newrivervoice.com>), *The Tartan* (<http://thetartan.com>), *Whim* (<http://ruwhim.com>), *RU Today* (<http://rutoday.radford.edu>), *The Wall Street Journal* (<http://wsj.com>), and *The Collegiate Times* at Virginia Tech (<http://collegiatetimes.com>).

Schedule changes & e-mail

Like the news itself, expect the class to change as we go along. The assignment calendar may be altered to take advantage of research discoveries or library acquisitions. **Changes will be announced in class, by e-mail, and on the Web. Check your Radford.edu e-mail and my website often.**

If you have questions of any kind, stop in during office hours or send me a note at rstepno@radford.edu. I have other e-mail accounts, but that is the one I use for all course-related mail. I check it several times a day, but rarely after 9 p.m. or before 9 a.m.

I may not be able to respond to all mail individually. If you have an especially good question, I may write back to the entire class or discuss it at our next class meeting.

E-mail etiquette

Your first “news” writing lesson: Think of each e-mail’s “Subject” line as a headline – an effective summary of the message. Make it informative, not a vague label. Be specific. Put your **name, “jpop” or “coms460” and topic** in the “Subject” line. Not: “Hey prof!” or “Help!!!” or “Weekly assignment.” Instead: “JBrown, 460, was Lois originally Lola?” or “ISmith, jpop, dog ate my computer.”

Being here: Attendance, Assignments and Deadlines

My attendance policy is inspired by professional media organizations: You are expected to come to every class, arrive **on time**, and deliver your work **on deadline**. When you’re here, be here: No e-mail, Facebook, texting, online gambling or off-topic Web browsing, please.

I know there are good reasons to miss class, so don’t bother with doctor’s notes or written apologies. BUT after the second week of class, when add-drop changes are over, **if you have more than three absences** for any reason come see me. Your grade for the course may be reduced by one letter for each additional absence. If you have four or five absences, come see me to talk about your withdrawing from the class. In the event of a flu outbreak or other emergency that keeps classes from meeting, we will “meet in cyberspace” using online systems and e-mail.

We will be watching film clips in almost every class. If you miss a class, it is your responsibility to find out what they were and, if possible, watch them on your own.

If you know in advance that you will miss a class, see me to arrange a catch-up assignment. If you miss a class, check my website and contact a classmate for assignments. I may not have a chance to answer “tell me what I missed” e-mails on Tuesday or Thursday, but I will attempt to update an “exercises we did in class” list on my Web page. If an assignment was done in class or due as homework the day you were out, submit it electronically and bring a printed copy to the next class you attend for full credit.

Class Cancellations

If class is cancelled because of a winter storm, flu outbreak or other emergency, it is your responsibility to check my course Web page for any assignment and schedule changes – and **do the work**.

Want to know if a class is cancelled?

In addition to local television and radio stations, information about classes being canceled and administrative offices closing due to inclement weather will be available from the university switchboard by calling 831-5000 or on the university’s Web page.

If you are confused by conflicting announcements, you may call the switchboard for clarification. The switchboard will update information on the day of the closing by 6 a.m.

More info: <http://www.radford.edu/weatherpolicy.html>

Important Note About Disability Services

If you are seeking classroom accommodations under the Americans with Disabilities Act, you are required to register with the Disability Resource Office. The DRO is located in Room 32, Tyler Hall, telephone 831-6350. To receive academic accommodations for this class, please obtain the proper DRO forms and meet with me at the beginning of the semester.

The Radford University Honor Code

By accepting admission to Radford University, each student makes a commitment to understand, support, and abide by the University Honor Code without compromise or exception. This class will be conducted in strict observance of the Honor Code, which reads as follows:

I do hereby resolve to uphold the Honor Code of Radford University by refraining from lying, from the stealing or unauthorized possession of property and from violating the Standards of Student Academic Integrity.

Those Standards of Student Academic Integrity are spelled out in the Student Handbook. **McConnell Library** has related material online: <http://lib.radford.edu/tutorial/X/learn.asp>

Another honor code

See the Code of Ethics of the Society of Professional Journalists at <http://spj.org/ethicscode.asp>

Truth, accuracy and honesty are essential in news writing. Plagiarism, fabrication and dishonesty are not tolerated. Don't cut corners or make things up because a story is "just for class." Clearly identify the sources of your information. Also be careful with electronic note-taking: Don't let anything you "cut and pasted" into a background-notes file land in a story without quote marks and attribution. It will look like plagiarism and you will not be able to prove it was an accident.

Assignments and Grading for COMS 460 JPop

- Response notes, class attendance & participation 20%
- Midterm research paper 20%
- Book discussion panel and personal paper 20%
- Final research paper (8-12 pages) 40%
 - Early submission of proposal and annotated bibliography 10%
 - Final paper itself 30%

Response notes will be assigned on paper or using Desire2Learn starting in the third week of class.

Your book discussion panel grade will be based on an in-class group presentation and a personal "book review" style report.

The midterm research paper (5 pages) will compare a theme that interests you across two or more films, books or other works, or contrast two themes within one work. Use Ehrlich's text as a guide and cite specifics. Be prepared to discuss the films in class the week that the paper is due.

The final research essay should demonstrate both critical viewing of films and/or other works plus research in academic journals, books and reference works. It should go beyond simple "what I liked" film criticism to explore themes in journalism ethics and media history along literary, cultural or ideological themes. See Corrigan's chapter, "Six approaches to writing about film," his sample essays, and student projects at IJPC.org.

A more detailed final assignment sheet will be distributed after class discussion.

COMS 460 Portrayal of the Journalist in Popular Culture -- Fall 2011 Schedule

Class meets Monday and Wednesday, officially 5 p.m.-6:50 p.m. We can flex the schedule to view full-length films on one day, shorter class for discussion on the other. Still average 150-minutes per week like other 3-credit classes. Written response "papers" will be assigned.

Ehrlich chapters

Week 1	8/27	<p>Introductions, syllabus and discussion of class schedule and materials Monday.</p> <p>Journalism and Enthusiasm: Radio's origin of Clark Kent, Sam Fuller's <i>Park Row</i>, and the opening of Richard Harding Davis's <i>The Reporter Who Made Himself King</i>.</p> <p>Read "The Truth and the Dragon Tattoo" at JHeroes.com to form a book-club, and read "The Girl Who Loved Journalists." (<i>Columbia Journalism Review</i>, Jan. 2012)</p>	1
Week 2	9/3	<p><i>Citizen Kane</i> and <i>Park Row</i> – newspaper creators at work, and a Wednesday discussion of resources for your film & popular culture research projects. Read the IMDB.com pages for both films.</p>	4
Week 3	9/10	<p><i>The Front Page</i> and <i>His Girl Friday</i> – films, remakes and radio editions... the "Unseen Power" ... and the "flaming sword..."The light side and the dark side: <i>Meet John Doe</i>, <i>Mr. Smith Goes to Washington</i>, <i>Five Star Final</i>, <i>Citizen Kane</i> and more.</p>	2 & 3
Week 4	9/17	<p>Radio plays, novels and short stories; discussion of midterm papers and book projects.</p>	5
Week 5	9/24	<p><i>All the President's Men</i>, <i>Network</i>, <i>Absence of Malice</i>, <i>The Insider</i>, <i>The Paper</i> and <i>Broadcast News</i></p>	6
Week 6	10/1	<p>Midterm report discussions both days; written reports due Wednesday</p>	7
Week 7	10/8	<p>Specific film depends on start-of-semester survey and midterm reports</p>	8
Week 8	10/15	<p>Specific film depends on start-of-semester survey and midterm reports</p>	

<i>Week 9</i>	10/22	Journalism novel presentations	
<i>Week 10</i>	10/29	Specific film depends on start-of-semester survey and midterm reports Final project proposals	
<i>Week 11</i>	11/5	Specific film depends on start-of-semester survey and midterm reports	
<i>Week 12</i>	11/12	Specific film depends on start-of-semester survey and midterm reports Final project bibliographies	
THANKSGIVING BREAK			
<i>Week 13</i>	11/26	Specific film depends on start-of-semester survey and midterm reports	
<i>Week 14</i>	12/03	Final project progress reports & discussion	
		EXAM WEEK No Final Exam (final paper due at "exam" finishing time, 7:30 p.m. Wednesday, December 12; classroom available for discussion and a farewell movie, 5:30 to 7:30)	

To double-check the times for this class or other classes: <http://www.radford.edu/~registra/>

Grading scale for story assignments

- A: 90-100 percent. Story assignment approaches professional-quality work (e.g., excellent reporting & writing; almost no errors for the copy desk to catch).
- B: 80-89 percent. Above average; almost ready to go, a thorough and balanced report with good use of sources; publishable with minor editing.
- C: 70-79 percent. Shows a grasp of basic principles, meets deadline, but needs more sources or heavy rewriting -- more facts, better grammar, more or better sources and attribution.
- D: 60-69 percent. Poor grasp of principles, serious problems with deadlines, grammar, factual errors, etc.
- F: Fails to meet basic standards. For example, work is inaccurate, libelous, dishonest or missing.

Time Requirement

We will watch some films or film segments in class, but thoughtful analysis may require multiple viewings, transcription of dialogue, reading a script or reviews. Plan on several hours of film viewing and/or reading each week.

Digital Media Essentials

- If you need to move back and forth between Macs and Windows computers, or send a document by e-mail, use ".rtf" format to avoid trouble with Microsoft Word's occasional format changes. Apple Pages, Microsoft Works and other programs can read and write .rtf
- Give documents clear, specific **names**, including your own last name, **especially if you e-mail them or submit them online**. (Example: "Romanov-banjo.rtf" NOT "homework" or "story.")
- If you e-mail a Microsoft Word document as an attachment or put it on the server, follow these steps: Save an RTF copy of the document onto your desktop. **Quit Microsoft Word**. Create your e-mail message. Attach the document, making sure to use the version you just saved. Send a copy to yourself. Check to make sure it arrived and opens correctly.
- If you use a laptop to take notes in class or look things up, but **do not** drift into Facebook, IM, e-mail, texting, online gambling and unassigned Web browsing.

Your Teacher (this seems to require the third person):

Bob Stepno joined the Radford faculty in fall 2007 after more than 20 years as a writer and editor, then seven years as a teacher. He has worked for the nation's oldest (*print*) newspaper and one of its first *online* "newspapers," which has made him interested in history and media changes. Despite the thinning gray hair, he received his doctorate from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill so recently (December 2003) that calling him "doctor" still makes him look around for someone wearing a stethoscope.

A note for you

Thank you for choosing this class. If you have questions that aren't addressed in this document—or in any class—come talk about it, or at least send me e-mail (which I usually check several times a day, seven days a week). After all, you're the reason I'm here!

Bob Stepno
rstepno@radford.edu
<http://www.radford.edu/rstepno>

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(which means "the end")