

**MOUNT HOLYOKE COLLEGE
DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY
Fall 2009**

**History 301:
READING THE NEW YORK TIMES: JOURNALISM, HISTORY, POWER**

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The fundamental premises of this seminar are simple. **The New York Times** is the most powerful newspaper in America because it serves as the single most influential agenda setter for media professionals. Examining how and why the **NYT** achieved this status (and the consequences thereof) will be a key theme in this course. The **NYT** has also long enjoyed and profited from a reputation as “the newspaper of record.” Among historians, the **NYT** has maintained a privileged position as the authoritative source of choice, and as the most reliable “quick fix” for information on past events. If journalism is the “rough draft” of history, then the **NYT** often provides the notes, outline, and key arguments for that draft. The emergence of the digital database, the **Historical New York Times**, which makes available the entire run of the paper from 1851-2006, will no doubt reinforce its influence among historians.

Our focus on the **NYT** will also lead us to explore several larger issues: the history of news and newspapers; the evolution of journalism as a profession; the relationship between news and political life, and between news organizations and government; the increasingly blurred boundaries between news and entertainment; the emergence of various ideological critiques of “the media”; and the writing of journalism versus the writing of history.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND GRADING:

This seminar requires regular, active, and critical participation from all members. First and foremost, you must subscribe to the **NYT** and read it every day (Sundays optional). Newspaper reading is a habit—some say an addiction—that you will need to cultivate. For this course, that means getting your hands dirty with ink, as opposed to reading a paper “on-line.” You will be expected to come to class ready to discuss thoughtfully and critically what you have read in the paper. Ditto for the weekly seminar readings. You should begin keeping your own “clippings file” of **NYT** articles that hold special interest for you. Over the semester, your file may help you to shape a topic for one of your papers; it might give you a clearer perspective on individual **NYT** writers, departments, or sections; and it should help strengthen and focus your contribution to seminar discussions.

Each week we will devote a portion of our seminar to “real time,” in-class analysis of the previous week’s **NYT**. We will be shifting our focus among the different sections of the paper and we will also track specific stories as they emerge.

Class Participation: (33%)

The seminar is a public space and I expect everyone to participate actively in our discussions. In considering your contribution to the class I will consider several criteria: your effort to make your comments as precise and concise as possible; your willingness to listen to and to respond directly to opposing views; your ability to demonstrate understanding of a writer’s argument and to offer a critique of it as well; your contribution to making discussions cooperative rather than competitive.

Papers: (67%)

Each student will write 2 medium length papers (c.10-15 pp. each). The first paper must be option 1; your second paper can come from either option 2, 3, or 4. On occasion, I may also ask you to write a brief response to or analysis of an item of interest in the **NYT**.

1) **The NYT as Historical Source:** This assignment allows us to make full use of the power of the **Historical New York Times**, which you can link to via E-Resources on the LITS web page. Choose any event, controversy, figure, or issue in American history and analyze how the **NYT** covered it. You may want to build on work you have already done in other classes or explore new territory. There are several different approaches you might want to take here. You can keep a tight focus on **NYT** coverage of a single historical event, conflict, or individual (for example: America’s entrance into a war; the emergence of nuclear energy; a labor struggle; a civil rights campaign or leader, such as Martin Luther King or Malcolm X; the Holocaust; a controversial political figure such as Sen. Joe McCarthy; youth culture in the 1960s; the run-up to the current Iraq war).

Alternatively, you might examine how the paper has changed over time in its coverage of an important issue or theme in American life (for example: race relations; U.S. interventions in Latin America; the changing status of women; immigration and the efforts to limit it; trends in the arts; the growth of consumer culture). In either case, your paper should analyze the patterns, underlying assumptions, and preconceptions you find evident in these historical accounts. You may also want to see how **NYT** coverage looks against later historical interpretations.

2) **The NYT as Contemporary Source:** Here you might want to track how the **NYT** covers a story or topic over the course of the semester. Again, there are many possible approaches: looking at the agenda setting function; examining the basis for news judgment and “objectivity”; tracking editorial positions or individual op-ed columnists; following coverage of foreign relations, culture, fashion, food, sports, or business; how its coverage compared to other media outlets (e.g. *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, *Time/Newsweek*).

3) **The NYT as Institution:** Consider the **NYT** as an institution, e.g. as a corporate entity and business player in the world of media; its internal history (there is a large and

growing body of memoirs by former **NYT** employees); its influence on political and cultural life in New York City; its role in landmark legal cases such as *NY Times v. Sullivan* (1964) or the Pentagon Papers (1971); its part as an active player in an important historical event, such as the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba; its recent involvement with new media ventures. How has the history of the **NYT** as an institution intersected with some of the most important public issues of the past century?

4) Journalism as the “Rough Draft” of History: Analyze how the contemporary media of the day reported a significant event, controversy, or figure in American history. Looking beyond the **NYT**, you should make an in-depth examination of the coverage found in newspapers, magazines, and other journalistic sources, some of which are now available on the Internet. What strengths and weaknesses do you find in the coverage, especially as compared to later historical accounts? Do you find important differences in how “the story” was framed, sourced, narrated, exaggerated, or suppressed?

DUE DATES:

Paper 1: October 21

Paper 2: December 12

REQUIRED READING: (Odyssey Bookshop)

NY Times Subscription (Monday-Saturday; Sundays optional)

Susan E. Tift and Alex S. Jones, *The Trust: The Private and Powerful Family Behind the New York Times* (1999)

Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (1977)

Seminar Readings available on ELLA

SCREENINGS: Journalism on Film Dwight 101 7:15pm

September 22: *Citizen Kane* (1940, d. Orson Welles)

October 6: *The Paper* (1994, d. Ron Howard)

October 27: *His Girl Friday* (1940, d. Howard Hawks)

November 17: *All the President's Men* (1976, d. Alan J. Pakula)

SCHEDULE

September 9

Course Introduction

A Million Words A Day: Getting Acquainted with the **NYT**

Reading:

David Remnick, "Comment: Nattering Nabobs" (2006) E

Spiro Agnew, "Speeches on the Media, 1969-71" E

September 16

What is journalism History?

The Penny Press: Birth of the American Daily

Reading:

Mitchell Stephens, "The Journalistic Method," from *A History of News* (1988) E

Schudson, *Discovering the News*, Ch.1-2

Tift and Jones, *The Trust*, Ch.1-7

September 23

Origins of Modern Journalism

The Power of News

Reading:

Schudson, *Discovering the News*, Ch. 3

Tift and Jones, *The Trust*, Ch. 8-11

James B. Reston, "The Job of the Reporter," and Arthur Hays Sulzberger, "The Newspaper's Role in the Community," from NY Times, *The Newspaper: Its Making and Its Meaning* (1945) E

Film Screening September 22: *Citizen Kane*

September 30

The Muckraking Tradition

From "Exposure Journalism" to Investigative Reporting

Reading:

Ellen Fitzpatrick, "Late Nineteenth Century America and the Origins of Muckraking," from *Muckraking* (1994) E

Upton Sinclair, "The Condemned Meat Industry" (1906) E

October 7

Not the NY Times: The Tabloid Press Then and Now

Journalism as a Profession

Reading:

Schudson, *Discovering the News*, Ch.4

Daniel Czitrom, "The Tabloid Tradition in American Culture" (1988) E

Edwin Diamond, "The Newsroom," from *Behind the Times: Inside the NY Times* (1994)

E

Film Screening October 6: *The Paper*

October 21**First Paper DUE**

Discussion of Papers

October 28

Women and the NYT

The Changing Face of the Newsroom

Reading:

Nan Robertson, Ch.1, 9, 10, from *The Girls in the Balcony: Women, Men, and the NY Times* (1992) E

Betsy Wade, "Surviving Being A Survivor, Or Whatever Became of What's Her Name?" *Media Studies Journal* (1993) E

Film Screening October 27: *His Girl Friday*

November 4

The NYT as Historical Actor: The Pentagon Papers Case

1960s-70s Countercultures and the Press

Reading:

Tift and Jones, *The Trust*, Ch. Ch.29-32

Schudson, *Discovering the News*, Ch. 5

Max Frankel, "The Papers" and "Trial By Fury," from *The Times of My Life and My Life with The Times* (1999) E

In Class Screening, Demo Reel, *The Most Dangerous Man in America: Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers* (d. Rick Goldsmith and Judith Ehrlich)

November 11

Election Special

NYT and Other Media Coverage

November 18

Watergate As History and Myth

Journalism After Watergate

Reading:

Tift and Jones, *The Trust*, Ch. 40-45

Michael Schudson, "Watergate and the Press" (1995) E

Mitchell Stephens, “Improved Means to an Unimproved End”, from *A History of News* (1988) E

Film Screening November 17: *All the President's Men*

December 2

Ideological Critiques of the **NYT** and the News Media
Journalism vs. Blogosphere

Reading:

Nicolas Lemann, “Journalism Without Journalists” E

December 9

Discussion of Final papers
Course Conclusion
Seminar Evaluations

