



## **Suggested Syllabus for a Case-based Course:**

### **Critical Issues in Journalism**

#### *Case Studies in Journalism*

The case-study method encourages students to think through the largest issues in journalism today—everything from ethics to new business models. By considering real-life problems confronted by newspapers, television stations and websites in the last few years, students refine their analytical, presentation, management and leadership skills. These case studies were developed by the Knight Foundation Case Studies Initiative at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism. They parallel the case-study approach to professional education that law, business and some medical schools have used for years, and they constitute another form of experiential learning. Students will be asked to take on the roles of editors, publishers, reporters and other news personnel. Through guided discussion, we will explore hard decisions to help refine our own values and standards and to expand our understanding of the practice of journalism today.

Among the most important learning outcomes:

- Refine analytical skills, as demonstrated by oral argument in class and written out-of-class assignments
- Articulate ideas, analysis and fact in a public presentation; gain confidence and practice through the semester
- Understand the difficulties of journalism management and leadership, as demonstrated by written and oral classwork
- Reinforce active listening skills, as demonstrated by response to and further development of ideas presented by classmates.
- Understand current challenges, issues, conflicts and dilemmas in the practice of journalism, as demonstrated by written and oral classwork.

---

*This case syllabus is adapted from one created in January 2010 by Professor Nancy Sharkey at the University of Arizona. We thank Prof. Sharkey for her willingness to share this syllabus more widely.*

Copyright © 2010 The Trustees of Columbia University in the City of New York. No part of this publication may be reproduced, revised, translated, stored in a retrieval system, used in a spreadsheet, or transmitted in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise) without the written permission of the Case Studies Initiative.

## Access to case studies

The cases are available through a secure link to the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. Go to the website: <http://casestudies.jrn.columbia.edu>. Put the cases for each section into your shopping cart, give them your payment information, and you're all set. Three of the cases below are free. For the others, the price is \$5.95 for each multimedia case and \$3.95 for text-only cases. Each access is valid for a three-month (90-day) period. Please enter your preferred dates when ordering. Each online case includes a .pdf version, which you are free to download and keep.

If you experience any difficulties in ordering, please email the Case Studies folks at: [jcaseorders@columbia.edu](mailto:jcaseorders@columbia.edu); or call the Editorial Production department at 212-854-6306 and someone will assist you as soon as possible.

## THE SYLLABUS

### PART I: Our Digital Future

Crowdsourcing. Weblogs. Civic journalism. Reader forums. Moderated comments. Aggregation. New technologies brings significant benefits and incredible challenges to today's journalist. We will be looking at the following cases to explore some of these issues.

#### Class Session 1

##### **The Bakersfield *Californian* and Blogging the Courtroom**

This case is about the professional conflict one journalist at the Bakersfield *Californian* experiences when editors ask her to blog from a trial she is covering. In the blog, which appears within a special section of the Bakersfield.com, she is asked to offer informal observations and commentary on the complicated murder case.

#### Class Session 2

##### **“Crowdsourcing”: Promise or Hazard?**

This two-part case looks at the research method “crowdsourcing,” pioneered by the private sector (*The Wisdom of Crowds*), and examines its usefulness. The Fort Myers (FL) *News-Press* and Gannett executives believe crowdsourcing—turning to consumers for expertise and information—holds promise for newspapers.

#### Class Session 3

##### **Risky Business: John Harris, Jim VandeHei, and *Politico*, Parts A and B**

Behind the scenes and into the minds of two journalism entrepreneurs: We will debate the pros and cons of leaving mainstream journalism outlets to start new operations, and we will take an in-depth look at the business model *Politico* adopted.

## **PART II: Ethics, Privacy and News Judgment**

### **Class Session 4**

#### **Integrity on Deadline: ABC News and the Duke Lacrosse Photographs**

This case describes ABC's early coverage of the rape accusation against members of the Duke University lacrosse team. The narrative stops at a point in mid-April when the ABC News Vice President for Editorial Quality, Kerry Smith, has to decide whether to broadcast photographs taken at the team's 2006 party, where the rape was alleged to have taken place.

### **Class Session 5**

#### **New England Cable News and the Terry Glenn Story**

This text + video case is about how a news organization, New England Cable News (NECN), handles the arrival of a fax alleging sexual misconduct by a member of the New England Patriots football team. The case proceeds in real time, so you experience the pressures of a newsroom deadline.

### **Class Session 6**

#### **Public Death, Private Life: Army Major Alan Rogers and the *Washington Post***

This case examines the challenges of reporting on the sexual orientation of a private individual. In March 2008, the *Washington Post* received a tip that a decorated Army major had been the first openly gay military officer killed in Iraq. But as the *Post* reported the story, it discovered that it was far from clear that he was open about his sexuality, especially to his military colleagues. How should the *Post* cover his death?

### **Class Session 7**

#### **Digital Deadline: The St. Louis *Post-Dispatch* and the Kirkwood Shooting**

This case addresses how to manage a breaking story online when a journalist is also an eyewitness and when the story could have traumatic effects on the local community. It also raises the challenges of deciding what to put in the newspaper once a story has broken on the newspaper's website. We'll discuss how the rise of online reporting has affected the newspaper's content, and what trade-offs and compromises are involved.

### **Class Session 8**

#### **Chemical Fallout: The Milwaukee *Journal Sentinel* and the BPA Story**

This case looks at the challenges that confront science reporters as they seek to determine what is the "truth" among competing scientific claims. In summer 2007, the Milwaukee *Journal Sentinel* launched an investigation into the chemical compound bisphenol A (BPA). An editor asks the reporters to determine for themselves whether BPA is safe or

not. Accustomed to telling “balanced” he said/she said-style stories, this thrusts the reporting team—especially its science reporter—into unknown territory.

### **Part III: Journalism in a Polarized World**

#### **Class Session 9**

##### ***Frontline*’s “The Last Abortion Clinic”: What’s Fair in a Video World**

This case takes students behind the scenes into the making of a news documentary for *Frontline*, produced at the PBS affiliate in Boston (WGBH). The case tells the story of the making of “The Last Abortion Clinic,” a 2005 documentary by producer Raney Aronson and her team.

#### **Class Session 10**

##### **Reporting an Explosive Truth: The *Boston Globe* and Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church**

This case is about the calculus a news organization must make when it uncovers a story that incriminates the most powerful institution in its community. In 2001, the *Boston Globe*'s investigative unit discovered several instances of Catholic priests sexually abusing children. Students will be able to examine investigative techniques as well as the special challenges of covering religion, and gain insight into the personal toll on journalists of covering misdeeds in one's own church.

#### **Class Session 11**

##### **God and Darwin: The *York Daily Record* and the Intelligent Design Trial**

This case examines the challenge of providing balanced coverage of a court case when the trial is about science, and the reporter believes the science on one side is flawed. Students can debate the proper role of a newspaper serving its local community—to reflect local mores and values, or to challenge them?

### **PART IV -- FOREIGN REPORTING**

#### **Class Session 12**

##### **A Life on the Line: The *Christian Science Monitor* and the Kidnapping of Jill Carroll**

This case treats the hard choices which confront a news organization when violence strikes one of its reporters. In January 2006, *Christian Science Monitor* Managing Editor Marshall Ingwerson learned that one of his stringers in Iraq, Jill Carroll, had been kidnapped by unknown assailants in Baghdad. The case traces the steps which the newspaper took to try to win Carroll's release—alive. *Monitor* editors found themselves caught between conflicting advice from the CIA and FBI on whether to handle the case quietly, or conduct a high-profile publicity campaign to persuade her kidnappers to release Carroll.

### **Class Session 13**

#### **Reputations to Lose: BBC versus the Blair Government**

This case is about the choices a publicly-funded news organization has to make when the government of the day attacks its editorial independence. In June 2003, what had been a short, live, early-morning exchange between a radio host and a British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) reporter escalated into a full-scale war, which pitted the BBC against Prime Minister Tony Blair's government.

### **Class Session 14**

#### **News or Rumor? *Politico* and the Edwards Affair**

How journalists make daily decisions on what to write, and what not to write. Students are asked to weigh the credibility of different sources of news, and discuss different standards of accuracy for blogs, tabloids, and more mainstream news outlets. They can also discuss the fine line between privacy and the public's right to know.