

USC ANNEBERG SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM

Syllabus

Journalism-405: Nonfiction Television

Instructor: Dan Birman

Fall, 2007

4 Units

Meeting Time: Tuesdays, 2:00 – 5:20

Location: ASC G38

Eligibility

The course is open to journalism students who have completed the Core Curriculum (including Jour 306 – Production: Broadcast) or with the instructor's consent.

Description

Jour-405 is a production course that teaches a methodology on how to research and organize a long-form nonfiction television program. Students research and produce segments of a documentary short.

Long-form nonfiction is in-depth reporting and goes well beyond the scope of news. But to be clear, long-form nonfiction does not necessarily mean documentary. The industry, for the most part, rarely funds traditional documentaries. Rather, nonfiction long-form generally falls in an area between documentary and entertainment. Therefore, it is incumbent on the journalist to understand what constitutes good and responsible reporting for long-form storytelling that has become the backbone of the burgeoning nonfiction cable industry. The hope is that we can apply journalistic values to any derivation that might be created to meet market demands, so that the finished program can at least stand-up to the rigors of fairness and credibility.

An essential thrust of this course centers on what it takes to make a successful nonfiction program. Students view recent and historical nonfiction programs to better understand how they're created and why they work – or in some cases – don't.

Course Objectives and Requirements: Students taking Jour-405:

- Pitch a story idea with a network placement in mind;
- Collect relevant research materials;
- View and critique recent and historical nonfiction programs;
- Organize lists for pre-production;
- Learn advanced shooting and editing practices;
- Shoot a segment for a long-form story;
- Write a producible script; and
- Edit the segment to be included in a nonfiction short program.

These objectives define the day-to-day work of long-form nonfiction television. Every aspect of this television form is complex but equally interesting. Research, experts, actualities, interviews, visuals, sound, music, and graphics – these are the basic elements of a long-form story. The payoff is rewarding for the producer and for the viewer.

As we go through the semester, we'll discuss terminology and application so that when you walk away from this course, you'll have a strong and defensible approach to making important, honest, and fair television.

Keep in mind that you're in control of the content that demands some levels of creativity to get people to watch. As you define the story through research and interviews, you'll develop the visual context as well. Your job is to create the content flow (*the story*) and decide how best to visualize it.

Assembling a show centers on one question, what are you going to do to retain viewers so that they can grasp the story that you wish to tell? It sounds easy and we're all critics. So now, you're in the driver's seat. What is the first thing *you'd* want to see in your television show? Why? What impact are you trying to create? What do you expect your audience to do when they see the first visual and hear the first words? How will you maintain audience interest throughout the show?

These are not small tasks or ideas. The questions above plague every single producer who designs and packages a show. While the gain is greater clarity with in-depth storytelling, the risk is losing viewers before the end of the prologue. And in today's world, when television ratings rule the day, this is just not an option. Losing an audience in the first moments of a show is a disaster and is a problem for the producer and not the audience.

Through observation (critiquing existing shows), organization, and hands-on producing, you'll learn the secrets behind long-form storytelling. In addition, the following books (available at the bookstore) frame the documentary in a much larger context beyond the work we do in this course.

- Barnouw, Erik. *Documentary: A History of the Nonfiction Film*
- Rabiger, Michael. *Directing the Documentary*
- Bernard, Sheila Curran, *Documentary Storytelling: Making Stronger More Dramatic Nonfiction Films.*

OFFICE HOURS

I maintain two types of office hours. I am available on Tuesdays from 1:00 p.m. to 2:00 p.m. and for an hour following class. I am also available to meet with each of you by appointment.

GRADING

You will be graded on the following:

1. Story pitch – Well-researched story idea; in-depth research;
2. Nonfiction television Reviews;
3. Organization;
4. Production approach;
5. One-page description;
6. Script;
7. Edited story – An eight to ten-minute edited project in final form.

Percentages:

Story pitch/Research	10%
Reviews	15%
Organization	10%
Production approach	10%
Description	10%
Script	20%
Edited story	25%

While this is a production class, please note that I do not expect anyone to be expert shooters and editors. These are skills that when understood, will make your jobs much easier as you begin your careers. Your grade is based on how you apply the technology to storytelling.

Instructor Contact Information:

USC Office: (213) 821-0802
Home Office: (818) 790-9920
Mobile: (818) 434-4300
danbirman@birmanproductions.com

DEADLINES

Assignments must be turned-in on-time, even if you are absent. The only exception is a medical emergency that must be verified in writing. Unexcused late assignments will not be accepted.

DELIVERABLES

Written assignments must be typed and proofed for errors and turned-in at the beginning of class.

Script assignments are to be submitted via e-mail as Microsoft Word documents in the table format that will be presented in class. **No other format will be allowed. I will not grade an assignment that is not in the proper format.**

Please maintain a binder with your completed assignments. This binder should accompany you during one-on-one meetings with me. Be sure to keep all research and logs within the binder. The binder should be organized so that you can locate the information to support your project.

COURSE SCHEDULE

- August 28: Choosing a sellable subject
 - In-depth research
 - Organizing research
 - Preparing a pitch
- September 4: Presenting a story idea to decision makers
 - Pitching your ideas
 - De-constructing a documentary
 - Identifying relevant methodologies
 - Building and maintaining lists
- September 11: Interview techniques for long-form television
 - Staying true to the story
 - Building from the bibliography
 - Conducting pre-interviews
 - Viewing assigned documentaries
- September 18: Acquiring compelling story-telling visuals
 - Applying advanced camera techniques
 - Using information from pre-interviews
 - Identifying possible visuals
 - Preparing topics and questions
- September 25: Mid-project update – re-selling the concept
 - Talking with production executives
 - Interviewing approaches
 - Maintaining a research bibliography

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- October 2: Screening footage for good story beats
 - Shooting first interview & sequences
 - Logging interviews and sequences
- October 9: Organizing large quantities of footage
 - Shooting second interview & sequences
 - Logging actuality footage
 - Preparing one-page story treatment
- October 16: Editing techniques that compel viewers to stay tuned
 - Digitizing interviews and sequences
 - Writing a first draft script
- October 23: Story review
 - Finalizing the edit script
- October 30: Translating the script to the edit
 - Editing a rough cut
- November 6: Progress review – surviving executive notes
 - Evaluating the rough cut
- November 13: Adding storytelling elements
 - First cut due
- November 20: Comparing the execution to the vision
 - Revising the first cut
- November 27: Editing Progress Review
 - Final cut due
- December 4: Screen Final Cuts
 - Sit back and eat popcorn!!!

IMPORTANT

PLAGIARISM/ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

Plagiarism is defined as taking ideas or writings from another and passing them off as one's own; in journalism, this includes appropriating the reporting of another without clear attribution. The following is the Annenberg School of Journalism's policy on academic integrity as published in the University catalog: "Since its founding, the USC School of Journalism has maintained a commitment to the highest standards of ethical conduct and academic excellence. Any student found guilty of plagiarism, fabrication, cheating on examinations, or purchasing papers or other assignments will receive a failing grade in the course and will be dismissed as a major from the School of Journalism. There are no exceptions to the school's policy."

ACADEMIC ACCOMMODATIONS

Any students requesting academic accommodations based on a disability are required to register with Disability Services and Programs (DSP) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from DSP when adequate documentation is filed. Please be sure the letter is delivered to the professor as early in the semester as possible. DSP is open Monday through Friday, 8:30 a.m.-5 p.m. The office is located in the Student Union room 301 and their phone number is (213) 740-0776.

DIVERSITY

When thinking about your own assignments, consider that American society is multi-faceted including racial, religious and cultural diversity. It is important when considering every aspect of nonfiction television production to remember this and to incorporate representatives who reflect this very basic part of the American experience. Bear this in mind as you do your research and begin to select experts. Please feel free to bring up any topics along these lines during class discussions.

INTERNSHIPS

The value of professional internships as part of the overall educational experience of our students has long been recognized by the School of Journalism. Accordingly, while internships are not required for successful completion of this course, any student enrolled in this course who undertakes and completes an approved, non-paid internship during this semester shall earn academic extra credit herein of an amount equal to one percent of the total available semester points for this course.

Daniel H. Birman

Daniel H. Birman is developing a documentary special that considers new thinking about our Universe. He is also producing *She's Screaming: Nobody's Listening* (w.t.) a documentary about the psychological complexity affecting a 16-year-old girl who committed murder. Most recently Birman completed, *Europa: Mystery of the Ice Moon*, a one-hour special program for **The Science Channel** and international distribution; and *Medical Maverick* – two one-hour shows for **Discovery Health Channel**. Just prior Birman produced *The Team*, a four-part and first-ever nonfiction series for **Nickelodeon** and **Tom Lynch Company**, and *Chopper Rescue* a one-hour trauma pilot for **Discovery Health**. Earlier, he produced *Alternatives: Uncovered* – a 10X series of one-hour programs for **Discovery Health** and international distribution.

Prior, Birman worked with some of the nation's leading research physicians during a six-year association with **Lifetime Medical Television**. He produced for *Physicians' Journal Update* and *Specialty Update*, two highly acclaimed series. He then produced several one-hour internal medicine specials for Lifetime, Harvard Medical School, and Merck.

Birman was Production Coordinator and Second Unit camera on documentary and network productions with **Brookfield Productions** in Los Angeles. Among these were such award-winning programs as *It's A New Day...* and *Just the Way You Are*. He also worked on the **NBC** special, *The Day My Kid Went Punk* and the **ABC** Afterschool Special, *The Donna Cheek Story*.

Mr. Birman directed and shot a documentary about famed radio personality Norman Corwin, and spent nearly two years shooting *The Children of Skid Row* in Los Angeles. Both were done while earning a Master's in Journalism at the **University of Southern California**. Both programs aired on **PBS**. Mr. Birman began his career with a PBS Network affiliate in Southern California. He worked for six years on a weekly series focusing on California politics.

The **University of Southern California** invited Mr. Birman to join the Annenberg School for Communication faculty where he teaches courses in nonfiction television writing and production. He is Executive Producer for student documentaries and *Impact*, a student-produced newsmagazine series. He has led his students to victory earning several College Television Awards from the Television Academy.

Birman was recently elected to a third term to the Board of Governors for **The Academy of Television Arts & Sciences**, where he also served two terms as Secretary. As a Board member, Birman is helping to shape the future of the Nonfiction Programming. He directed a national search for a new Academy COO, chairs the Academy's **Ethics Committee**, has been an active member on the *National Emmy Awards Committee* and the *Educational Programs and Services Committee*, established for students entering the television industry.

As a presenter, Birman has recently presented his *Europa* documentary for an international space research organization, and for NASA scientists including a screening at The Jet Propulsion Laboratory. He was also invited to address writers at a National Writer's Conference on how to write for documentary film and television. Birman led a panel on journalistic malpractice in reporting healthcare; he has led panels for **RealScreen Summit** in Washington, D.C., **Television Academy** nonfiction panels for educators and students entering television, and in 1998 the **Shanghai Television Festival** invited Mr. Birman as one of five jury members to judge international documentaries at China's premiere television awards event.