

Jour-405

Nonfiction Television

Instructor: Dan Birman
Spring, 2008
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 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 we gain greater clarity with in-depth storytelling, the risk is losing viewers before the end of the prologue. And in a time when television ratings rule the day, losing the audience 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 to the semester's work, the following reading list – available at the bookstore – will give you an even greater understanding of the work that goes into creating documentary television.

- 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.*

GRADING

You will be graded on the following:

1. Story pitch / Research;
2. Nonfiction television Reviews;
3. Lists / 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%
Lists / Organization	15%
Production Outline	15%
Script	20%
Edited story	25%

Story pitch / Research is all about your ability to articulate an idea – based on credible facts – before you start to produce a show. You will be graded on how well you deliver the information and how prepared you are to respond to questions;

Documentary Reviews measure your ability to comprehend nonfiction methodologies. You will be graded on your ability to analyze a production and to describe elements that work or do not work for you;

Lists / Organization has to do with how you organize many variables. You will be graded on material that shows that you have thoroughly researched your topic;

Production Outline is a description of the production elements that you're going to use and how you plan to implement them. You will be graded on your ability to create good topic flow;

Script is the story plan based on the materials you actually have and the actual written content. You will be graded on good visual descriptions in the left column, and how the story flows in the right column. This included proper script format and good written transitions from one idea to the next; and

Edited Story is how it all comes together in the end. You will be graded on how well you achieved what you said you were going to do, how the story is paced, and whether there is a clear beginning, middle, and end.

While this is a production class, please note that I do not expect you to be accomplished camera operators. I do expect you to use the camera to identify significant visual opportunities that you would use to report to an audience who might never see what you see.

The following is the grade scale that I will base your grades. It is up to you to keep track of your grades and to make an appointment with me to discuss any concerns you might have. We will have a mid-course evaluation to let you know where you stand.

Grading Scale:

94 – 100 = A

90 – 93 = A-

87 – 89 = B+

84 – 87 = B

80 – 83 = B-

77 – 79 = C+

74 – 77 = C

70 – 73 = C-

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 each class.

COURSE SCHEDULE
Lecture Topics / Assignments

- 1/15 – Choosing a sellable subject; doing in-depth research; preparing a pitch; introduction to lists
 - Begin research
 - Prepare a one-paragraph pitch
- 1/21 – Presenting story ideas to decision makers; de-constructing a documentary; maintaining lists
 - Continue research
 - Continue lists
 - View: High School and Harvest of Shame
 - **Due: In-class two minute pitch**
- 1/28 – Interview techniques for long-form television; stay true to the story; selecting characters; conducting pre-interviews
 - Contact three possible participants
 - Conduct pre-interviews
 - Read Shooting Guidelines
 - View: In Memoriam
 - **Due: review**
 - **Due: In-class binder review**
- 2/5 – Advanced camera techniques; thinking about sequences; identifying visuals; organizing tapes
 - Test shoot one sequence – edit in camera
 - Test shoot one interview
 - Lists: people, locations, actualities, topics & questions; bibliography
 - View: Three Days in September
 - **Due: in-class binder review**
 - **Due: Review**
- 2/12 – Re-selling the project; talking with executives; interview approaches; logging
 - First Interview & sequence
 - Log Footage
 - View: Combat Diaries
 - **Due: in-class binder review**
 - **Due: Review**
- 2/19 – Screening footage for good story beats; organization; script format
 - 2nd Interview and sequence
 - Log footage
 - View: Skinheads USA: Children of the Race War
 - **Due: in-class binder review**
 - **Due: Review**
- 2/26 – Organizing large quantities of footage in preparation for a script; mid-semester review
 - 3rd Interview and sequence
 - Log footage
 - View: White Light / Black Rain
 - **Due: in-class binder review**
 - **Due: Review**

- 3/4 – Advanced editing techniques; capturing footage; prep script outline
 - Prepare first draft script outline
 - View: Medical Maverick
 - **Due: in-class binder review**
 - **Review**
- 3/11 – Story review; from outline to script
 - First draft script
 - **Due: review**
- 3/25 – Translating the script to the edit
 - Begin rough cut
- 4/1 – Progress review – surviving executive notes
 - Continue rough cut
 - **In-class review: first cut**
- 4/18 – Adding storytelling elements
 - Pick-up shoot materials
 - Revise edit from in-class notes
- 4/15 – Comparing the execution to the vision
 - Revise edit
 - **Due: in-class edit review**
- 4/22 – Editing Progress Review
 - Finalize edit
- 4/29 – Screen Final Cuts; where to go from here
 - **Due: Final Edit**
 - 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 producing a one-hour special for **National Geographic Channel** that considers new theories about our Universe. Recently Birman completed, *Europa: Mystery of the Ice Moon*, a one-hour special for **The Science Channel** about a moon of Jupiter that might hold the key for life beyond Earth; and prior, *Medical Maverick* – two one-hour trauma shows for **Discovery Health Channel**. He is producing *She's Screaming: Nobody's Listening*, a documentary feature about the psychological complexity affecting a 16-year-old girl who committed murder.

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, Birman produced two seasons of programs for **Discovery Health**. *Alternatives: Uncovered* is a 10X series of one-hour primetime shows on alternative medicine seen in the U.S. and abroad.

Early-on, 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.

During the Stone Age, 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*.

Before that, 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 of Journalism 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 serves on the Board of Governors for the **Academy of Television Arts & Sciences** representing the nonfiction producers peer group. He was formerly a member of the Executive Committee, directed a national search for a new Academy COO, chaired the Academy's **Ethics Committee**, is 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 spoke to an international space research organization, and NASA scientists about his Europa documentary. 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.