

JOU 109 Media & Culture

Dr. Donald Allport Bird

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Office Hours: Tuesday and Thursday Afternoons, and by Appointment

The Sensationalist Tradition & Culture of Contemporary Tabloid Journalism

A survey of the history, significance, use and impact of the American and the British sensationalist tradition. Students study the relationships between mass media, print and broadcast tabloids as best-selling artifacts of popular culture and their audiences. Web- and internet-based sensationalism are studied also. Students analyze the worldview, meaning, presentation and style in these journalism forms. In addition, students investigate the manner through which print and broadcast tabloid journalism and the internet both influence and are influenced by elite news values and ethics as well as by popular, mass and folk cultures.

In *A History of News*, Mitchell Stephens observes that “Sensationalism appears to be a technique or style that is rooted somehow in the nature of news. News obviously can do much more than merely sensationalize, but most news is, in an important sense, sensational; it is intended, in part, to arouse, to excite, often—whether the subject is a political scandal or a double murder—to shock.”

Stephens argues that sensationalism stretches back prior to Andrew Jackson to at least 17th century England. This view also is held by Kenneth Nordin who assaults the view of those journalism historians who traditionally have argued that entertainment was added to the press only after the 1830’s. Nordin observes that “early American newspapers, especially in Boston, catered to a mass literate audience by stressing stories of sensation, human interest, and violence.” For at least two centuries earlier, sensational broadsides were hawked at executions, frequently containing moralistic endings.

This course will test the hypotheses of Stephens and Nordin and explore related aspects of the roots of contemporary sensationalism through a carefully designed sequence of readings of both primary and secondary sources. Also explored and tested will be clearly defined issues concerning the relation of sensationalism to today’s New Media and Internet. Even U-Tube.

Due to its large circulation, influence, and role in the social history, the sensationalist press merits serious study. Indeed, the attitudes and values expressed by popular newspapers in the 18th, 19th, 20th, and early 21st centuries should be of strong interest to undergraduates, media practitioners, and social historians. Instead of focusing on the elite press, the course examines the print and electronic sources many people actually use. These topics should be studied not only due to their past popular appeal but also because these publications and web depictions--replete with sensationalism--dominate today's newsstands and broadcast scheduling. For many years, the literate public purchased more than copies of the *National Enquirer* per issue than *The New York Times*.

In JOU 109 tabloid daily newspapers, supermarket tabloids, tabloid television shows and "trash-TV" talk shows are viewed as reflectors and teachers of societal aspirations, values, disappointments and failures. Examination of the content, meaning, style and presentation of sensationalism expressed through these cultural forms will enrich student understanding of today's American metropolitan daily tabloids, the growth of New York City, sensationalism in the New Media, and of the British popular press that shares similar historical roots.

The course will provide students with a deeper understanding of the impact of sensationalism, and allow them to formulate more precise questions--and also answers--concerning the exact relation of popular culture, celebrities, fads, and public opinion to the mass media. Assigned readings will enlarge student understanding of the humanistic values, worldview and functions that have characterized periodicals for three centuries in the United States and Great Britain.

Also analyzed will be tabloid television programs that have aired such as "Inside Edition," "Hard Copy," "A Current Affair," "Entertainment Tonight," Jerry Springer, Maury Povich, Paternity Court, Judge Judy and other forms of Reality TV. Speculated will be exactly why *The Bachelor* (and the *Bachelorette*) have enjoyed two decades of running on ABC-TV. Some of the above shows merge business, politics and Hollywood gossip and camera verite, as well as today's pseudo-news into a form of personality journalism that relishes intimate details of celebrities and ordinary individuals. The pseudo or half-news frequently found in tabloid journalism today has turned private gossip into public rumor in a renaissance of celebrity gossip of the 1940's and the 1950's so aptly pioneered by Walter Winchell, the founder of the gossip column.

Case studies of stories covered in a sensationalist manner will be drawn from the Robinson-Jewett, Hall-Mills, Thaw-Nesbit-White and O.J. Simpson murder cases, as well as the Lindberg baby kidnapping to allow students to explore in depth several riveting and controversial episodes in American history. Also examined, time permitting, will be the contributions of several disparate individuals who attempted to create fantasy worlds through their publications and entertainment. These will be drawn from the list of Bernard Macfadden, Walter Winchell, Walt Disney, Hugh Hefner, Generoso Pope Jr., Robert Maxwell and Rupert Murdoch.

The instructor expects students tackle some of the below:

Examine themes and styles of contemporary metropolitan daily tabloids, supermarket weeklies and pulp magazines;

Gain an Understanding of how Digital Media—especially the internet—transmit and perpetuate sensationalism, rumor and gossip;

Explore the Concept of Fake News as Electronic Informant with influence;

Gain an understanding of the definition and scope of ‘lowbrow’ news in historical periods that preceded today’s metropolitan and weekly supermarket tabloids;

Acquire an understanding of the dynamics of how today’s gossip, rumor and news are diffuse and acquire various news characteristics;

Gain an understanding of the ethical and legal boundaries of sensationalism;

Gain an understanding of the relationship of the sensationalist tradition to today’s tabloid TV shows, reality TV, “E!” channel, TMZ, Jerry Springer and Maury Povich;

Gain an understanding of morality and meaning expressed within sensational accounts;

Test the hypothesis that although headlines frequently promise to unmask unusual or bizarre behavior, most narratives staunchly align themselves with traditional values against threatened change and support populist issues and advocate a strict moral code;

Acquire an understanding of the various roles that tabloid journalism plays in the role of its readers and the reality which tabloids create in the minds of readers and viewers;

Gain an understanding of the degree that tabloid journalism influences the elite press, political decision making, and perhaps national discourse, as well as tabloid journalism’s role in the creation, sustenance and molding of public opinion--for example, one may argue that the most significant breaking news surrounding the O.J. Simpson trial were from the tabloid press;

Probe as to whether tabloid journalism represents a testing of public standards as tabloids offer incisive comment about the public domain;

Probe as to whether the ubiquity of daily and weekly tabloids suggests influencing publics as they provide an arena for public deliberation about individual conduct);

Acquire an opinion as to whether today’s high-circulation tabloids reflect and express a growing force of conservative populism;

Ponder the visual elements of sensationalism;

Form an opinion concerning the expressed attitudes of tabloid journalism toward the handicapped, minorities and women; and,

Perhaps enjoy tabloid reading and viewing.

Criteria for excellence and a syllabus replete with course goals, methodology and readings will be given to each student. All print readings will be supplied by your Instructor.

Text: John Steven, Sensationalism and the New York Press. Columbia University Press, 1991.

New York Magazine's chronological account of Sensational New York City Stories and their media coverage.**

Current American Public Opinion Research On Topics Relevant To This Course:
<https://www.pewresearch.org/>

Become Acquainted With:

Crimelibrary.com/notoriousmurders/classics/white/
Smithsonianmagazine.com/issues/gg1999/February/object_feb99.php
Evelynnesbit.com
Nytimes.com/books/00/03/05/specials/Doctorow-ragtime.movie
Nytimes.com/specials/ragtime

Participation: In the classroom you will be asked to demonstrate your knowledge of the readings and analyze and weigh their validity. Your participation in class discussion will be judged for factual accuracy, validity of argument and clarity of thought and expression. Strong positions on critical issues will be accepted in discussion and in writing if adequately supported.

Counseling and Student Questions: Feel free to consult the instructor. Read your assignments conscientiously and don't fall behind. This class lasts six weeks and not 14! Solve any problems early; don't wait until the end of the semester. (Past procrastinators have been sorry.) The instructor may be reached at the numbers listed at the top of the first page.

Office Hours: Feel free to consult the instructor on Tuesday or Thursday afternoons, or by appointment.

Note: If there is any student who needs an accommodation for any type of disability, please see me so we can talk.

SECTION ONE

- Introduction, Definitions and Housekeeping
- Why Study the Sensationalist Tradition?
- Theories of popular culture, mass culture, folklore and their audiences
- Marshall McLuhan, *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man*
- Ubiquity and Rationale for Electronic and Print Tabloid Examination

- The Process of Sensationalism; Viewing “Tabloid” as a verb rather than a noun
- Mark Allen Peterson, “Aliens, Ape Men and Wacky Savages: The Anthropologist in the Tabloids”
- What is Truth? How many kinds of “Truth Are There”?
 Literal truth; symbolic truth; psychological truth and

Audience and Publics. Exactly why did Bruce Jenner’s interview with Barbara Walters draw 16 million viewers While World News Tonight with David Muir is No. 1 evening newscast with an average of 8.6 million viewers for the 2017-2018 season? A portion of the Jenner interview included musical background; does this propel the program from news to entertainment? Go to Pew on the Internet and look at the latest trends in American Public Opinion: you may be surprised!

- Videotape: A& E: Sensationalism
- Videotape: Frontline’s Death of Princess Diana
- Videotape: CBC Newsworld: “Tabloid Frenzy”
- Videotape: SPJ USC Conference – on media coverage of the OJ Simpson Trial. Intro Film and brief talks by Charles Ogletree (Pres Obama’s Harvard Law Professor) and UCLA History Professor Patricia Pfaff.

George Polk Award Winner Link to May Ying Welch’s Polk Winner

John Stevens, “The More Things Change... .” pp. 3 – 9

- Everette Dennis, Introduction to Conference on Sensationalism and Remarks by Thomas Bender concerning your Stevens text
- Donald Allport Bird, “Ubiquity of the Tabloid Press” in ‘The Wages of Sin’: Themes and World View in the American Tabloid Popular Press,” (pp.1-18 only)**
- Mitchell Stephens, “Introduction” to [A History of News](#)
- Steve Gorelick, “Cosmology of Fear”**

SECTION TWO

- News Values and Sensationalism*
- The Changing Definition of News in American Journalism

SECTION THREE

- The Roots of Sensationalism: Earlier American Newspapers; the Broadsheet; Sensationalism in The 18th Century.*
 (Includes Slides of Selected American Newspaper Front Pages)

SECTION FOUR

- The Sensationalist Tradition in the 19th Century - Part I*
- The Penny Press
- Robinson-Jewett Murder Case
- [Read Stevens, Part I The 1830s](#)

SECTION FIVE

The Sensationalist Tradition in the 19th Century_- Part II

-Yellow Journalism

-Read Stevens, Part II

The 1890s-Videotape: “The American Experience: Murder of the Century; Stanford White, Evelyn Nesbitt and Harry K. Thaw

-Readings on the Stanford White murder and media coverage.

SECTION SIX

Jazz Journalism and the Rise Of Tabloid Journalism in the 20th century

-Read Stevens, Part III The 1920s through 14 – In the Tradition Supermarket Tabloids

-Lindberg Baby Kidnapping Tape

-Peaches Browning

-The Trial of Fatty Arbuckle

-Lindberg Baby Kidnapping

-*Confidential Magazine* as Venerable Pioneer

-Hall-Mills Murder Case

-Walter Winchell Made-For TV Film

SECTION SEVEN

The Modern Day Tabloid

(Or, Naked Ladies, Gruesome Murders and the Wages of Sin Meet as Killer Caddy Rams K-Mart)

-Bill Carter, “Now It Can Be Told: Tabloid TV is Booming”

-Laurence Zuckerman, “The Last Stand of the Tabloids: As Newspaper Competition Declines --

-Nationwide, Three New York City Papers Slug it Out for Survival

-Biographical Examination of a few Fantasy Entrepreneurs

-O.J. Simpson Media Coverage

SECTION EIGHT

The Typology of Tabloid Culture

-Dominant Themes in Tabloids

-Morality as Meaning in tabloids: Tabloid Journalism as a conservative and populist movement

SECTION NINE

Tabloid style, Rhetoric and Argument

Read, Bird, “E.T. Star’s Daddy is Skid-Row Bum”; “Goetz Gets A Break,”; “Doc Errs, Drug Perils Mom-to-Be”; Rhetoric and Style of Tabloids**

Electronic Tabloids

Reginald Potterton, "I Cut Out Her Heart and Stomped On it" (what working at the *National Enquirer* was like during the 1960s_

Videotape: "Other side of the News: Entertainment News or Entertainment?" Panel discussion about "Tabloid TV" with Phil Donohue, Morton Downey Jr., Geraldo Rivera, others. Fred Friendly, host.

SECTION TEN

Tabloid TV – cable channels Reelz and HLN

Reality TV – ABC Monday Nights, The Bachelor, the Bachelorette and ... Becca! Almost everything is you YouTube.

Electronic Tabloids II The Cult of the Celebrity; Nude Secrets of Hollywood Stars

Case Study: A Tabloid Love Affairs with the Kennedy Family, Including John Jr.'s Death; JFK Assassination

9/11 and JFK Revisionist Theories

Youtube as Informant and Catalyst

TMZ

Web TV

Alex Jones

SECTION ELEVEN (Time Permitting)

The Contemporary British Popular Press

The role and the end of *News Of The World*.

SECTION TWELVE (Time Permitting)

Shifting relationships between popular culture, folklore, Fake News and mass communications in the 20th century Sensationalism and the Visual Arts

Biographical Examination of Fantasy World Entrepreneurs

Bernarr Macfadden

Walter Winchell (Reviews of Book; Film and Worksheet)

Walt Disney

Hugh Hefner

Generoso Pope Jr. and the *National Enquirer*

Excellence Criteria

Excellent Good Adequate Weak Unsatisfactory

CONTENT

Originality of
Thought _____

Scope of
Research _____

Depth of
Research _____

Depth of
Analysis _____

Synthesis _____

Accuracy _____

Organization _____

Logic _____

Attribution to
Authorities _____

Interest
Originality of
Expression _____

Clarity, Coherence,
Conciseness,
Syntax _____

Word
Precision _____

Transitions
Paragraphing _____

Grammar _____

Spelling _____

Punctuations _____

MECHANICS & FORM

Copy
Reading _____

Crediting
Sources _____

Bibliography &
Notes _____

YOUR INSTRUCTOR

Donald Allport Bird is Professor and Chair of the Department of Journalism and Communication Studies at Long Island University, Brooklyn where he serves on the George Polk Awards Committee and from which he received the David Newton Award for Teaching Excellence. He graduated from The Stony Brook School and Rutgers—The State University after being appointed a Henry Rutgers Scholar and earned his Ph.D. at Indiana University in Folklore and Mass Communications. He has devoted nearly forty-five years to communications teaching, administration, writing and consulting, at least 18 so far at LIU as journalism chair.

Dr. Bird has taught on-location at corporations such as NBC and Pfizer and at military bases in five states. At the request of Chinese academics, Dr. Bird has lectured on the First Amendment, environmental reporting, new media, media trends, and media economics at Remnin University in Beijing, China, Beijing Normal University, Nankai University in Tianjin, Fudan University, Hua Dong University in Shanghai, and Zhejiang University in Hangzhou. During his fifth trip to China for Thanksgiving 2015 he gave four invited lectures at China Youth University in Beijing, a school that has forged ties to LIU with regular student exchanges. Dr. Bird has hosted foreign journalists at LIU for the U.S. Department of State's International Visitor Leadership Program has been appointed, trained and certified as an English Language Officer (contract) with the International Distinguished Visitors and Leadership Programs of the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, the U.S. Department of State. During the summer of 2010 he served as a *New York Times* Fellow to the International Center for Longevity. Dr. Bird has held post-doctoral research appointments at Harvard University's W.E.B. Dubois Institute for African-American Research and at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where he was a National Endowment for the Humanities Fellow in Speech Communication.

His students have won national and New York City metropolitan awards and a number have become successful writers and editors at leading media outlets throughout the country. A few have earned their Ph.D.'s and have taught at universities such as University of Nebraska,

University of Illinois and Washington State University. Some have become newspaper executives and publishers—one became publisher of the *Indianapolis Star*.

Dr. Bird has studied persuasive techniques and teaches courses in communication theory, public relations, news writing and sensationalism. While an undergraduate he worked at The Associated Press in Rockefeller Center and later *served on the copy desks of newspapers such as The Jersey Journal, the Patterson News, and Africa Today*. He has published articles on trade magazines, important media figures and has researched a history of *Billboard* magazine through the Beatles. He presented a paper at the American Folklore Society in Quebec titled “*Presentation of Self and Folklore on Facebook*” and has completed a study on 9/11 communication titled “*Holy Smoke*” on 9/11: *Legend, Belief and Dialectics in the New Media*. In June, 2017 he co-presented at the Indiana University’s Future of Folklore Conference a paper titled “*9/11 and Holy Smoke Revisited: the Role of Undergraduate Research in creating a 9/11 Oral History Website and a Case Study Viewed Fifteen Years Later.*”

The Internet and digital interests of his two sons, 26 and 31, have taught your instructor that, alas, a hundred years from now his own generation will be viewed as a transitional one. He credits his sons’ career successes to two factors: acquisition of digital skills in advance of their peer groups, and college internships that directly launched their first positions. Bird is grateful for the enrichment provided by his students and family and believes all teaching and learning is a two-way street, especially across generations. Teaching is a *calling* and not merely in a profession. A War Baby and *not* a Baby Boomer, he believes that asking the right question is as important as formulating the right answer. And, he is eager to learn more from his current students--the millennials who now remain *his* primary teachers.