

Covering the Middle East:

The challenge of reporting on the world's most controversial beat.

Spring 2008

The Fels Institute of Government

Sweeney Room

Thursdays 6-9 p.m.

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Course description:

This course will examine the challenges of covering a region that is crucial to America's security but is becoming ever more daunting for U.S. correspondents. Journalists must deal with the dangers of war and with Arab suspicions about U.S. aims. They must also contend with charges back home that they are biased towards Arabs or Israel, or are undermining the U.S. war effort.

The course will pay special attention to the complexities of covering the Iraq war, Iran, and the Israeli-Palestinian issue. It will also look at how the topic of Islam – both moderate and radical - is covered in the region.

The course is designed for students who want the tools to better evaluate the news they get from the Middle East, and to understand what goes into producing the stories they read. It aims to help students learn how to dissect complex issues and write essays that go to the core of difficult problems.

Course format

The course will meet once a week, in a seminar format.

There will be frequent guest speakers, including current and former Middle East correspondents as well as Arab and Israeli journalists.

Students will also conduct some group interviews via speakerphone during class sessions.

Required reading

The Assassin's Gate, by George Packer (selected chapters)

Willful Blindness: the Bush Administration and Iraq, by Trudy Rubin (selected chapters)

Now they tell us: the American Press and Iraq by Michael Massing

Readings for each week's session (magazine and newspaper articles, book excerpts, monographs) will be provided in a packet or on Blackboard.

These will include articles from the NY Review of Books, The New Yorker and other periodicals on coverage of Islamic issues, Hezbollah, the Israeli-Palestinian issue and Iraq.

Students will be also be expected to follow Middle East coverage in the NY Times, Washington Post, and other newspapers during the semester, and to formulate opinions on what is good, bad, or indifferent about the coverage. They will also be asked to check regularly with several websites and blogs on the Middle East, including Ha'aretz, the Beirut Daily Star, al-Hayat English, and memri.org.

Course Requirements

Students will be expected to come to sessions prepared for active class discussion. In a Since there is only one seminar per week, attendance is mandatory, barring an emergency.

Students will be expected to write six short essay/articles and one long paper to be turned in at the end of the semester .

The essays will be based on interviews they will conduct with subjects in the Middle East, via skype, or on speakerphone during class. Suggested writing assignments are included in the Weekly Schedule of Classes, and may change. How to set up interviews and find pertinent sources will be examined during class, and help will be provided if needed. Initiative in finding sources will be rewarded. Student essays will be circulated and discussed.

The long paper will involve a longer investigative article on one of the subjects we have covered during our weekly seminars.

Grading will be based 25% on class participation, 25 % on short essays, 40% on the final paper, and 10 per cent on initiative.

Weekly Schedule of Classes:

Week 1. Jan. 17. Introduction: A primer for covering the Middle East. Cultural and psychological obstacles, the pressures of Mideast history, the trap of political correctness, accusations of bias, the prevalence in the region of conspiracy theories, the advantages of being a woman reporter, and more. I will talk about my thirty years of experience in covering the region as a correspondent and a columnist, including the nuts and bolts of working as a foreign correspondent.

Week 2. (Date to be determined) Our values, their values – looking at the region through frank eyes. Often, U.S. reporters are accused of cultural bias in covering the region. But a group of Arab intellectuals organized by the United Nations Development Program has put out an astonishingly frank series of reports on why the Middle East trails so far behind in personal freedoms, education, economy, democratic institutions, and women's rights. We will read sections of these reports. For a first **writing assignment**, students will interview one or more of the authors of the UNDP reports, by phone, in their home countries, and ask them how reporters could follow up these reports with news stories on the ground.

Week 3. Jan. 31. Covering Arab democracy – did western correspondents miss the story and why? Recent elections in the Middle East – including those in Iraq, Lebanon, and Egypt – have brought Islamists to power via the ballot. Do U.S. correspondents

understand the political currents in the region, and Islamic attitudes towards freedom (as opposed to justice) and towards elections? Do they pay too much attention to the region's small segment of beleaguered liberals? Or is it the function of the western press to give these liberals a global voice? **Writing assignment:** students will interview Islamist and liberal Arab candidates for office by phone and write about these candidates' perception of democracy.

Week 4. Feb. 7. Covering Islam in the Middle East. We will look at how U.S. correspondents have dealt with issues such as the Danish cartoons; the popularity of radical Islam amongst Arab youths; the preachings of radical clerics; the relative strength or weakness of Islamic moderates; the question of whether growing anti-American feeling reflects a clash of civilizations or a clash of policies. Does the media give the U.S. public an accurate portrait of the role that Islam plays in the region? **Writing assignment:** students will revisit the cartoon story, with an eye to how this story spread in the Middle East, and to what degree it was fanned for political reasons. They will interview at least three people for the story, at least two of them by phone in Arab countries.

Week 5. Feb. 14. Covering Iraq – Part I. War coverage. When confronted with unprecedented dangers, can correspondents give an adequate portrait of what is going on? How do journalists function when they face threats of car bombs, kidnapping, and beheading. ?

Week 6. Feb. 21. Covering Iraq – Part II. The moral responsibility of the press in wartime. Do journalists have a duty to report more good news? Or, in covering the Iraq story, did they report too little of the bad news in the prewar and early postwar, thus giving a false picture of progress? Have the issues of civilian deaths and abuse of Iraqi prisoners received enough, or the proper, attention? The different roles of electronic and print media. **Writing assignment.** Students will interview U.S. correspondents in Baghdad, via conference call, about the difficulties of coverage. Then they will review selected articles, and write an essay on the moral responsibility of the press in war.

Week 7. Feb. 28. Covering Iraq, Part III. Do journalists miss the big picture? Bogged down in violence, can reporters adequately assess what this war means to the struggle against jihadi terrorists or to the future of the region?

Week 8. March 6. Covering Lebanon. An examination of how the media covered the Lebanon war in 2006 and its aftermath. Did/can journalists accurately present the civilian suffering caused by each side?

Week 8. March 20 Covering Iran. How can the U.S. media cover a country such as Iran with which we haven't had relations in decades, and where there are no full-time U.S. correspondents? This question becomes increasingly important as Iran moves towards acquiring the technology for a nuclear weapons.

Weeks 9 & 10. March 27 and April 3. Covering the Israeli-Palestinian issue. Can or should coverage be “balanced”? Do correspondents tell us enough about the “people” on each side, as opposed to the tit-for-tat violence? How do you cover a crucial story when many readers in the USA have tired of reading about what they consider a hopeless issue? I will talk about my thirty years of covering this story and how it has changed, and bring in other well-known correspondents who have covered it as well.

Week 11. April 10. Their eyes, our eyes. Looking at the Mideast through the lens of Arab – and Israeli - media. What do we miss? What can a smart correspondent learn from local coverage? **Writing assignment:** Half the students will interview Arab journalists and half Israeli journalists on the question of how the western media covered the Lebanon war. The students will then compare and critique the responses.

Week 12. April 17. Women covering the Middle East and the coverage of women in the Middle East. The perils and advantages for a woman covering a male-dominated region. And a look at whether Middle Eastern women are adequately or accurately covered by the Western press.

Week 13. April 24. Does U.S. coverage of the Middle East tell Americans what they need to know? More and more networks and newspapers are closing their bureaus, electronic media rely on poll coverage, correspondents tend to have less historic memory as old Mideast journalist hands retire. Blogs and websites are useful but don’t replace first hand reporting. The slow demise of print media undercuts the best source of consistent coverage. What is to be done? **Writing assignment:** after reviewing the clips they have been assigned for each session, and doing further research, each student will write an essay on how he/she would approach covering the Middle East, and what elements are missing from the coverage he/she has studied.