
STUNT JOURNALISM

In 1887, when journalist Nellie Bly feigned madness in order to get herself locked up in the Women's Lunatic Asylum on Blackwell's Island in New York where she could investigate reports of inhumane conditions there, stunt journalism wasn't yet a brand. But the kind of immersive, investigative



photo from newseum.org

journalism that Bly did would soon become a thing, a way for journalists and newspapers to grab headlines, increase circulation and often enough affect real social change. Nowadays, serious stunt journalism is more commonly referred to as “immersion journalism.” In the hands of American journalist Hunter S. Thompson in the 1970s, it was called “Gonzo journalism.” Today it might also be called “annualism” or “schtick lit” or “method journalism,” whereby a writer attempts to do something or live without something for a finite period then writes about the experience. No matter what you call it, stunt journalism differs from traditional journalism in this significant way: The journalist deliberately becomes a part of the story—and sometimes in disguise—in order to tell it.

We will make our way through four book-length works of stunt journalism this semester, beginning with Nellie Bly and ending with Ted Conover, one of the foremost stunt journalists of our time. We'll explore in these books, and in other smaller pieces, the role the journalist's stunt plays in the telling of the story. Along the way, we'll ask such questions as: How does the stunt affect the credibility of the journalist—and the veracity of the story as it is received by readers? What happens to the

journalistic pursuit of, and perception of, objectivity in stunt journalism? In an age in which journalism already gets a bad rap, how does stunt journalism impact the reputation of the genre as a whole? How does the gender/race identity of the journalist affect the journalist's ability to tell the story? Considering these identities as well as social means and safety nets, are there experiences, or privileges, that make access to certain stories more possible? more or less authentic? [Syllabus Easter Egg: These very questions will appear on the final exam.]

The best way to understand the journalism we will read this semester is to write it. Thus, over the course of the semester, you will produce three stories of stunt journalism that, at least on a smaller scale, mirror the challenges of the stunt journalist.



photo from <http://www.nytimes.com/>

Instructor Information:

Dr. Jenny Spinner

E-mail: jspinner@sju.edu

Phone: (610) 660-3272

Office: 114 Merion Hall

Office Hours: T/TH 12 - 2 and by appt.

Required Materials:

Around the World in 72 Days and Other Writings, Nellie Bly (2014)

Black Like Me, John Howard Griffin (1962)

My Life as an Experiment, A.J. Jacobs (2009)

Newjack: Guarding Sing Sing, Ted Conover (2000)

Access to our course Schoology site

Writing/Reporting Projects:

Below are general descriptions of each assignment as well as the percentages they are worth in terms of your overall grade. You will receive detailed instructions at the introduction of each story assignment that will include goals and expectations. While your stunt is certainly a big part of each story you write, you will still need to report the story, interview sources, conduct background research, etc. While there are many acceptable stylistic variations for the type of journalism we will be doing—so much depends on the intended publication—you still must adhere to the basic elements of writing and formatting journalism, including Associated Press style.

For each project, we will have a pitch session in which you will pitch your story idea and receive feedback from the class. After that feedback, you will write a more formal e-mail pitch following standards for composing professional e-mails.

We will also have a draft workshop for each story in which you will receive feedback from your peers. Additionally, I will be available at all points of the process to help you develop story ideas and review drafts. You will be asked to write a short reflection prior to turning in each story, thinking about the reporting and writing process and noting any particular challenges and successes.

Students must complete all major assignments to receive credit for the course. Also, journalists honor deadlines. No late assignments will be accepted.

Pitches (10%) While the verbal portion of the pitch is informal, it's still mandatory. You need to show up, prepared to convince us that your idea, which you've already researched, is the best thing the rest of us has ever heard. You will receive a grade for it as well as for the follow-up professional e-mail pitches that you will craft based on feedback during the oral pitch process. You must be present in class on the day of your pitch or you will receive an "F." There are no make-up opportunities. We will review guidelines for both prior to the first pitch session.

Rookie Story (20%) For this story you will try something you've never done before, then write about the experience.

Method Journalism Story (20%) We don't have a year to write the kind of book-length annualism stories (a phrase coined by the BBC) that are popular right now, so we will try this experiment on a much smaller scale. Inspired by published examples we will read and discuss in class, you will choose something that you will do, or do without, for a defined period of time (average: 7 days or less). That experiment will be the basis of your method journalism story.

Writer's Choice Story (20%) For your third and final story, you will choose from one of the two categories of stories you've already written. The stakes are higher the second time around; after all, it's your second time taking a stab at it. Give it your all!

Literature Reviews (15%) While much of the research we will do for our class will involve hands-on reporting, you also need to do the kind of deep background research that journalists do before and when writing a story. For each of your three major stories, you will do a "lit review" of the topic, finding out how your topic has been covered already in the last two to five years, determining any links to current events that provide your story with exigency, finding out what sources have been consulted for other journalist's stories on the same topic, and compiling a list of sources you may use for your own story.

Final Exam (5%) For your final exam, you will be asked to take a position on the legitimacy of stunt journalism as a journalistic genre, citing specific texts we've read, and your own work, as examples to bolster your argument.

Quizzes, Participation (10%) Expect short reading quizzes or in-class writing assignments that test your thorough and complete reading of the day's assignments. The key to success here is simple: do the work, engage in discussions; in other words, don't be a bump on a log. If you're the type of student who is reluctant to voluntarily speak up in class, no worries. There will be ample opportunities for you to demonstrate your engagement.

Policies:

Regular attendance and participation is not only required but essential to our classroom community. If for some reason you must miss class, I ask that you notify me as far in advance as possible to let me know that you will not be there. E-mail notification is fine. You then need to speak to me or to one of your classmates to clarify missed work and/or discussion. After three absences, your final grade will be lowered by one letter grade. After six absences, you will receive an "FA" (failure due to excessive absence) on your transcript. Also, please note that being present in class means being present in all senses. Students caught texting or tweeting or Facebook trolling or Internet surfing during class will be marked absent for that class period. Lastly, I ask that we treat each other with respect. We will live and let live except when it comes to academic dishonesty, missed deadlines and general laziness. No one likes a slacker, and journalism is unforgiving when it comes to all three.

I ask that you take seriously your responsibility as a communicator, journalist and scholar and that you honor your own intellectual integrity. Plagiarism includes rewriting someone else's ideas in your own words, not properly attributing sources or honoring copyright, and submitting work under your name that has been created by someone else. It also includes inventing sources and quotes for stories. Violations of the University's Academic Honesty policy will result in failure of the course,

and your infraction will be reported to the Academic Honesty Board. Please note that more than one reported violation may result in your dismissal from the university. If you are EVER tempted to cut corners, stop—and see me first. I'd rather negotiate an extension than see you risk ruining your academic (and perhaps professional) career.

I am happy to meet with you any any point during the semester, so please don't hesitate to see me if you ever have any questions or desire additional feedback on your work. You may also wish to take advantage of the Writing Center, where some of the tutors are students journalists. The main Writing Center is located in Merion Hall 162; the satellite is located in PLC 128. (To make an appointment, go to sju.mywconline.com.) As an added incentive, you will receive extra credit for visiting the Writing Center for help on a draft of a pitch, a lit review, or a story.

For those of you who have or think you may have a disability, the University will make reasonable accommodations for students with documented disabilities in accordance with state and federal laws. Contact Service for Students with Disabilities at (610) 660-1774 (voice) or (610) 660-1720 (TTY) as early as possible in the semester for additional information and so that an accommodation, if appropriate, can be made in a timely manner.