

CANADIAN SCHOOL OF PEACEBUILDING
CANADIAN MENNONITE UNIVERSITY

COMM-3950 A Reporting Disaster? The nature of Credible Journalism in a Competitive Compassion
Market

Session II: June 12-16, 2023

Undergraduate Course Syllabus

Instructor: Monika Maria Kalcsics

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Lecture times: 8:30am-5:00pm, Monday to Friday

Office hours: After class

Last date for voluntary withdrawal without academic penalty: **July 14, 2022**

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Credible disaster reporting will be more essential than ever in the future because pictures of despair and unmediated voices are transmitted instantly, which has consequences for responses and recovery. Aid agencies compete for positive media coverage and donations, and journalists who embed with the UN or NGOs to gain access to compelling stories, can compromise their credibility.

This course seeks to examine the practice of a content-hungry disaster news market, and asks tough questions about transparency, ethics, and the impact of news media. It will also explore the questions around NGOs and the competitive compassion market. A series of case studies and broader discussions will be used to see if crisis news can become more constructive and relevant to both the people involved and the audiences who want to know and care about what is happening. Some practical production skills will be taught.

OBJECTIVES

After successful completion of this course students should have:

- Conflict reporting know-how
- knowledge to understand the mechanisms of the competitive compassion market in which NGOs and media organisations work
- tools and ideas to promote solutions journalism and constructive storytelling

REQUIRED TEXTBOOK(S)

It is the participant's responsibility to order texts ahead of time, whether online, as e-books, or from local book-sellers.

1. Books, Articles

BOLTANSKI, Luc. *Distant suffering: Morality, media and politics*. Cambridge University Press, 1999.

➤ Part 1 (Chapter 1)

FENTON, Natalie (ed.), *New Media, Old News. Journalism & Democracy in the Digital Age*. SAGE Publications, London, 2010.

➤ Part I, Part II (Chapter 3), Part III (Chapter 5), Part IV (Chapter 9)

MOELLER, Susan D. *Compassion Fatigue. How the media sell disease, famine, war and death*. London, Routledge, 1999.

➤ Introduction, Chapter One, Chapter Three

POLMAN, Linda. *War Games: The Story of Aid And War In Modern Times*. Penguin Books, London, 2011 (214 pages)

RIEFF, David. *A bed for the night. Humanitarianism in crisis*. Vintage, London, 2002.

➤ Section One, Conclusion

SONTAG, Susan. *Regarding the pain of others*. Penguin Books, London, 2004. (113 pages)

2. Internet resources

a) Academic articles

ABBOTT, Kimberly. "Working together, NGOs and journalists can create stronger international reporting." In: NGOs and the News: Exploring a Changing Communication Landscape, *Nieman Journalism Lab*, 9 November 2009. (<https://www.niemanlab.org/2009/11/kimberly-abbott-working-together-ngos-and-journalists-can-create-stronger-international-reporting/>)

COTTLE, Simon and NOLAN, David. "How the media's codes and rules influence the ways NGOs work." In: NGOs and the News: Exploring a Changing Communication Landscape, *Nieman Journalism Lab*, 16 November 2009. (<http://www.niemanlab.org/2009/11/simon-cottle-and-david-nolan-how-the-medias-codes-and-rules-influence-the-ways-ngos-work/>)

Kalcsics, Monika. "A reporting disaster? The interdependence of media and aid agencies in a competitive compassion market." Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Oxford, May 2011. (<https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020->

[08/A_reporting_disaster_The_interdependence_of_media_and_aid_agencies_in_a_competitive_compassion_market.pdf](#))

b) Journalistic articles, blogs

MIGIRO, Katy. "Starvation pornography: How many skinny babes can you show me?" AlertNet, 18 July 2011. (<http://www.trust.org/alertnet/news/starvation-pornography-how-many-skinny-babies-can-you-show-me/>)

TEACHING APPROACH

In addition to lectures, there will be opportunity for interactive exercises, exploring case studies with guests (communications professionals from NGOs), student interaction and small groups works. Students will be expected to actively engage in class activities. Communication and bringing in one's own observation are key elements of the course for aspiring peace workers, humanitarians, and journalists.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND DEADLINES (for credit)

The following are the general outlines of requirements for those taking the class for credit. Others are encouraged to read as much as possible, however, in order to receive maximum benefit from the course.

Assignments are due as scheduled. Submission via email.

ASSIGNMENT SUMMARY

ASSIGNMENT	DUE DATE	VALUE
1. Report on the use of disaster images	June 12	30%
2. Interactive work in class	during the course	30%
3. Communications strategies report	July 16	40%

ASSIGNMENT GUIDELINES

1. Report on the use of disaster images

Due: June 12

Length: 3 pages

Value: 30%

Description: Based on the book *Regarding the pain of others* by Susan Sontag, students are asked to choose an aid organisation of their choice and describe how much communication about emergencies has changed since the publication of Sontag's book in 2004.

For the choice of visual language students can either use the aid organisation's website or/and a social media channel where they communicate (for instance Instagram, TikTok, YouTube,...)

Students can either choose a sudden or creeping disaster (for example war, earthquake, flood, or drought).

Try to answer the following answers in your report:

- What kind of images (visual language) does the aid organisation use to communicate the disaster? (Who or what do you see in them? What does the person or situation express? How drastically does the picture portray the disaster, the suffering?)

- How do the images and the way we portray suffering today differ from the 20th century examples Susan Sontag gives in the book? Are the differences big, and if so, what are they? What parallels do you see?
- What do the images of the aid organisation trigger in you? (empathy, compassion, disinterest, too emotional, too graphic,...)

2. Interactive work in class

Due: during the course

Value: 30%

Description:

- Students will be expected to actively engage in class activities. Communication and bringing in one's own observation are key elements of the course for aspiring peace workers, humanitarians, and journalists.
- Students are asked to attend the CSOP evening lecture on Tuesday, June 13 about: *How do agencies tell their stories when the pressure from news agencies is to create a hyper local connection in order for the story to be picked up by the media? How can agencies create a strategy to get their stories picked up by media?*
- Students are asked to participate in the audience Q&A by asking one question.
- Students are asked to reflect on the following two questions which will be discussed with the NGO professionals in the class the following day:
 - +Which aspect of the debate was most surprising for you?
 - +How much local connection do you need in an international story to be drawn in?

3. Communications strategy report

Due: July 16

Length: max. 5 pages

Value: 40%

Description: Students are asked to choose a Canadian NGO that participated in the one-day course (Wednesday, June 14) and develop a communication strategy for them based on the learnings from the course. They must choose an emergency (sudden or creeping disaster) and describe where and how they will communicate about it (social media channels, newsletters, traditional media, fundraising letters, etc....).

STYLISTIC REQUIREMENTS

CMU has adopted the following as its standard guide for all academic writing:

L. Diana Hacker, *A Pocket Style Manual*, Ninth Edition (Bedford/St. Martin's, 2020)

The final paper should follow an accepted academic format for citations, bibliography, etc. (e.g. APA, Chicago, MLA). You may choose the format but whichever you use, be sure to use it properly and consistently.

OTHER REQUIRMENTS

Academic Integrity—All material referred to in any assignment MUST be appropriately referenced. Plagiarism is a serious matter. Students should be aware of CMU Academic Policies, particularly those regarding academic misconduct (plagiarism and cheating), which apply to all University courses. These are detailed on CMU’s website (<http://www.cmu.ca/students.php?s=registrar&p=policies>) and in the CMU Calendar.

Attendance—In order to maximize the potential of the educational process, and given the intensive nature of CSOP courses, it is necessary that each student attend all classes. On occasion, a student may need to miss some class time. A half-day of class (4 total hours) is the maximum allowable absence, and any student missing more than this may be barred from further class attendance. In such cases the student is responsible to advise the instructor before the class occurs. It is the responsibility of the student to become familiar with all academic policies, including those pertaining to attendance, academic misconduct, and grading.

ACCESSIBILITY

CMU strives to provide a fair and supportive learning environment for academically qualified students with disabilities. If you are eligible for these services or have questions about becoming eligible, please contact Sandra Loeppky, Coordinator of Accessibility Programs at sloepky@cmu.ca or 204.487.3300 x.340.

In recognition of individuals with asthma, allergies and severe environmental/chemical sensitivities, CMU is striving to become a scent-free campus. Students, staff and guests are asked to refrain from wearing fragrances and scented personal care products at CMU. This includes perfumes, colognes, aftershave and scented hair products. Your cooperation is greatly appreciated by those affected.

EVALUATION

Good communication skills are essential for justice and peacebuilding work. Thus, in general, instructors should look for quality writing that adheres to the assignment guidelines, expresses ideas clearly, concisely, and persuasively, and demonstrates engagement with readings and class sessions. All written work should be well informed, well organized and well documented.

Students to take up any concerns or questions regarding grades first with the instructor. If this does not produce a satisfactory result, the student should submit a written appeal to the Registrar (spenner@cmu.ca).

NOTE: Grades are not final until vetted and approved by the Dean’s Office.

For more information on CMU policies regarding grades, academic misconduct, appeals, and other matters, please see the *CMU Student Handbook*.

LETTER GRADE/PERCENTAGE SCALE

Letter Grade	%	Grade Points	Descriptor
A+	90-100	4.5	Exceptional
A	80-89	4	Excellent
B+	75-79	3.5	Very Good
B	70-74	3	Good
C+	65-69	2.5	Satisfactory
C	60-64	2	Adequate
D	50-59	1	Marginal
F	0-49	0	Failure

Students are graded using the Letter Grade and Descriptor.

EXTENSIONS

The last date within the semester an instructor can grant as an extension is AUG 15. If a student is unable to complete the requirements of a course by this date, the student must submit a written appeal for an “incomplete” to the Registrar’s office (spenner@cmu.ca). The student should seek the instructor’s support for the appeal and must submit it by AUG 16.

If the student’s appeal is granted, the instructor will enter a grade of I (for incomplete) accompanied by a temporary grade (which is based on completed work and assigns a value of zero for uncompleted work). Instructor grades are due by AUG 21. If the student completes the remaining work within the extension period, the grade will be recalculated and the incomplete status will be removed. If the student does not complete the work within the extension period, the incomplete status will be removed and the provisional grade entered alongside the “incomplete” will become the final grade. The maximum extension for courses ending in August is DEC 1.

SCHEDULE, TOPICS & READINGS

This schedule, along with assigned readings, may be adjusted slightly in response to pace of discussion, availability of guests, and other scheduling issues. The instructor will provide advance notice of any changes.

Monday, June 12

Topic: **News from the competitive compassion market**

A historical insight and the state of disaster reporting (the research from the students will be included)

Readings:

FENTON, Natalie (ed.), *New Media, Old News. Journalism & Democracy in the Digital Age*: Part I

RIEFF, David. *A bed for the night. Humanitarianism in crisis*: Section One, Conclusion

Tuesday, June 13

Topic: Who is speaking to us?

About a symbiotic relationship and the interdependence of aid agencies and the media

Readings:

COTTLE, Simon and NOLAN, David “How the media’s codes and rules influence the ways NGOs work.”

FENTON, Natalie (ed.), *New Media, Old News. Journalism & Democracy in the Digital Age*: Part III (Chapter 5), Part IV (Chapter 9)

Kalcsics, Monika, “A reporting disaster? The interdependence of media and aid agencies in a competitive compassion market,” Chapter 2

POLMAN, Linda. *War Games: The Story Of Aid And War In Modern Times*.

Wednesday, June 14

Topic: The ethics of representation. Where do agencies point the camera?

Communications professionals from NGOs like Mennonite Central Committee and Canadian Foodgrains Bank will join the class and bring in their experience. Students will be coupled with practitioners from the field.

Readings:

BOLTANSKI, Luc. *Distant suffering: Morality, media and politics*: Part 1 (Chapter 1)

FENTON, Natalie (ed.), *New Media, Old News. Journalism & Democracy in the Digital Age*: Part II (Chapter 3)

Kalcsics, Monika, “A reporting disaster? The interdependence of media and aid agencies in a competitive compassion market”: Chapter 3

MIGIRO, Katy “Starvation pornography: How many skinny babes can you show me?”

Thursday, June 15

Topic: From compassion fatigue to compassion regard

How constructive journalism and solution-oriented storytelling stimulates audience interest and enriches public discourse.

Readings:

ABBOTT, Kimberly. “Working together, NGOs and journalists can create stronger international reporting.”

MOELLER, Susan D. *Compassion Fatigue. How the media sell disease, famine, war and death*: Introduction, Chapter One, Chapter Three

Friday, June 16

Topic: Conclusions, recommendations and outlook

Bullet points about new forms of credible disaster communication

CONTINUITY PLAN

Faculty and students should plan to stay home when ill, and continue to follow current public health isolation requirements following a positive covid test: <https://manitoba.ca/covid19/info-for-mbs.html#isolation>

Individual students: what to do if you can't come to class

Students need to communicate their inability to come to campus the evening before or one hour before the start of the course. Where possible, they are digitally included using the online tools used at CMU.

What happens if the instructor can't come to class

Students will be informed in Moodle. If possible, elements will be continued online.

SCHEDULE NOTES

July 15	The final date to withdraw from the course without academic penalty.
July 16	Final date to submit essay.
Aug 15	Instructors cannot grant extensions past this date.
Aug 16	The last day for students to appeal in writing to the Registrar's office for extensions past Aug 15.
Aug 21	Last day for instructors to submit grades.