The media business has undergone a major shift over the past decade, from the makeup of newsrooms to the way that stories are disseminated and consumed (often: on our phones). At the same time, we are living through a period of radical social and cultural change — as the way we work, live, communicate, identify and stay connected has been fundamentally transformed. From meme culture to marriage trends to the #MeToo movement, cultural change is all around us. But how do we identify it? Capture it? What does it mean to cover the way we live now?

In this 14-week course, you will improve your ability to pitch, report and execute stories that reflect the cultural zeitgeist — the ideas, issues, people and trends that tell us something about the way we live now. You will learn how to identify patterns, zero in on a trend and contextualize what is happening. We will discuss how identity (gender, race, sexual orientation, etc.) can act as a lens through which to view your reporting, and how diverse perspectives can inform your work. And importantly, we will use the tools of the zeitgeist in our storytelling — bolstering our work in formats beyond the written word.

CLASS EXPECTATIONS:
- Please check your email regularly and make sure you have a login for social platforms.
- Track sources and citations. On the last page of each assignment, you will be asked to list each source as well as links to articles or research used.
- Please arrive to class on time. If you need to miss a class for any reason, email your instructor in advance. If you miss two classes, your grade may be lowered.
- Wikipedia is not a reliable source and should not be used in citations.
- Please utilize hyperlinks in assignments and correspondence with your instructor.

GRADING:
Grades are based on quality and creativity of ideas, execution of work, class participation, accuracy and deadlines. You must sign the department’s ethics pledge. Assignments will be graded as follows:
A: Outstanding work
B: Good work, in need of improvement.
C: Needs significant improvement.
D: Major problems.
F: Issues with plagiarism, libel.

© Jessica Bennett 2021. Please do not redistribute without permission.
ASSIGNMENT OVERVIEW:
- 2,500-3,000-word final feature with at least 8 sources
- 1,200-word reported trend story, including at least three sources
- 800-word Q&A
- 500-word visual profile, incorporating original photos
- Weekly readings & analysis of the news
- Pitches for professional publications

COURSE SYLLABUS:

PRE-CLASS ASSIGNMENT:
Before your first class, please send me a few sentences about you — where you’re from, your interests, etc — and a link to one piece of culture journalism from 2021, in any format or genre (article, profile, podcast episode, essay, Q+A, etc), that made an impact on you. Prepare to discuss with the class.

CLASS I:

What Is the Zeitgeist?
Every generation has a cultural zeitgeist. But what makes up the zeitgeist of today? In this class, we will look at different definitions of the zeitgeist and create one of our own. This definition will be used as a guiding principle throughout this course.

- Roll Call: Introductions & Syllabus Review
- Presentation: What Is the Zeitgeist?
- Discussion: What is the culture -- or the cultural zeitgeist -- of today?
- Watch: Episode of Genera+ion (30 mins)
- Review / Office Hours

Assignment for next class:

- News roundup: Please choose five links or articles from the news that you find relevant to our subject matter or reflective of the zeitgeist. This can be a published article, a blog post, a hashtag, a podcast, or something you have observed on campus. For each link, please provide a two-three sentence of the item and explain why you find it relevant or interesting. Is this a subject you think merits follow-up reporting?
- Reading TBC
- Pitching: E-mail me three potential subjects for a 800-word Q+A. Please include two subjects you think you have access to, and one dream subject.

© Jessica Bennett 2021. Please do not redistribute without permission.
CLASS II:

Doomscrolling My Life Away: Where Do Story Ideas Come from?
In this class, we will explore where to look for story ideas and what makes a good culture story. Part of the goal of this class will be to help you figure out what kind of reporter you are, what kind of stories you want to tell, and where and how you go looking for them.

- Roll Call: Discuss reading assignment + news roundup
- Discussion: What makes a subject a story?
- Presentation: Points of entry
- Guest Speaker: Anya Strzemien, deputy Styles editor, The New York Times
- Review / Office Hours

Assignments for next class:

- Reading TBC
- 1,200-word trend story pitches: Using your news roundup from last week, class discussions as well as other sources, please suggest three story ideas for a trend story subject you’d like to pursue -- along with a short description (a few sentences to a paragraph) about how you would report the story.

CLASS III:

Using Your Campus as Reporting Ground
In recent years, college campuses have become a battleground for debate about free speech, social trends, activism and more. This class will explore using your own campus as a reporting ground for rich reporting that captures the way people are living now, and often reflects larger societal trends.

- Roll Call: Discuss pitches + story ideas
- Discussion: Using Your Campus as a Reporting Ground
- TBC Guest speaker
- Brainstorm
- Review Q&A / Office hours

Assignment for next class:

- News roundup, campus edition: Please collect 3-5 links you find interesting or indicative of the cultural zeitgeist, that are in some way affiliated with (or reflective of) campus culture.
- 1,200-word reporting assignment: Work with your instructor to land on a trend or event you’d like to cover. (We will finalize your assignments in office hours this week.) You will need to interview three sources. Due in two weeks
• **Prepare for class interview:** Your instructor will email three articles about next week's interview. Please read them and prepare three questions you’d like to ask in the interview.

**CLASS IV:**

**Ask Me Anything: The Art of the Interview**
No matter what subject you are covering, you will need to conduct interviews -- and there are myriad ways to do it. In this class, we will discuss interviewing techniques and then interview a special guest as a class.

- **Roll Call:** Review campus news roundup
- **Presentation:** Interviewing nuts & bolts
- **Special Guest:** TBC
- **Discuss Q&A assignment**
- **Office hours**

**Assignment for next class:**

- **Q&A:** Using the interview we conducted in class, please write up an 800-word Q&A. You will need to come up with an angle (or decide which elements of the interview you want to focus on), write a short introduction and edit down the copy. *Due next week*
- **Finish up 1,200-word trend story**

**CLASS V:**

**Pics Or It Didn't Happen: Thinking About Story Format**
These days, every journalism job is a digital job. In this class, we will build on what you’ve learned already to conceptualize ways of storytelling that integrate visual elements.

- **Roll Call:** What we’re reading/watching/listening to
- **Presentation/Skill-focus:** Reviewing your Q&As
- **Presentation:** Exploring different formats
- **Guest speaker:** Sandra Stevenson, deputy photography director, CNN
- **Brainstorm/discuss profile assignment & Office hours**

**Assignment for next class:**

- **News roundup:** Once again, please curate two links you find interesting or indicative of the cultural zeitgeist, along with a short summary and description of why.
- **500-word visual profile:** For this assignment, you will be asked to document a zeitgeist story in photos and words, on a subject of your choosing. *Details to be discussed in class*

© Jessica Bennett 2021. Please do not redistribute without permission.
CLASS VI:

Zoom Fatigue Is Real: Digital Reporting Tools
What happens when you can’t report in person? How do you get subjects to open up over Zoom? In this class, we will discuss the nuts and bolts of reporting in a digital era -- and a pandemic -- as well as how, sometimes, those tools become the story themselves.

- Roll Call: Review homework + answer questions about feature
- Presentation: Digital reporting in a pandemic
- TBC Guest Speaker
- Skill focus: Different tools and tech to use
- Office hours

Assignment for next class:

- Finish up visual profile assignment -- you will present this next week in class
- Submit three ideas for 2,500-3,000-word final feature: Using past news roundups, story ideas we have discussed in class or in your one-on-one sessions, or other sources, please come up with three potential subjects for your end-of-semester feature project, along with at least one idea for a non-written element to accompany each. Come prepared to pitch and workshop your ideas with the class next week.

CLASS VII:

Workshop: Visual Profile
In this class, students will present their visual profiles to the class, followed by a Q&A. We will discuss what worked, what could have been improved, as well as how the text and visuals worked (or didn’t work) together.

- Roll Call: Set up workshop parameters
- Student Presentations: Each student will have 5-10 minutes to present, followed by the chance to answer questions from instructor and students.
- Discuss next week’s archives class and field trip
- Office hours

Assignment for next class:

- Finalize feature subjects: Based on discussions with your instructor, select which idea from your feature pitches you want to pursue. Write up a 2-3 paragraph pitch explaining the topic, why you believe it is a zeitgeist story and how you plan to report and execute it. Please also provide a list of 8-10 sources you would like to conduct interviews with.
- Reading TBC
CLASS VIII:

Using Archives
In this class, we will talk about using historical research to contextualize your work, and the importance of understanding how history influenced any cultural phenomenon. We’ll discuss using archives as a reporting tool and how to find stories in the present by looking at the past.

This class will include a field trip.

Assignment for next class:

- Feature reporting: Begin researching and reporting feature story. For next week, please plan to submit an outline for your approach.
- Reading TBC

CLASS IX

The Zine as Artifact
In recent years, even as magazines and newspapers have moved to a “digital-first” model, there has also been a resurgence of old-school print, which has taken the form of zines, quarterly print magazines, or pop-ups. In this class, we will explore the history -- and present popularity -- of the print format.

- Roll Call: Discussion of news roundup + check in on feature stories
- Discussion: History of zines.
- Zine-making workshop
- Review/Office hours

Assignment for next class:

- Keep working on your feature; we will have a status update next class.
- Reading TBC
- Bring to class a piece of culture writing that you think represents writing about identity (race, gender, sexuality, etc) well. Please also bring a piece you think missed the mark.

CLASS X:

Reporting on Race + Gender + Sexuality in 2021
In this class, we will explore the way that identity -- gender, race, sexual orientation, etc. -- can
be used as a lens through which to approach storytelling. We will also explore the importance of incorporating diverse perspectives into our work.

- **Roll Call:** Discussion of reading
- **Presentation:** What does it mean to cover “identity”?  
- **Guest speaker:** Maya Salam, senior culture editor, The New York Times  
- **Discuss next week’s class / Office hours**

**Assignment for next class:**

- Keep working on your feature. Please submit a revised outline and be prepared to discuss how it’s going in your one-on-one.
- Reading TBC

**CLASS XI:**

**Covering #MeToo: A Case Study**
In this class, we’ll look at the role of the journalist in uncovering stories of sexual misconduct that led to the #MeToo movement. We will discuss how some publications relied on rigorous tools of the trade, while others did not. We will examine what role culture played in the journalism, and vice versa.

- **Roll Call:** Discussion of news roundup + identity stories  
- **Presentation:** Dissecting (and reporting) #MeToo  
- **Discussion:** Ripple effects  
- **TBC Guest speaker**  
- **Discuss next week’s workshop / Office hours**

**Assignment for next class:**

- **News roundup:** Please curate 2-4 links you find interesting or indicative of the cultural zeitgeist, along with a short summary of each.  
- **Troubleshooting:** Bring questions or areas you’re stuck on your feature story for our next class (which will be a workshop)  
- **Reading TBC**

**CLASS XII:**

**WORKSHOP DAY**
In this class, we will review the rough draft of your final project and workshop areas where you may be stuck or need feedback.

- **Roll Call:** Discuss how the workshop will work
• **Workshop:** Spend time discussing areas where you're stuck -- and how to get unstuck -- with classmates and instructor. (Will break into groups of three)

• **TBC Guest speaker**

• **Discuss how everyone is feeling about final projects / Office hours**

**Assignment for next class:**

• **News roundup:** Once again, please curate two to four links you find interesting or indicative of the cultural zeitgeist, along with a short summary of each.

• **Put finishing touches on your feature**

• **Reading/listening for next week TBC**

---

**CLASS XIII:**

**Pop Culture Through a Modern Lens**

It is often said that journalism is the first rough draft of history. But history -- as it was written -- has not always gotten it exactly right. In this class, we’ll look at some of the creative ways that journalists and documentarians have *reframed* some of the stories of the past.

• **Roll Call:** Checking in

• **Discussion:** “Reframing” as the new cultural framework

• **Watch:** *Framing Britney Spears* (Hulu, 70 mins)

• **TBC Guest speaker**

• **Office hours**

**Assignment for next class:**

• **Put the finishing touches on your final project. DUE NEXT WEEK.**

• **Reading for final class TBC**

• **Pitches:** Bring three original story ideas suitable for pitching to professional publications (and please list the publication to which you’d like to pitch)

---

**CLASS XIV:**

**What Should I Do With My Life (And This Degree)?**

The good news: The past few years have shown the world the power -- and importance -- of journalism. In fact, on many campuses (including ours), administrators have seen a surge in admissions. And yet still, the industry is a very different place than when most of your professors were beginning their careers. What is the best way to navigate the path forward, and where should you begin?

• **Discussion:** The Industry
ABOUT YOUR PROFESSOR

Jessica Bennett has spent her award-winning journalism career bringing a gender lens to politics and pop culture, from the persistence of workplace inequality to the ripple effects of #MeToo. She was the first-ever gender editor of The New York Times, where she worked to expand coverage of women's issues across platforms. Now an editor at large, she has documented the primal screams of working mothers in the pandemic, launched the Overlooked obituary series, and has profiled figures such as Monica Lewinsky, E. Jean Carroll, Jennifer Aniston and Katie Hill. Jessica is the author of the bestselling book, Feminist Fight Club: A Survival Manual for a Sexist Workplace and editor the photography book, This Is 18. She speaks on stages around the world on issues of leadership, the media, and diversity and inclusion.