

ZUR393p Reporting Public Affairs

Fall Semester 2016
Faculty of Social Studies
Masaryk University

Instructor: Prof. Stephen Doig
E-mail, Twitter: steve.doig@asu.edu, @sdoig
Hours: 1.30-3pm
Days: Tuesdays
Office hours (from 19th of Sept): 3-5pm Tuesday and Thursday, office 5.51

Course Description: Perhaps the most important role of journalists in democratic societies is to report on the functioning of government at all levels. A democracy functions best when its citizens can get objective information about the effectiveness of public officials and policies in order to make informed votes in elections. Often this journalistic role involves simply reporting on actions taken by governmental agencies and choices made by elected officials. Sometimes, however, it means calling attention to harmful policies, bad decisions, wasteful spending and even outright criminality on the part of public officials. This kind of journalism is often called "watchdog reporting", after guard dogs that start barking when they see something wrong.

The goal of this course is for you to learn some of the basics of how to cover the activities of elected officials and governmental bodies and such important public functions as education, environmental protection, public safety and courts.

As your instructor, I assure you that I have a lot of experience in covering public affairs in the United States, but not as much in European countries. Therefore, an important element of this course will be assignments you will do to educate each other about how government bodies and agencies in Brno, the Czech Republic and the European Union are organized and function.

I will teach you techniques for finding out information from government officials and writing informative stories based on what you find. This instruction will include where to get public data and how to use tools like spreadsheets and mapping programs to find patterns in the data that will suggest good public affairs stories.

Readings: There is no required textbook for this course, but I will give you a number of printouts or readings from the web for you to do as assigned.

Grade: Your grade will be based on the following elements:

- **Shoot First/Ask Questions Later (20%):** Each week I will expect you to develop your eye for stories by shooting a picture of something unusual and then writing a couple of sentences explaining it based on information you gathered by asking about what you saw. Examples might be a police motorcade going by, or construction starting in what had been an empty lot, or fresh paint covering over what had been a wall of graffiti. I will give you a more detailed instruction sheet about this assignment.
- **Public agency description project (20%):** I will assign each of you a governmental agency -- such as the Brno city council or the Czech Parliament -- to research and then write a 2-3 page description of its functions and structure and other details I will specify in an assignment sheet I will give you.
- **Public affairs stories (50%):** During the course of the semester you will write six news stories based on government activities. They might involve sitting through a city council meeting or a court hearing or a speech by a politician, then writing about it.
- **Final exam:** There will be a final during the January exam period that will be worth 10% of your grade.

Make-up Work: The unexpected does happen. When it does, I will accept make-up work for full credit, including any exercises and quizzes, if you can convince me there was a non-frivolous reason for missing your deadline. Obviously, it will get harder to convince me if there are multiple occasions.

Hashtag: If you are a Twitter user and want to post something of interest to other class members, use **#doigclass**.

News media: You are expected to read a good newspaper or news website every day. Look particularly for stories about government decisions, political activities and social problems.

Schedule: The schedule below is subject to revision as I see fit, depending on our progress, the possibility of guest speakers and other factors.

NOTE THAT THE FIRST CLASS SESSION SCHEDULED FOR SEPTEMBER 20 WILL NOT BE HELD. Unfortunately, I have to be in Prague that day to attend a Fulbright orientation. In lieu of that class meeting, I will send you by email a survey and a reading to do. We will hold the true introduction to the class the following week.

Meeting number	Class date	Lecture subject
1	20-Sep	NO CLASS MEETING
2	27-Sep	Introduction
3	4-Oct	Reporting and writing public affairs stories
4	11-Oct	Brno city govt
5	18-Oct	CZ national govt
6	25-Oct	Budgets
7	1-Nov	Elections
8	8-Nov	Public safety
9	15-Nov	Courts
10	22-Nov	Education
11	29-Nov	Immigration
12	6-Dec	Environment
13	13-Dec	Covering the EU

Steve Doig is a Fulbright Scholar who holds the Knight Chair, specializing in data journalism, at the Cronkite School of Journalism of Arizona State University. Before joining ASU in 1996, he was research editor of the Miami Herald in Florida. Data projects on which he worked at The Herald and at ASU have won the Pulitzer Prize for Public Service, the Investigative Reporters & Editors Award, the Goldsmith Prize for Investigative Reporting, the George Polk Award for Medical Reporting and other recognition. He consults actively with news organizations on complex data analysis stories, and has done data workshops and lectures in 18 countries. He is a political science graduate of Dartmouth College and the Defense Information School, where he trained to be a journalist for the U.S. Army during the Vietnam War.