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Inside Journalism

Columbia College Chicago

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Inside Journalism

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Journalists renew interest in science

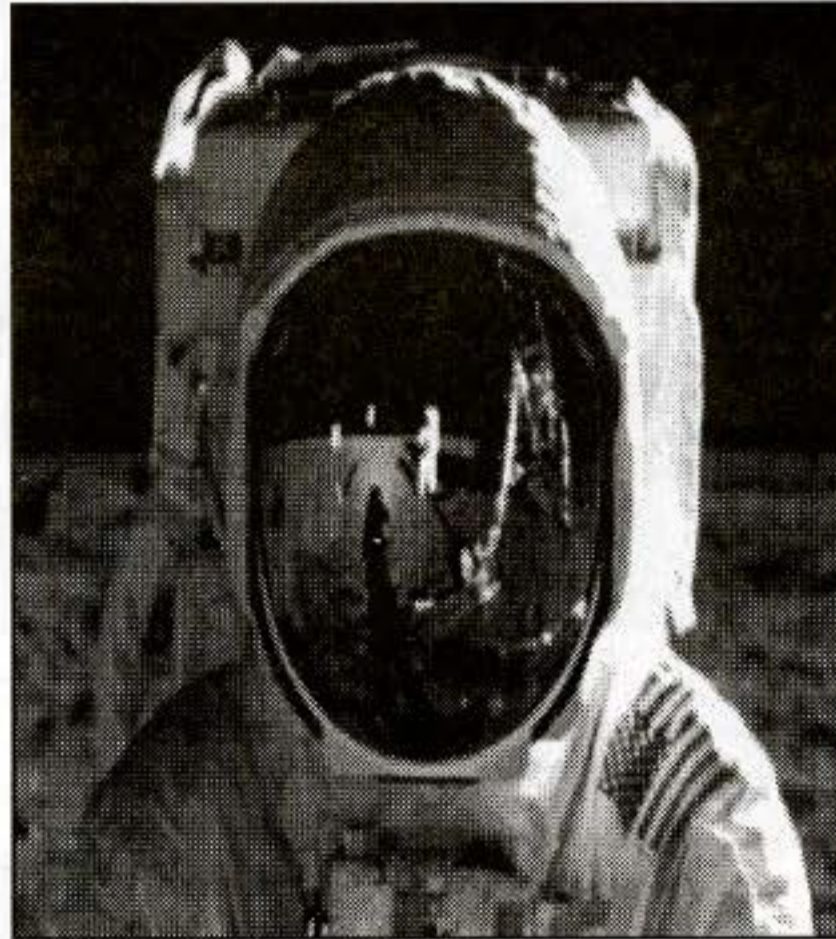
By Rachel Wood

Science was once thought to be a dull subject only understood by the guy with coke-bottle glasses and a pocket protector. Now, science is seen as exciting and worthwhile reading to everyone from high school students to grandparents. The change in attitude towards science is coming about because of the current breakthroughs in the study of space, medicine, technology and environmental policy.

"People are becoming more aware of science's role in their lives," says Jeff Lyon, director of the science writing program.

Recent developments in space studies have unleashed a new era of unbridled anticipation for space exploration seen last in the 1960's when Buzz Aldrin's foot touched the moon's surface. The discovery of ice on the moon has led NASA to plan for a space gas station on the moon for rocket ships heading to Mars in the near future.

Even more exciting is the recent discovery of microscopic organic remains in a meteor found in Antarctica.



Science writing reflects new interest in space.

The meteor, which crashed on Earth 13,000 years ago, gives new hope to the idea of Martian life.

AIDS research has led to a new way to slow the progression of the disease through the combined use of three new drugs. Used separately, the drugs show little results, but when taken con-

currently, the drugs offer AIDS sufferers a longer life expectancy.

Gene therapy is getting raves in Houston, where researchers have used it to slow the effects of lung cancer. New genes are transplanted into a body of someone who lacks the needed good genes or who carries bad genes. "The study of genetics and diseases is growing fast and furious," says Lyon.

Technology in computers is the ever-growing wave of the future. With millions of people surfing the Internet, scientists and engineers are searching for more ways to make the computer faster and more efficient. The

amount of RAM, random access memory, is doubling each year, and the number of megahertz is skyrocketing. MRI, Magnetic Resonance Imaging, offers a better way for doctors to diagnose tumors.

Environmental concerns continue to haunt the minds of politicians as well as the common citizen with visions of air, water pollution, oil spills and endangered species. Slowly, gray wolves are being reintroduced into Yellowstone National Park; Chicago has started its blue bag recycling program and efforts are being made by students everywhere to clean up filthy lakes and streams. "Science is more exciting and has more promise of yielding a bounty to improve all of our lives," says Lyon. Science affects everyone in one way or another, whether it is the water you drink, the computer you communicate through, the drugs you take for ailments, or the planet you may one day inhabit. Hence, there is a need for journalists to write about science in a clear and informed manner.

The need for science writers is great indeed. With all of the current scientific magazines, including Discover, Astronomy, New Scientist, Earth Journal, Science and Scientific American and more and more magazines like Time and Newsweek donating more space on scientific issues, journalists have a

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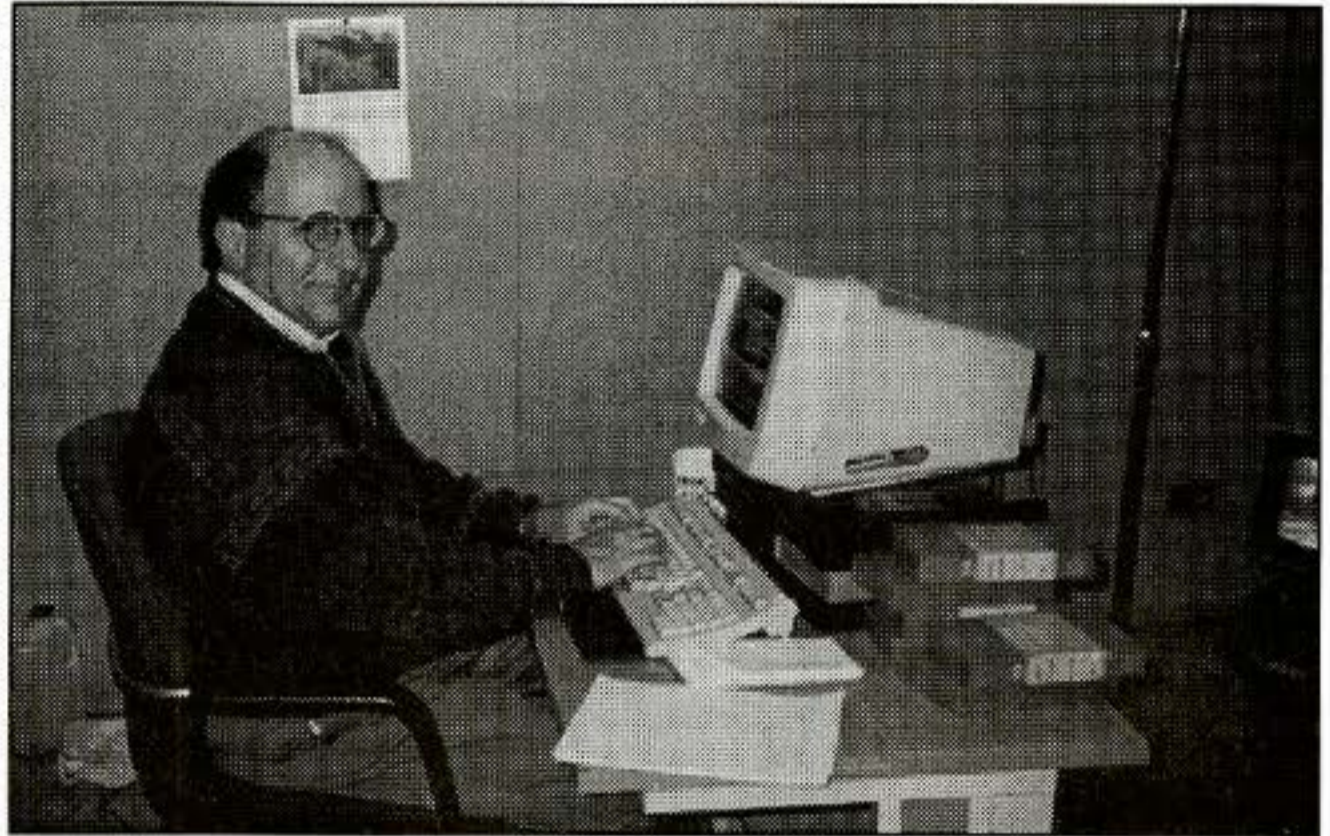
Corman is broadcast industry man

By Jesse Lebus

Steve Corman doesn't have much trouble trying to stay busy. Besides being the director of broadcast journalism and teaching three classes, he writes and sometimes produces sports for WMAQ Channel 5 news, an NBC affiliate in Chicago. However, Corman has complete faith in his busy career: "It is important for me as the director of broadcast journalism and the teacher of three classes to keep a hand in the industry."

Corman was raised in the northern suburbs of Chicago. He attended the University of Denver for undergraduate schooling and then came back to complete graduate school at the University of Illinois. His career started in radio, but in 1973, he began working at WMAQ and continued working there until 1986. It was during this time that he won his first four Emmies, two in sports and two in news. In '86 Corman moved to San Diego, California, to be the executive producer for another NBC affiliate, KNSD. He worked on the Pacific coast for eight years—earning four more Emmies—then returned to Chicago to teach here at Columbia College.

Soon after he started teaching, Corman received an offer from a former colleague at WMAQ to return and write news for a couple of days a week. Corman saw the opportunity as advantageous for himself and his students. "Having this job gives me insight that deals directly with the present, and besides, I don't have to tell my students just



Steve Corman hard at work at WMAQ-TV.

war stories....

"My classes and I frequently look at scripts I have written, and I might ask them, what is good about this, what is not so good?" Corman regularly shows newscasts he has produced and makes references to his days at KNSD to help his students understand different aspects of broadcast journalism.

Writing news again has allowed for several crossovers from workplace to classroom. One of Corman's most important lessons is that news must be reported unbiasedly and accurately. Corman has seen that some newscasts have crossed the fine line of what is news and what is entertainment, and in a school that has its roots firmly in the arts, these might be difficult for some to differentiate between.

"Artistic creativity plays a very important role in broad-

cast journalism, but journalists must understand their basic responsibility and not take their creativity above

and beyond accurately reporting the news."

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Schanberg and Chiarito: one on one

By Bob Chiarito

Sidney Schanberg, who spent 25 years at The New York Times, became nationally known during his years as a foreign correspondent in Southeast Asia in the 1970's. He was awarded a Pulitzer Prize in 1975 for international reporting "at great risk" while covering Cambodia.

The Academy Award-winning film, "The Killing Fields," is based on Schanberg's book, "The Death and Life of Dith Pran," a personal memoir of his experiences covering the war and relationship with his friend and colleague Dith Pran.

Schanberg also worked as a columnist and associate editor for New York Newsday from 1986 to 1995. He is currently working on other projects.

Bob Chiarito spoke with Schanberg in person late last summer.

Chiarito: What do reporters have to do in order to stand out?

Schanberg: Be individuals. All good journalists are. There will always be people who don't go along with the crowd. It's always been true, as much as I love newsrooms, that most of the people in newsrooms didn't stand up to management because most people want to hang onto their jobs.

The way I was taught, you carry your resignation in your pocket; nobody ever owns you, and you move. You have to because you won't like living with yourself [if you compromise your values]. It's different now because most media companies are owned by conglomerates.

Chiarito: What is your feeling about major newspapers covering stories that once were found only in the

tabloids?

Schanberg: We used to have some rules, some guidelines, some standards that have absolutely gone by the boards. For example, we never used to look into people's private lives unless we could demonstrate that something they were doing privately affected their public performance. That was for everybody in a position of public power.

Chiarito: President Clinton has been the subject of one scandal after another, but the public seems not to care. Even the Dick Morris controversy, which many felt could hurt the President, hasn't affected him at all in the polls. Do you think the public is just tired of tabloid flavored stories?

Schanberg: I don't think it stuck [to Clinton] because it wasn't about Clinton. The fact is that in any era a call-girl like this woman [Sherry Rowlands, who blew the whistle on Mr. Morris] can go to any publication and eventually find one to publish her story.

Chiarito: Don't you think character is a valid issue with presidential candidates?

Schanberg: Yes, he was unfaithful to his wife and he's been weak from time to time in his personal life in particular, but I think the electorate has decided that he's the better of the two candidates somehow.

If the public wants a privacy police or bedroom window police, let them elect or hire such a police force. I don't, as a journalist, want to be a part of it, and I don't think as a journalist that is what I signed on to do.

If the mainstream press continues to leap into these stories, and my guess is that they will, it will only taint us.

Chiarito: What do you think of the coverage of Atlanta bomb suspect Richard Jewell?

Schanberg: There was no reason to use his name. His name didn't tell us anything. I mean, it's almost like publishing the name of a rape victim. We don't know who the person is; why does her name help us?

I don't know if he did it or not but let's say he didn't do it. Who is going to give a public apology? The FBI - never. The FBI has never given a public apology. [Jewell was recently cleared.]

What if six major newspapers decide not to print his name or one major television network. At least we would have some example out there to follow. But we don't have any role models like that anymore because everybody does it.

Sometimes there is a difference of opinion on what's right and what's wrong but sometimes it's pretty well agreed on. It has nothing to do if you're a Republican or Democrat. Right and wrong is quite simple. Trust your gut to decide what's right and wrong.

Chiarito: Do you think Newsweek columnist Joe Klein was wrong for lying about being the author of the novel "Primary Colors"?

Schanberg: It wasn't the lie that changed the world, but I will say this: When a reporter tells a public lie, for whatever reason, he's taking

an enormous risk of throwing away his reputation. I can't judge him; he has to judge himself. The problem with Joe is he never judges himself. In a personal way Joe is a very arrogant man. I do feel it is a screwball thing to try and separate two parts of your life like Joe tried to do.

Chiarito: Many journalists have become sources or analysts for stories, offering their opinions on issues from the O.J. Simpson trial to Presidential politics. Is there a danger or conflict of interest when journalists give their opinions publicly on the issues they try to cover objectively?

Schanberg: There's been a general criticism in recent years that there is too much analysis in newspapers. Television is a different animal, but when print journalists appear on television, they have to accept whatever risks are inherent in switching mediums. This is the era when this has become very common, and no one questions it anymore. I don't think it's necessarily a good thing; I certainly don't think it's good when it appears in newspapers with too much frequency. In other words, in the rush to explain to the reader the intricacies of what's going on, not just the details of a bill in Congress but what's behind it all, reporters rush in with an analysis that says, "This is it, this is what it means."

Of course, a week later you find out there was something else and another analysis appears. I think people have become cynical because what they're really getting is

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Issues



By Bob Chiarito

Ask any journalist about his favorite part of the job, and you will get a myriad of answers. When it comes to the worst part of the job, reporters often agree that contacting relatives of a tragedy victim is their hardest task.

If done insensitively, it reinforces the already negative view of journalists by the public. Reporters learn quickly that it is part of the job, a non-glamorous part that requires a delicate mix of sensitivity and a lack of prejudice.

According to 1995 Columbia graduate Linda Abu-Shalback, who worked for City News Bureau of

Chicago before moving on to her present job at Lerner Community Newspapers, covering tribulation is especially hard for young reporters.

"Initially it's very hard,

but you do get kind of desensitized," she said. Abu-Shalback also said covering tragedies every day at City News prompted her co-workers to call their job "death-watch."

"If someone's not in critical condition or worse, it's not covered [by City News] unless it's something unusual," Abu-Shalback said.

In order to cover a tragedy properly, a reporter must contact the victim's relatives, which can present a tough situation. For Abu-Shalback, getting a relative to talk about a victim takes patience. "There's a line I won't cross," she said. "I'll ask about the person who died, but I won't ask the relatives how they feel."

Abu-Shalback said at times she's been called a "vulture."

Columbia graduate and Chicago Sun-Times reporter Art Golab said in order to

avoid incensing a victim's relative, it is important to contact them as soon as possible.

"If you're the first or second reporter they usually open up ... It's like therapy for them," Golab said.

"When you're the sixth or seventh reporter calling them up, that's when they start hanging up."

To get a victim's relative talking, Golab said he focuses on the good aspects.

"Generally I say, 'We're doing a story about this accident, and we want to put a little bit in about the victim [their relative]. We don't want to describe him as another statistic. We'd like to know about his life. Was he a good student?' That sort of thing."

Golab said if someone doesn't want to talk he'll ask if there is another relative available who isn't as close to the tragedy who can give

him answers. In some instances, he has even asked tragedy victims' relatives to appoint a "family spokesperson" or to hold a press conference.

"Even though it may mean that I don't get the story exclusively, it doesn't bother me too much," he said.

"It makes it easier on them and the reporters."

As for television reporters, Golab said, "the good ones ask the relatives of the victim off-camera if they want to talk; they don't shove a microphone in their face and say, 'How do you feel?'"

For both Abu-Shalback and Golab, contacting a victim's relative is the most unpleasant part of the job, and they agree that it will always be tough. They also agree that being understanding and patient is the key to getting the job done.

Venson pioneers future for female journalists

By Kathy Minnis

Many female journalism students today realize that they are entering a profession which has typically been a "boys' club." They are aware of the challenges they face, but many don't stop to think of their predecessors.

These are women who made entry into the field of journalism possible and success plausible.

Lilly Venson is one of those women. In an era

where women and African Americans were fighting for their rights, Venson's voice was heard throughout Chicago.

No, she wasn't a protester, a rioter, or even an activist in the truest form of the words.

Lilly Venson was a reporter.

"I was the only female hard news reporter; the other three women were on the society page," she said.

Venson wrote in the 1960s

for Lerner Newspapers, a large chain of community newspapers in Chicago. The Lerner Newspapers provided each neighborhood with its own newspaper. Lilly worked at the paper for 10 years. She credits her success there to resourcefulness and persistence.

"You have to get your story. You can't go to the editor and say, 'I'm sorry, I couldn't get the story.'"

And get the story is exactly what she did. There were

times when Venson was not allowed to cover a story because she was a woman. She did not cover the Riots of 1968 because her editor felt she would be in too much danger. Venson did, however, cover the Civil rights march in Alabama, and it was one of her most memorable journalistic experiences.

After 10 years, Venson was offered a job at the Chicago Tribune, but decided to take

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Science

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great opportunity to write on an interesting subject.

"Health magazines are one of the fastest growing niches in the magazine world today," said Scott Fosdick, director of the magazine program. Broadcast journalists can get involved in some of the programs on The Learning Channel, Discovery channel, PBS or even the Sci-Fi channel. Science fiction is a hot book and movie venue for journalists right now.

"The job market for science writers is blossoming. I have more internships than I do students," says Lyon.

Columbia is the only college in Chicago that has a program specifically designed for reporting on scientific issues and events. The name of the program will change to "Reporting on Health, Science and the Environment" to clear up any confusion as to what the program is about.

Environmental Journalism is a new class that will be added to the curriculum next fall to help journalists learn



Earth as seen from space.

to report on such issues as air pollution, wildlife controversies and water quality. The class will be team-taught by Lyon and Deborah

Schwartz.

The program combines 30 credits of journalism classes with 15 to 18 elective science credits. If you have a

natural curiosity for science in any field, whether it is astronomy, medicine, technology or the environment, you should think about a major in science writing.

Other jobs to consider in the science writing realm include public relations positions, Environmental Protection Agency jobs, doing research at a university, writing for a publication or broadcasting or working as an editor for a publishing house.

"Science writing is on an upward growth curve," Lyon says. "The interest in science is growing. There are more readers, which means there is a need for more writers to write in an everyday language."

If you are interested in science writing as a career or just want to know the specifics of the program, you may call Jeff Lyon at (312) 663-1600 ext. 5622 on Mondays or Thursdays in the Journalism department or at the Chicago Tribune at (312) 222-4586.

Venson

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a job as a public information officer for Cook County Hospital. She left after five years and joined the Department of Children and Family Services, where she again worked as a public information officer.

After 11 years, Venson retired early to be with her husband, who is suffering from Parkinson's disease. She plans to work as a freelance writer.

Schanberg

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talking heads on television and blabber in newspapers. I think there is a real risk that reporters will lose some of their credibility. All the polls indicate that the public doesn't really trust journalists a great deal.

Chiarito: *Do you think that it is unethical for journalists to accept money for speaking to corporations or special interest groups?*

Schanberg: There are a lot of journalists who take lots of money from organiza-

tions. They contend that it does not affect their judgment in any way. The problem with that is when politicians do it, they are criticized and vilified for "selling their office."

One of the key things that has developed over the years in an effort to regulate this is the requirement of disclosure among politicians. Journalists are not required to do this, and a lot of them have refused. At the very least, journalists should declare those payments and put themselves in the open for examination for conflict of interest.

Chiarito: *Do you think they should ultimately cease to speak to those kinds of groups?*

Schanberg: The problem with issuing a rule like that is that you would impose on their freedom of expression, freedom of speech. You couldn't just say that they couldn't speak. You might want to regulate how much they can accept. I think the best way to limit it is for journalists to agree - because there is no outside power that can force them - to disclose all of their sources of income.

shorts...

By Peter M. Verniere

Booth lands AP award

Bonnie Booth may look like your average News Reporting I teacher at Columbia, but she is the winner of an Associated Press award this year. Booth wrote a three-part series for the Courier News in Elgin last February titled "Mapping the Future." Booth worked on many longer stories while at the Courier News. "It was wonderful," exclaimed Booth on winning the award. "During the year I was there, I worked on longer pieces, and it was gratifying to see my work pay off." The reason Booth only spent a year at the Courier News was that she developed carpal-tunnel syndrome in her wrists. Carpal-tunnel is often caused from typing and causes pain and inflammation of the wrists. "I plan to begin freelancing again in Chicago," said Booth. She currently is employed by Roosevelt University in internal communications and public relations. This is Booth's third semester at Columbia as a teacher. She graduated from Columbia in 1989 and was a Fischetti scholar.



Bonnie Booth

Awards continue for faculty

The awards keep coming to the Columbia College faculty. News Reporting I and Feature Writing teacher Pamela Dittmer McKuen was awarded second place in the serial reporting category in the annual journalism competition sponsored by the National Association of Real Estate Editors. She won for a three-part series that ran in the "Your Place" section of the Chicago Tribune. "I was very happy to win it for the Chicago Tribune," said McKuen. "It was team effort between myself and my editors." The article was based on the changing real estate market and how it affects home buyers and sellers. McKuen has worked as a freelance writer for the Tribune for 18 years. McKuen began teaching at Columbia three semesters ago and has a bachelors degree in English from Elmhurst College.



Pam McKuen

Mystery man revealed

The long awaited answer to the question that everyone in the J-dept. has been asking is here. I know that's not Ed Planer--or is it? Could it be our academic advisor? Maybe it's Scott Fosdick, advisor for Inside Journalism? All those answers are incorrect. And it's not me, Peter Verniere. This gentleman is actually the copier repair man for the j-dept. Refugi Raigosa is an outside repairman hired by Printing Services. For the amount of time that he's in the j-dept, maybe he should go on the j-dept. payroll. Raigosa plays the lifesaver role for the j-dept. on a continuous basis.



Refugio Raigosa

Thank you!

Hey, thanks for all your contributions to the newsletter this semester. Keep them coming in the Spring. Place your stories ideas in the Inside Journalism mailbox in the j-office.