

DOCUMENTARY / PODCAST PROJECT –
HARD WORK IN HAPPY VALLEY

5-15 minute video documentary / audio podcast (.mp4 format)
Presentations due on Tuesday, 28 April via ANGEL dropbox

OVERVIEW

Working in groups of 2 to 3, students will create a short, 5-15 minute documentary or podcast on one of the many kinds of work that makes life in our community possible (see page six for suggestions). The point of the project is to celebrate the lives and labors of the unsung men and women's whose work constitutes the backbone of Happy Valley – and to link their struggles, joys, and experiences to larger social and economic structures at work in both the past and the present. In other words, I expect you to take use the critical thinking methods you will learn from studying the history of American labor to better understand the political-economy of work in the present.

The content of your documentary or podcast will be based on both original research and on interviews conducted with people in the line of work you have chosen to study (please note: **each member of the group is expected to interview at least two people; these interviews must be recorded with your subjects' prior, written consent – including their consent to have the audio and/or video of their interview made available on the internet).**

Your documentary / podcast should address the following:

- **The kinds of work your subject does** (be specific!);
- **The risks associated with your subject's occupation;**
- **The rewards (both material and experiential) associated with your subject's occupation;**
- **What an average day in your subject's line of work looks like;**
- **The average wage for people in your subject's line of work** (research this question; do not ask, unless you know your subject well!);
- **The power relationships at play in your subject's workplace** (think broadly: I'm not just interested in whether your subject's boss is pleasant or not; I'd also like to know about how his or her workplace is organized; how much power your subject's boss has over the content, structure, and pace of his or her work; and so on);
- **Whether or not your subject's profession is unionized** (if so, ask if your subject thinks his or her union represents his or her interests effectively; if not, inquire if your subject wishes his or her occupation *were* unionized [*n.b. this is a sensitive question! Be careful about asking this in the presence of your subject's boss; and don't push the question if your subject is uncomfortable answering*]);
- **The contribution your subject believes he or she makes to the community and to the world** (i.e. how the community and/or world would be diminished were people in his or her line of work to suddenly disappear);

- **How your subject believes his or her line of work will change in the future;**
- **The racial, ethnic, and gender composition of your subject's line of work** (if you don't feel comfortable asking this question, you should do independent research on the topic);
- **The best part of your subject's job;**
- **The worst part of your subject's job.**

After conducting your interviews, you and the members of your group will convene to compare and contrast your findings, and to discuss how you plan to splice together your own original content with excerpts from your interviews to create a coherent whole. When completed, you will be asked to post these documentaries / podcasts on a website tentatively titled *Hard Work in Happy Valley: The Labor of Life in a Central Pennsylvania Town*. Your presentation should aim to provide a general overview of what it means to do your subject's job in State College, PA, the joys and challenges their labor brings, where their work fits in the larger economy of the community, country, and world, as well as the role they and their colleagues play in making our lives in this community possible.

FORMAT AND TIPS

For examples of what your finished project might look like, spend some time watching or listening to the work of others. In this class, we will spend much of the final weeks of class watching documentaries. But I also expect you to do some research and investigation on your own. For audio-only documentary work, you can do no better than NPR's [This American Life](#). Nearly any episode should provide an excellent example of how to blend original research and authorial commentary with carefully-edited interviews. But, as Penn State students, you may be particularly interested in an episode entitled "[#1 Party School](#)," which was made about PSU and the State College community after Penn State was named the country's number one party school in 2009. This episode has very little to do with work or labor history. But it's still well worth a listen. On the video front, meanwhile, I highly recommend television newsmagazines like [60 Minutes](#) or [Dateline](#).

Now, obviously, these are professionally-produced series. While you should aspire to such lofty heights, I recognize that most students' projects are likely to be far more modest. With that in mind, I would like to recommend a handful of additional examples. The short documentaries [Slaves of Dubai](#) and [Dubai's Night Secrets](#), for example, both show how you can tell an important story using only a camera phone and a video editing program. While you should aim to give your subjects' voices a more prominent place in your projects than either of these documentaries do (their subjects, as you'll see, were reluctant to speak to journalists for obvious reasons), I nevertheless encourage you to study these, not only as models of storytelling, but for their attempts to situate construction and sex work, respectively, within larger social, legal, and economic structures.

For examples, on the other hand, that use video – with only a smattering of text and/or dialogue – to tell their stories, consider [A Day in the Life of Your Waitress](#) or [A Day in the Life of a Trucker](#). Neither of these are Oscar-worthy films, obviously. And neither does a particularly good job of situating the work of waitressing or truck driving within larger contexts. But they do suggest the storytelling potential of visual media for even inexperienced filmmakers.

A few final pointers: **first, you need to strike a balance between accurately reporting the contents of your interviews and conveying your own broad, critical perspective.** Imagine you were to do your documentary on NCAA athletes. Many 18-year Penn State athletes, I suspect, think it's pretty cool that they're getting a 'free' college education in exchange for playing football. And, if that's what your subjects say, you should convey that insight in your project. But you should also find a way to mention that a number of athlete-activists throughout the country have criticized a system that generates billions of dollars of revenue for colleges and universities, but pays student-athletes only a fraction of the market value of their labor. In other words, don't lose sight of larger contexts and/or alternative viewpoints.

Second, be mindful of your subjects' feelings and needs. Do not make a video that will embarrass them or get them in trouble. Remember, these videos will be available on the internet – and, if all goes according to plan, may fetch some media attention of their own. If possible, keep in touch with your subjects. Work in close collaboration with them. Discuss the project as you are making it. **And seek their final approval before you give me permission to post your project on the internet.**

Third, never lose sight of the fact that your subjects are doing *you* a favor by agreeing to participate in this project. While this is a mandatory assignment for you, it is not mandatory for them. Therefore, meet on their terms (so long as doing so does not compromise your safety or security). And be courteous. Respond promptly and immediately to email or phone conversations. Pay for their coffee or meal if you meet to discuss the project. And provide some small token of gratitude when the project is completed: flowers, a hand-written thank you note with a gift card, a baked good from one of our local bakeries – whatever you feel is appropriate.

Fourth, feel free to draw on your personal networks, friendships, families, and so on. Your subjects needn't be strangers. The only requirements for this projects are 1) that your subject must not be a 'boss' (this project is designed to celebrate our community's unsung heroes, not its professors, lawyers, top administrators, business owners, and the like) and 2) that their work must, in some way, intersect with the life of Happy Valley – a criteria I am willing to construe broadly. If your aunt, for example, is a farmer outside of Philipsburg, but occasionally sells her produce to restaurant owners in State College, she is an appropriate subject. Similarly, if your cousin works as a line cook at a restaurant in Altoona that sets up concession stands in Happy Valley for football weekends and Arts Fest, he, too, is fair game.

Fifth, your finished project should blend three or four main elements: 1) footage / recording of you and your partner (mandatory); 2) footage / recording of your subjects at work (mandatory); 3) footage / recording of your interviews with your subjects (mandatory); and 4) archival / historical footage or recordings (optional).

LOGISTICS

Video / Audio Recording

The majority of you likely have smartphones, digital cameras, laptops, tablets, or electronic audio recording equipment that will suffice for this project. If not, please let me know as soon as possible, and we will find a way to put the necessary equipment in your hands.

Video / Audio Editing

Many of you surely have iVideo or Windows Live Movie Maker on your computers. For those of you who do not, I am currently working with the Penn State libraries to identify computers / labs / workspaces around campus equipped with video editing technology. In addition, you may find [this article](#) useful, as it lists a number of video and audio-editing software options available for free.

Finally, I will be inviting a campus expert to come speak to the class about video editing technologies and to provide all of us with a brief tutorial on the basic functionalities of a number of common video editing programs.

DEADLINES

- Weeks 1-3* Carefully read the prompt and begin thinking about the persons / occupation on which you would like to base your presentation. Meanwhile, begin chatting with your classmates (either in class or on the ANGEL message board) and start figuring out the person or people that you would like to work with. **It is up to you to make sure that two or more groups are not focusing on the same occupation.**
- Week 4
(Thurs., 5 Feb.)* **Contact ST with the names of the members of your group and the occupation on which you will base your presentation. Please also submit a summary of the equipment / software that you plan to use as part of the project.**
- Weeks 5* Begin thinking about whom you would like to interview. Remember, each group member must interview at least *two people*.
- Week 6
(Thurs., 19 Feb.)* **Submit a five-minute practice video / podcast to ST.** The topic of the video / podcast is unimportant. I just want to make sure that you know how to use your equipment / software and that you're using it effectively.
- Week 7
(Thurs., 26 Feb.)* **Submit to ST the names of your interviewees, as well as a detailed plan of how you plan to complete your project** (dates of interviews, time allocated for research and editing, etc.). **You should also provide me with evidence of written consent from your subjects**, indicating their awareness that you will be using their image and words as part of this project, and that the resulting videos will ultimately be posted on the internet.

Week 10
(Thurs., 19 Mar.) **Submit a one-page progress report to ST**, detailing your progress-to-date toward the completion of your project. I want you to devote particular attention to the work that remains to be done and how much time you will need to complete it.

Week 12
(Thurs., 2 Apr.) **Submit to ST either a storyboard of your project or a rough draft.** If it is easier, please make an appointment to come see me directly and show me a rough cut of your video / podcast on your computer.

Weeks 13-15 Finish and polish your project.

Week 16
(Tues., 28 Apr.) **Submit your projects to the ANGEL dropbox.** View the entries of your classmates.

Week 16
(Thurs., 30 Apr.) Class discussion of the groups projects. **Submit to ST written evidence that your interviewees approve of the final version of your project and that they consent to having it posted on the internet.**

EVALUATION

- *Five-Minute Practice Video:* 10%
- *Project Completion Plan:* 15%
- *One-Page Progress Report:* 10%
- *Storyboard / Rough Draft:* 15%
- *Final Project:* 50%

N.B. The first four components of your grade will be based solely on timely submission (i.e. on-time submissions will receive 100%). Evaluation of the final project will be based on a) the quality and creativity of your presentation and b) how successfully you address the bullet points on pages 1-2, as well as your success in embodying the mission of the project more generally (to celebrate Happy Valley's unsung workers).

POSSIBLE OPTIONS

- Taxi Drivers
- Restaurant Wait Staff
- Line Cooks
- Construction Workers
- Fast Food Workers
- Nurses / Home Health Aids
- Daycare Workers
- Cleaning Staff (Home, Office, Workplace, Hotel, etc.)
- Teachers
- Adjunct Professors / Graduate Instructors
- Garbage Collectors
- Farmers / Farm Workers
- Truck Drivers
- Secretaries / Administrative Assistants
- Postal Workers / Mail Carriers
- Police Officers
- Soldiers
- Firefighters
- Bar Tenders
- Librarians
- IT Technicians
- Hairdressers
- Retail Sales Clerks
- NCAA Athletes
- Landscapers