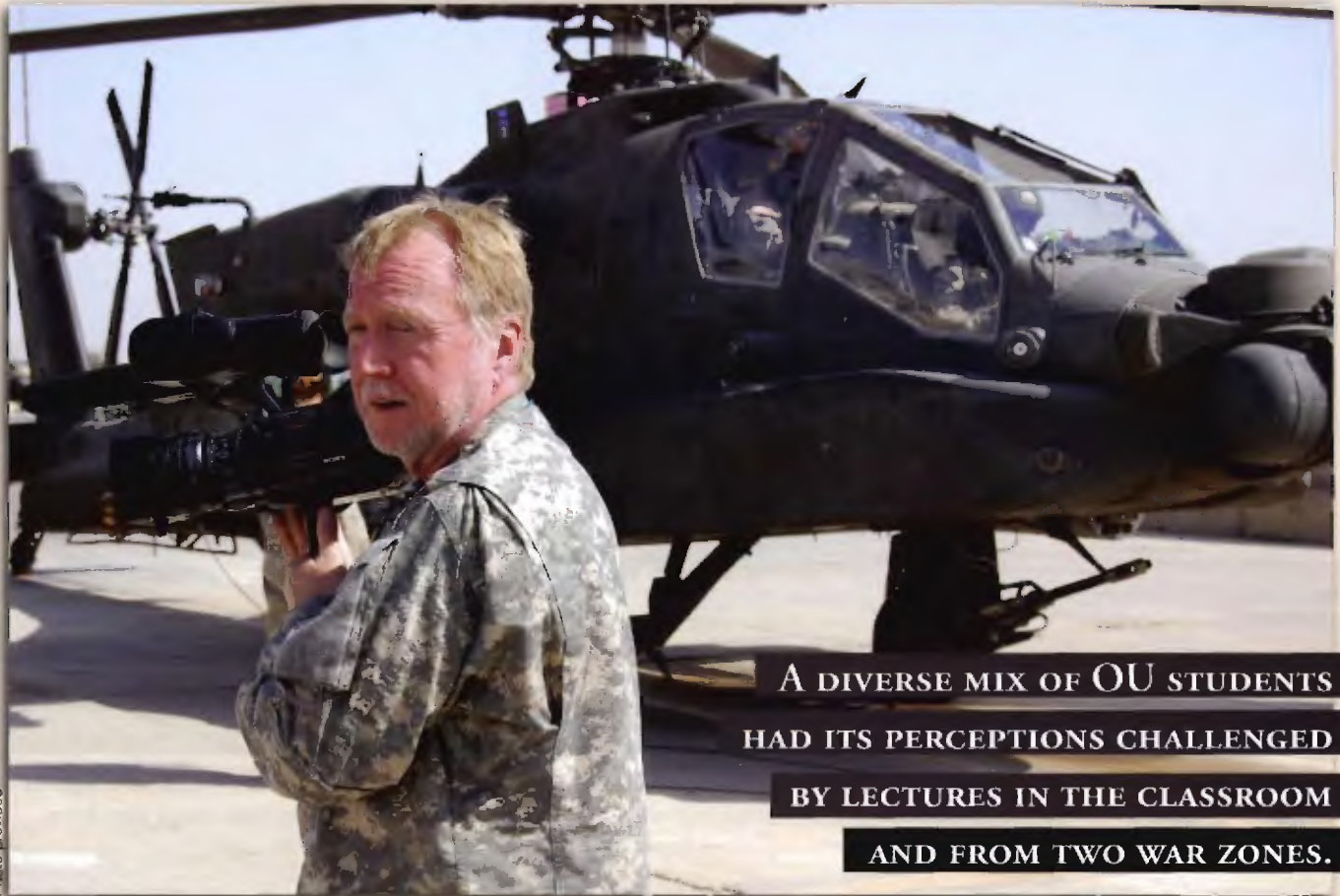


# Mike Boettcher:



A DIVERSE MIX OF OU STUDENTS  
HAD ITS PERCEPTIONS CHALLENGED  
BY LECTURES IN THE CLASSROOM  
AND FROM TWO WAR ZONES.

Photo provided

OU alumnus Mike Boettcher, who has been reporting on armed conflicts around the globe for nearly 30 years as a network journalist, is on his own in Iraq and Afghanistan, working beside U.S. soldiers and telling it like it is to the public and a classroom full of Sooners.

## TEACHING FROM THE BATTLEFIELD

BY KATHRYN JENSON WHITE

The phrase War and Media may not have the literary punch of *War and Peace*, but the fall 2008 University of Oklahoma course designated War and Media has become an instant classic in its own right. With its high-tech method of exploring its subject matter, cross-disciplinary philosophy driving its teaching partnership and intentional blending of students from two very different disciplines, the class is a model for innovative and effective education.

Cross-listed as both a journalism/mass communication and international and area studies course, the class brought together 36 students in equal numbers from each of the disparate academic cultures. Joe Foote, dean



Carlos Boettcher put on hold his senior year at George Washington University, where he is majoring in international relations, to sign on as part of his father's 15-month commitment as an independent journalist covering the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Once when Mike Boettcher's travels made connecting with his on-campus students impossible, 22-year-old Carlos took over the class.

of the Gaylord College of Journalism and Mass Communication, and Zach Messitte, associate professor of IAS, were the instructors of record, but each week students welcomed via Internet broadcast from Iraq or Afghanistan a third leader of their classroom experience: veteran broadcast journalist Mike Boettcher.

"The technology is incredible, but more interesting were the multiple divides—and these are a positive thing—within the class," Messitte says. "First, was this divide between journalism students and IAS students in how they view the world. Some people knew what a bounce story was and understood the conventions of NBC Nightly News. Other students knew what the Bush Doctrine was and understood the important elements of American foreign policy in the last 10 years.

"Even within subject matters, however, was a very interesting divide. A couple of students had done service in Iraq, includ-

ing one as a public affairs officer. They saw things through the military lens. Other students were sort of reflexively anti-military. That was probably the strongest divide. A group of students was involved with Sooners for Israel and another with Sooners for Palestine and other Arabic and Muslim causes. It was the most interesting mix of students I've been involved in because the perspectives were so nuanced for people who are 20 or 21 years old."

Those nuances came from discussions with guest speakers like documentarian Richard MacKenzie ([mackenzieproductions.com](http://mackenzieproductions.com)), whose films like *Inside Special Forces* and *Afghanistan Revealed* have aired on the National Geographic Channel and PBS; readings from sources like Lawrence Wright's *Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11*; and special events like the screening of *Dying to Tell the Story*, an exploration of photojournalists covering war through the story of the death in Somalia of 22-

year-old Daniel Eldon, freelance photographer. Then there were Boettcher's weekly interactive dispatches.

Boettcher, a 1975 OU journalism graduate who has won a Peabody, four Emmys and five National Headliner Awards, is located in the Middle East, committed to work as an independent journalist alongside soldiers in the two countries with which the U.S. is at war. He plans to stay for 15 months, the standard tour of duty for military personnel. To get there, he asked for an early out from a contract with NBC when the network decided not to fund the initiative Boettcher calls, "No Ignoring: Truth Thru Risk" ([noignoring.com](http://noignoring.com)).

"Here's this award-winning, 30-year news veteran who is one of the leading war journalists of our time, and we are enmeshed in these two major conflicts, and he can't get on the news," Foote says. "His frustration with that and the expense of



a network paying for someone to stay in the field has led to reporters like him disappearing from the networks. It's a major story in itself."

The 28-year veteran of mainstream broadcast media outlets like NBC and CNN is, so far, funding his own project with help from grants. Boettcher talked with the OU class live via the military's Digital Video and Imagery Distribution System, or DIVIDS, time on which the military provided. Defined on its Web site ([dividshub.net](http://dividshub.net)) as "a state-of-the-art,

tary serving in Iraq, Afghanistan, Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain," DIVIDS brought Boettcher the approximately 7,000 miles from Mosul or Kabul to Norman with only a few seconds of delay between spoken word and student understanding. While he has long handled sniper fire and IEDs with aplomb, teaching kind of spooked the war correspondent.

"You know, I thought this would be easy," Boettcher said during a phone conversation from Iraq. "It's not. I get as keyed up before this class as I did before

I don't want it to be bullshit. I want it to be exciting. Every class I worry. I want to make it good and make it something interesting."

Boettcher's concerns were unfounded. Foote and Messitte both say he went from wowing students with the Live From Iraq! element, to impressing them with his deep knowledge of the situation in the Middle East and his craft, to moving them with his passion and commitment. Of course, the unstable nature of Boettcher's situation led to logistical problems those who man-

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24/7 operation that provides a timely, accurate and reliable connection between the media around the world and the mili-

an NBC Nightly News live shot, where I have millions of people watching, because I don't want to let the kids down.

aged the course apparatus had to solve. Messitte says as he and Foote worked on the syllabus, Boettcher had to keep filing new personal-location stories.

"Three weeks out, he was going to be in Iraq to start the class; then he switched about 10 days before the class, and he was going to be in Afghanistan," Messitte says. "I scrapped the first syllabus and re-did it because he wasn't going to start in Iraq where the course did. Then about 72 hours before the class began, he said, 'No. In fact I *am* going to be in Iraq.' At that point, I couldn't re-do the syllabus again, so we coped. The students understood the need for flexibility, but we couldn't



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Zach Messitte, at left, represents the International and Area Studies side of the team-taught War and Media course with journalism dean Joe Foote and, from Iraq or Afghanistan, via Internet broadcast, veteran war correspondent Mike Boettcher, a 1975 OU graduate.

just walk into the class and say, 'Look, we don't know where he's going to be, and we don't know how to match the syllabus up to what he's going to be talking about.' Ultimately, the students seem to really have appreciated what they got."

Representatives from both sets of students say they did, indeed, appreciate the course and brushed aside the glitches that being on the cutting edge of technology in the classroom is bound to produce. The class filled quickly and had a waiting list of almost as many who did not enroll in time to make the cut. IAS junior Marissa Alberty said she considered herself fortunate to be one of the in-group and that the course ranked at the top of her classroom experiences.

"I learned so much in that class about the war in Iraq, and I learned to seek out different news sources to really find out what's going on," she said. "Talking to Mike in Iraq has given me a totally different perspective on what's really going on there. I've learned way more than just what I would answer on a test. I liked the mixture of students, too. The journalism students are really good at seeing both sides to the story. I don't think I could ever be a journalist because I'm not good at looking at things objectively. As an international studies major, I would be thinking, 'We need to get this story out to *change* people, not just inform them.'"

Boettcher's lesson is not necessarily focused at this point in his career on objectivity, although he is trying, he said, to present a fair picture of what he has seen up close and personal for many years. He

leaves attempts at objectivity to the mainstream media. He seeks something more along the lines of filling in the many gaps in understanding he sees left by the conventions of objective reporting and the reduction in mainstream coverage.

"My job for NBC news since the invasion had been to rotate into Baghdad for two months and go home," he says. "As time went by, we embedded less and less. As time went by, the wars became an easy thing to ignore. That's why our name is No Ignoring. Maybe we would embed once a month, if that, and for shorter periods of time. I thought that was wrong because we have 200,000 soldiers between Iraq, Afghanistan, the Persian Gulf and the Horn of Africa.

"I want the students to deal with these big questions: What is objectivity if your nation is at war? If your nation is at war,

are you supposed to be objective about it? Are you supposed to give Al-Qaeda equal treatment and give them the same benefit of the doubt you would give a U.S. soldier? No Ignoring is wrestling with that, and we intend to keep that question front and center.

"I'm not a cheerleader for the U.S. Army or the U.S. Marines or the DOD or any policy. But I am for the soldier who is out there. I'm just telling soldiers' stories from the vantage point of on the ground."

Because advertising senior Matthew McRoberts started his academic career at the Air Force Academy, he says, he appreciates on a personal level what Boettcher is doing. McRoberts left the Academy after two years to enlist in the Air Force. He has been out for two years and will earn his degree in May.



Robert Taylor

Coordinating the ever-moving Boettcher's participation from the war zones with course preparation for students on campus presented a challenge for Dean Joe Foote, at left, and his co-teacher Zach Messitte, but the benefits far outweighed any logistical problems they encountered. Those fortunate enough to enroll in the class were more than willing to put up with any inconvenience involved.





Robert Taylor

Journalism students in War and Media contributed an understanding of how the media works and a need for objectivity to IAS students, who entered the class with a better understanding of the historical and political background of the areas in which war reporting takes place. Boettcher's on-the-ground viewpoint gave perspective to both sides.

"Going into the class, I had a pretty negative view of the media," he says. "You know we would read stuff in the news about, say, Kirkuk. There'd be news stories that we in the military knew weren't true or were spun to a point that just made the military look horrible. Ninety-five percent of the time, they don't report on the good stuff. But being able to talk to Mike has kind of explained why that happens."

Footo said the class did provide IAS students a deeper understanding of how media work and journalism students a better understanding of the historical and political contexts in which war reporting takes place. It taught both groups that the frames each of them brings to war coverage have a significant influence on how they perceive it.

"Not all students were sophisticated enough to understand the difference

between propaganda, public relations, journalism, opinion, editorial content, etc.," Footo says. "IAS students are very sophisticated about international affairs, but some of their views about journalism are very simplistic. The journalism students were often unsure of terms used and historical events and individuals. I hope that they are looking at themselves and saying, 'I should know these things to be an informed citizen and consumer of mass media.'


"I had a bit of an epiphany during this class during our discussion of group projects requiring students to do a 50-question survey of OU students to determine their perceptions of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Analyzing the responses of their fellow students led to a reflective moment when our students seemed to say, 'You know, our informa-

tion gathering strategies as a generation are somewhat flawed. We have built a reality around ourselves, constructed it with our own media that we've selected, as opposed to 30 years ago when major news outlets told us all about the same things. Now we're in control. We can make it anything we want. And, disturbingly, it doesn't all add up. It's not a total package.' In other words, the student responses they got did not suggest a great deal of knowledge or understanding of the current military situations."

Messitte agreed with Footo and says this reality had serious implications for not only the mass media professions but also for the knowledge of the citizens in a representative democracy who participate in making major decisions.

"They came to understand that because young news consumers can create that which they *want* to understand rather than having journalism professionals guide them to what they probably *need* to understand, they might be missing a lot," Messitte says. "That was a revelation."

An equally important revelation—and a key concept of the course—was the major impact of the Internet on communications during and about war, on the media and on education.

"Our students were blown away from the first day by technology that in five years will be par for the course," Messitte says. "Everybody in the classroom is going to be doing something with this technology. It's there, waiting. Students are going to demand this because it's interactive, it's exciting, it's different. It's not a professor standing up in front of the classroom and rambling for an hour. It moves. In this generation of students, it's started; in the next half-generation, it's going to be everywhere." 

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