The Art of the Review: Classical Critics Attend NEA-Funded Program at Journalism School

By Alisa Kaplan Michaels

Joseph Nickell, an arts and entertainment reporter for a Montana newspaper, had just dreamt this summer that he would be expected to cover the premier of a program at Columbia University for journalists who cover classical music and opera. He wished the dream might come true.

“I am often on the road to other dreams of my own,” said Nickell, a writer for the Minnesotan Daily and a former student of the Arts (NEA) Journalism Institute in Opera and Classical Music. The institute is overseen by the National Arts Journalism Program (NAJP) at Columbia University’s Mailman School of Public Health (MSPH) and serves arts journalism with a comprehensive curriculum combining studies in climate variability and its impacts, social and environmental issues, and the effects of climate change on society. The participants will be exposed to new ideas and experiences that will boost their professional skills and expand their journalistic range.

The NAJP training seminar is part of a $1 million national initiative supported by the NAJP with the NEA and provides basic skills of arts criticism and an understanding of the history and fundamental concepts of classical music, opera and other performing arts. The participants will attend great performances at such renowned venues as Lincoln Center’s Juilliard Academy of Music, the Metropolitan Opera, Carnegie Hall and Columbia’s own Miller Theater. The program will be repeated for an additional 25 journalists in the 2006–2007 academic year. Almost all of the participants expenses are covered.

“This innovative program in classical music and opera coverage combines the intellectual resources of the University, its School of Journalism and the NAJP with the vibrant city of New York,” said Lee C. Bollinger, president of the University. “These writers and editors will be exposed to new ideas and experiences that will boost their professional skills and expand their journalistic range.”

Current Research

A new Mailman School of Public Health study recently released examined the effects of exposure to the Sept. 11, 2001, destruction of the World Trade Center (WTC) on non-smoking women who were pregnant at that time and who lived or worked closer to the lower Manhattan it compares the size of full-term babies born to women living within two miles of the WTC site during the four weeks following the attacks with the size of live births of other women in the greater New York City metropolitan area.

The study revealed that the infants born to the women living near the WTC site following the event weighed significantly less at birth (on average 5.2 ounces or about a third of a pound), compared to infants born to other pregnant women who were not living or not working so close to the WTC site.

“The study reveals that the infants born to the women living near the WTC site following the event weighed significantly less at birth (on average 5.2 ounces or about a third of a pound), compared to infants born to other pregnant women who were not living or not working so close to the WTC site,” said Sally Ann Lederman, lead author of the report. “Reduced gestation means smaller, less mature babies. The first trimester appears to have been a sensitive time period for this effect. The decreases we saw in the size of the newborns and the size of the newborns are in the range of the reductions seen in response to tobacco smoke, although none of these women were smokers.”

These effects, though modest, are of potential concern; and because they may have implications for the health of exposed children, we are following the children born to the women who were pregnant at the time of the WTC event,” said Andrea Perera, the study’s principal investigator and director of the CCCEH.

It is important to note that the effects observed in this study, although statistically significant, are relatively small, and that the reported reductions in birth weight and in the duration of pregnancy are small group averages that do not apply to every individual in the study.

The research involved a sample of 500 non-smoking women who were pregnant at the time of the attacks and delivered at term (after 37 weeks of pregnancy) were enrolled in a study between December 2001 and June 2002, shortly before the delivery of one of three downtown hospitals close to the WTC site: Beth Israel, St. Vincent’s and Harlem Hospital.

From these sources, information was obtained on the course of the pregnancy, sociodemographic and reproductive variables, maternal and neonatal health, and on all maternal home and workplace locations during the four weeks following 9/11. Computerized mapping was used to determine the distance of each of these locations from the WTC site. About 44 percent of the women in the study lived or worked within two miles of the WTC site in the month after 9/11, an area including most of Manhattan below 14th Street and parts of Brooklyn and New Jersey. The remaining women lived and worked further from the WTC site, mostly in the greater New York City metropolitan area.

This study is the first to examine the effects of the WTC attacks on pregnancy outcomes in women who were all living or working near the WTC event at the same hospitals. It is also the first to include women known to have lived and worked near the WTC site as well as those close to the site.

Although this study did not determine the role of specific exposures, other studies show that the destruction of the WTC towers released a wide range of toxicants and tritiated water, and that combustion products such as polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), polychlorinated dibenzo-p-dioxins, polychlorinated dibenzo-p-dioxins, polychlorinated dibenzofurans, pesticides, other hydrocarbons and metals. In addition, the event was obviously a highly stressful event for which the women who were pregnant at the time.

This research is part of a long-term project, The World Trade Center Mothers and Children Study, that continues to examine the effects of prenatal exposure to the WTC tragedy on the growth, health and development of infants.

Co-authors of this study include Lederman; Perera; Virginia Rauh, co-director of the CCCEH; Jean J. Bolan, director of the Health and Community Research Institute; and Andrea Perera, the study’s principal investigator and director of the CCCEH.

For more information about the NAJP go to www.najp.org.