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JRNL 370.01: Public Affairs Reporting

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JOURNALISM 370

Public Affairs Reporting

2:10-3:30 p.m. Mondays and Wednesdays: 210 DAH

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Office hours: 3:30 to 5:30 p.m. on Mondays and Wednesdays, or by appointment

Course description

Beginning today, I am your city editor, and you are my beat reporters. Unlike standard beat reporters, who often spend years sinking their teeth into a single topic area, you will spend a couple of weeks, or less, covering cops and courts, city hall, public schools and higher education. During the 15 weeks we are together, you will learn the basics of covering local government and writing about the key issues that affect a community. In the process, you'll gain experience making sources, rooting out public information, and digging for documents and data that help break big stories. You will learn to write factual information and differentiate it from hype, spin, speculation or opinion. You will learn the elements of a good story, how to pitch editors and the nuts-and-bolts skills of turning a good story idea into a killer read.

Beat reporters are the core of a news organization. There's little that's more fun, or more challenging. Your beat is your turf, a wide-open playing field full of stories that you own. Beat reporting is also competitive, consuming and very hard work. So is this course. You will often be responsible for reporting and writing one story a week. I'll edit each of your stories, which will often need to be rewritten. The pace is fast, but it's the pace you'll need to run if you want to do the job.

Outcomes

Successful students will emerge from Journalism 331 with:

- Experience covering local government, criminal- and civil-court proceedings, schools and other government institutions.
- Ability to generate interesting, useful story ideas.
- The improved reporting and writing skills applicable to all types of writing.
- Experience writing breaking news on deadline.
- An understanding of government organization and functions.
- An appreciation of the societal value of public affairs reporting.
- An understanding of access to and use of public records.
- Familiarity with news beats and methods for successful beat coverage.
- An understanding of ethical and professional challenges of reporting public affairs.
- Necessary skills needed for reporting internships with news organizations.

Course policies

This course requires significant time spent reporting off-campus. You must commit some Monday evenings to firsthand coverage of Missoula City Council meetings. Court proceedings and other coverage also require an extraordinary commitment of time and local travel.

Classroom discussion is an essential part of this course. Attendance and active class participation are essential to your grade. That means completing assigned reading and other homework before class. You are also expected to read and think like a journalist. If you are adequately conversant on the news, we'll enjoy excellent discussion. If not, there will be quizzes. As for the participation grade, you'll lose 5 percentage points for every unexcused absence.

A note on paying attention in the Internet age

Except when otherwise noted, this classroom is a device-free zone. Please put all gadgets (computers, phones, etc.) in your bag. Active participation requires your complete attention. Traveling in the online world will harm our discussion and hinder your grade.

All writing for this class must be original. As stated in the University of Montana Student Conduct Code, you may not submit for this course any assignment that you have submitted or will submit for another class or publication unless you receive prior approval from me. To do so without permission will result in an F for the assignment and could result in an F for the course. You may not recycle pieces previously written for publication. You must be able to identify the sources of all information you use. Upon request, you must provide story notes and contact information for all sources.

Published stories will win the reporter extra credit.

Rules of integrity: Cheating will not be tolerated. All students must practice academic honesty. Academic misconduct is subject to an academic penalty by the course instructor and/or a disciplinary sanction by the University. All students need to be familiar with the Student Conduct Code. The Code is available for review online at http://life.umt.edu/vpsa/student_conduct.php.

Plagiarism. Submitted work **MUST** be entirely original; you may not copy or borrow phrasing or sentence structure, unless you attribute clearly. **If you are uncertain about what is or is not appropriate, ask me.** Submitting the work of someone else as your own is a serious violation of journalistic ethics and the University of Montana Student Conduct Code. An act of plagiarism will result in an F for the course and possible disciplinary sanction by the university.

Collaborative efforts. Discussing stories among colleagues often helps you generate better story ideas, work through reporting challenges and improve your reporting and writing. Feel free to discuss your ideas and writing and seek feedback from other people. But the reporting and writing for this class must be your own.

University policy regarding accommodations for students with disabilities: This course is accessible to and usable by otherwise qualified students with disabilities. To request reasonable

program modifications, please consult with the professor *during the first week of classes*. Disability Services for Students will assist the professor and student in the accommodation process. For more information, visit UM's Disability Services Web site: <http://life.umt.edu/dss/>.

Texts

Fred Bayles' "Field Guide to Covering News." Get the spiral-bound version online.

The AP Stylebook. No older than 2009. Online versions not acceptable.

Meanwhile, here's a summary of basic AP style that you should know by heart:

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/735/02/>

Here's a grammar guide too

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/735/02/>

The New York Times, the Missoulian, the Kaimin and Poynter's Mediawire. Subscribe to the Times here with an education

discount: <http://www.nytimes.com/subscriptions/edu/lp1999.html?campaignId=393W8>

Grading

Your course grade will be based on an average of all individual assignments and quizzes, plus your participation. Here's the formula: Assignments and quizzes (80 percent) + participation (20 percent) = final grade.

Remember: Unless you're told otherwise, you will be required to rewrite every story you do for this course. Every draft of a story will carry the same weight.

Grading Criteria

Grades on written assignments will reflect the following criteria:

A. Substantial and suitable for publication. Compelling topic; clear, flowing, precise writing that conveys information relevant to readers; thorough reporting; good focus with excellent organization and structure; correct grammar, punctuation and Associated Press style. Facts and quotes are appropriately and skillfully attributed.

B: Substantial and suitable for publication with minor revision. Interesting topic presented well but needs polish or minor additional reporting to meet the standards of an A. Writing is clear and compelling; has good focus but needs improving; reflects thorough reporting; demonstrates good structure and organization; includes correct

grammar, punctuation and Associated Press style. Facts and quotes are correctly attributed.

C: Adequately fulfills assignment but is overly simple, lacks the newsworthiness of A and B stories or needs significant revision or additional reporting to merit publication. Flaws may include dull topic or unclear focus; inadequate reporting; lack of clarity or creativity; minor errors of fact or grammar, spelling, punctuation and AP style.

D: Not publishable because of one or more serious flaws, including poor or inappropriate topic; inadequate reporting; unpolished writing; significant problems of focus, organization, syntax, spelling, grammar, punctuation or Associated Press style.

F: Fails to fulfill the assignment. Flaws may include lack of newsworthiness; serious factual error; imperfect attribution of facts or quotes; grossly inadequate reporting; serious factual errors; libel; serious ethical problems, such as obtaining consideration in exchange for favorable coverage; plagiarism; fabricating information; failing to adequately attribute facts and quotes.

Deadlines

Journalism is deadline-driven. A late assignment is a failed assignment. In rare instances involving documentable extenuating circumstances, such as hospitalization, I may grant an extension or, in the case of breaking news, make an alternative assignment.

COURSE SCHEDULE (Subject to change)

Week 1 – Getting started

8-26: Introduction to Public Affairs Reporting.

8-28: Finding and pitching stories from a beat. The lifecycle of a news story.

Assignment – Three story pitches.

Week 2 – Crime, fires, crashes, and other pandemonium on the public safety beat

9-2: Labor Day

9-4: Cops beat boot camp: Writing a crime story on deadline. The art of the telephone cops interview.

In-class assignment – Write a cops story on deadline from a press release and PIO interview.

Week 3 – Cops continued

9-9: Boot camp continued. Critique cops story. Leads and nut grafs. Effective use of quotes.
In-class assignment – Write another cops story on deadline from a press release and PIO interview.

9-11: Crime features and trend stories.

Assignment – Research and prepare a pitch for a crime trend story. Due 9-16.

Week 4 – More cops, intro to courts

9-16: When the department is the story, from budgets to bad cops.

9-18: Intro to courts reporting. How to find, read and understand court records. Following a case from cops to prison.

Assignment – Write a story incorporating details from a court record. Due by Thursday at midnight.

Week 5 – Courts continued

9-23: Critique court record stories. Covering hearings and trials.

9-25: Field trip to the Missoula County Courthouse. Search District Court and Justice Court records.

Assignment – Write a daily deadline story on a hearing or ongoing trial. You have the week to complete the story.

Week 6: Justice wrap-up, Intro the city beat

9-30: Justice wrap-up: Working the mafia beat. Skype visit from Michael Zuckerman, former USA Today reporter and editor and expert on organized crime, terrorism, cyber-security, the Justice Department and national security issues.

10-2: Intro to city hall reporting. Prep for Monday's Missoula City Council meeting.

Assignment – Write a preview of Monday's City Council meeting. Due in class Monday

Week 7: City beat continued

10-7: Continue prep for Monday's City Council meeting

Assignment – Write a story on the council meeting. Due at midnight.

10-9: Review City Council story.

Week 8: Advancing the story

10-14: How to write an issue folo.

Assignment _ Develop a pitch for an issue folo. Due on Wednesday.

10-16: Brainstorm reporting strategy for folo.

Assignment _ Issue story due 10-28

Week 9: City beat continued

10-21: How to read a city budget. Finding stories in the agate type.

Assignment _ Three story pitches from the budget.

10-23: From the city beat to U.S. Congress. Skype visit Dave Levinthal, a former Houston Chronicle city hall reporter who now lives and works in Washington.

Week 10: Reporting on elections

10-28: Covering elections, beyond the horse race.

Assignment _ Write a candidate profile. Due in one week.

10-30: Critique issue story. Reporting on the role of money in politics.

Week 11: The Elements of investigative reporting

11-4: Reporting investigations from your beat. The Gene Roberts “two notebook” method of making a name for yourself as a journalist.

11-6: Critique candidate profiles. Leaks and documents—how to get them, how to use them.

Week 12: Intro to computer-assisted reporting

11-11: Veteran’s Day

11-13: Reporting the data-driven story. Intro to Microsoft Excel

Week 13: More CAR, intro to the education beat

11-18: Exel Continued

Assignment _ Find and pitch three stories from a database.

11-20: The hows and whys of covering education.

Assignment = Localize a national story on K-12 or higher ed. Due Tuesday, Nov. 26

Week 14: Higher Education

11-25: Reporting on universities, community colleges, and for-profit schools

11-27: Student travel day

Week 15: Law, ethics, and public affairs journalism

12-2: Review education story. Ethics of public affairs journalism

12-4: Feedback and student evaluations