

9-2014

JRNL 470.01: Covering Elections

Dennis L. Swibold

University of Montana - Missoula, dennis.swibold@umontana.edu

Lee M. Banville

University of Montana - Missoula, lee.banville@umontana.edu

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Recommended Citation

Swibold, Dennis L. and Banville, Lee M., "JRNL 470.01: Covering Elections" (2014). *Syllabi*. 1541.
<https://scholarworks.umt.edu/syllabi/1541>

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JOUR 470/Covering Elections, fall 2014

INSTRUCTORS:

Lee Banville (DAH 406), 243-

2577, lee.banville@umontana.edu

Dennis Swibold (DAH 412), 243-

2230, dennis.swibold@umontana.edu

OBJECTIVES

Successful students will learn how campaigns operate and the various tools and methods journalists use to follow them. They will hone their reporting skills and develop critical insights by backgrounding candidates, fact-checking campaign statements and analyzing public response to the campaigns. Students will demonstrate their skills by producing election coverage for professional news organizations.

HOW THE CLASS WORKS

Students will do reporting and analysis for an online audience and for networks of Montana newspaper and radio stations. Each student will:

- Write a profile of a statewide contest or ballot issue.
- Write a follow-up article on that race or issue or on another aspect of the campaign.
- Fact-check candidate's campaign claims.
- Contribute to the class's election night and day-after coverage.
- Produce a postelection analysis piece.

ABOUT THOSE ASSIGNMENTS

- **Profile** – A 600- to 800-word article providing an overview of the candidate, race or ballot issue assigned. If you're writing about a race, the article must focus on key differences between the candidates in terms of their experience, style, support and positions on issues. Stories about ballot measures need to focus on the key arguments and potential consequences. We will need original photos to accompany the articles. The stories will run in Montana newspapers and on the Web.
- **Follow-up** – An update on your race. These website-only reports (audio, video, text, graphics) may focus major developments or controversies that have arisen in your contest.



- **Fact checking** – Each of you will be responsible for fact-checking candidate statements and advertising claims. You will prepare by analyzing the candidates’ records and their advertising claims. We’ll show you how.
- **Election coverage** – The class will provide Election Day results and reaction in a variety of forms for the Montana Public Media website.
- **Postelection story** – Each of you will be expected to produce a Web-only story (audio, video or text) after the election analyzing the results or looking ahead at the implications of the outcome.

DEADLINES

With news organizations depending on us, we can’t be late. No excuses, please. Anticipate problems, and if they happen, inform your editors immediately so they can help or make alternative plans.

Assignment deadlines are:

- Profile – Sept. 15
- Live fact-checking – Sept. 29 and Oct. 2
- Follow-up – Oct. 10
- Election coverage – Nov. 4 and 5
- Postelection story – Nov. 18

GROUND RULES

All the standard ethical rules apply. We won’t tolerate plagiarism, fabrication, etc., but there’s a special warning for this class: no politicking.

So keep your politics out of your work. This isn’t a class in political commentary or electioneering, so let’s keep the public’s focus on your reporting, not on your biases. So if you have a conflict of interest, tell the instructors immediately so they can assign you to a race or issue where that won’t be a problem. Conflicts may include working for, donating to, or publicly promoting a specific candidate or one side of a ballot issue. No conflict is too small to consider, so let’s disclose everything at the start.

We’ll expect you to attend every class and do every assignment. If you have to miss for a good reason, clear it with one of the instructors first. Be aware that Election Day is a working day for students in this class.

GRADING

We expect your work to be accurate, compelling, thorough and fair. We expect great sourcing. We expect you to hit your deadlines. You’ll get an initial grade on the first draft and a final grade on the finished work. Your course grade will be an average of those. First-draft grades will reflect the instructor’s judgment on the amount of work you or your editor would have to do make the article publishable. (A= Needs little, if any, editing; B=Needs minor editing, reorganization, reporting; C=Needs major editing, additional reporting; D=Needs a complete rewrite, much additional reporting; F=A story turned in after the deadline or not at all.)

Students are expected to complete every assignment to pass the course.

***Extra credit:** You're not limited to the class assignments. If you see additional stories you'd like to do, great. We'll factor them into your final grade. Lee or I need to approve these stories beforehand.

GRADUATE STUDENTS

Students taking this course for graduate credit must complete an additional assignment to be chosen from the following:

- An additional story to be approved by the instructors.
- A 10-page paper analyzing some pertinent aspect of the Montana news media's role and performance in covering the 2012 Montana election.

PLAGIARISM WARNING

Plagiarism is representing another's work as your own. That includes writing a story based on someone else's reporting, including a classmate's notes. Students who plagiarize may fail the course and be suspended. The solution is simple. Do your own work, and attribute your sources.

ACADEMIC HONESTY

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://www.umt.edu/SA/VP/SA/index.cfm/page/1321>.

NO DOUBLE DIPPING

You may not submit for this course any assignment that has previously or will be concurrently submitted for another class unless you receive prior approval from the professor for this course.

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 instructor during the first week of classes. Disability Services for Students will assist the instructor and student in the accommodation process. For more information, visit the Disability Services website at <http://www.umt.edu/dss/>

CLASS SCHEDULE (SUBJECT TO CHANGE)

Aug. 26, 28 – Course overview; assign race and ballot-measure stories, assign fact-checking teams; begin overview of reporting resources and approaches. Provide sample stories.

Sept. 2, 4 – Trends in campaigning and campaign coverage; fact-checking basics.

Sept. 9, 11 – Political fact checking exercises

Sept. 16, 18 – Fact-checking labs, edit profiles

Sept. 29, Oct. 2 – Pitch follow-up possibilities in class on 29th

Oct. 7, 9 – Problems in campaign coverage

Oct. 14, 16 – Workshop follow-up stories

Oct. 21, 23 – Campaign finance

Oct. 28, 30 – Election planning;

Nov. 4, 6 – Election Day (Be prepared to work that day and the next.) Be thinking of postelection stories.

Nov. 11, 13 – No classes on the 11th, but postelection pitches are due that day. We'll polish them Thursday.

Nov. 18, 20 – Workshop postelection stories

Nov. 25 – Final editing sessions. (Nov. 26-28 is Thanksgiving break.)

Dec. 2, 4 – Course wrap-up, evaluations