1-2015

JRNL 575.01: Story Laboratory

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Recommended Citation
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**Story Lab Syllabus**  
JRNL 575 (CRN32790)  
5:10-8 p.m., Tuesdays, Room 410 Don Anderson Hall

*This syllabus has been formatted to be accessed using an eReader.*

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Office Hours:  
Mondays 9:30-11:30, Thursdays 3-5  
or by appointment

**Learning Outcomes**  
By the end of the semester, successful students will:  
Be comfortable applying journalistic skills to the stories of science.  
Have an enhanced ability to assess the news value of scientific claims.  
Know how to develop relationships as working journalists with scientists.  
Have a deeper understanding of the nature and processes of science.  
Understand the differences and similarities between the culture of science and the culture of journalism.  
Be familiar with the pragmatic as well as theoretical approaches scientists use to seek new knowledge, and what those approaches mean for journalists seeking access and accountability for reporting science-based news.  
Understand the business behind scientific research – how it is funded and how that affects the questions pursued and published by researchers and research journals.  
Have experience facilitating thoughtful peer discussions about the challenges of covering science for a general audience.

**Course Overview**  
This course will allow students to explore the culture of science, forge relationships with scientists and practice, through application and repetition, applying journalistic skills to stories about science.

Laboratory partnerships are central to this course. Each journalism student will embed with a team of scientists for the duration of the semester. This time spent by journalists in the company of scientists should inform the class time conversations and the stories pitched and pursued as part of class (and, perhaps, beyond.) It is important that journalism students bring the lessons of the labs with them to class, in the form of both questions and revelations about science, and the relationship between scientists and journalists, between science and journalism.

Students who successfully complete this course will better understand the challenges and opportunities of telling journalistic stories about scientific research, findings and the people and systems that support scientific inquiry in the United States. You will be able to engage in a broad conversation about the relevance of science to civil society.
You will spend time with scientists and professional science journalists (in person and via Skype) and reflect in practical ways on the values that scientists and journalists share and the culture and traditions that can affect opportunities for storytelling about science.

You will practice the fundamental skills of journalism within constraints peculiar to the science beat. You will focus on translating and simplifying scientific communications for a general news audience; applying news values as you evaluate and interpret scientific studies; developing relationships with scientists; and critically evaluating science news as it appears in the general media. Special attention will be paid to ethical concerns raised in the practice of science and science journalism.

Presented as a weekly, three-hour seminar, this course requires students to prepare for and vigorously participate in class each week.

**Course Structure**

**The lab: Exploring the culture of science**

Scientists and journalists are both concerned with verifying facts, sharing information and developing lines of evidence that allow fresh understanding of the world. The quests inherent in each profession are creative undertakings, though scientists and journalists are both guided by the rules and cultures of their respective discipline.

But the tools and processes each group uses in each pursuit of facts – and new knowledge and understanding -- are quite different, as are the obstacles encountered or perceived along the way. In order to cover the search for scientific knowledge, journalists need to understand the culture of science and scientists – and how it mixes with the culture of journalism that they are more familiar with.

With that in mind, each student in this class will establish a working, professional relationship with a lab group doing scientific research on the UM campus. Students will act as “participant observers” in the labs as they learn about the practical realities of how science happens – how the lab functions, the relationships of lab members and hierarchy of that community, how knowledge is created, and how questions are asked, answers evaluated and findings shared.

The relationships established for this class between the lab group and the journalism students is special. Unlike many professional relationships you enter into as journalists, elements of mutual interest and prior restraint are explicitly built into these relationships. Journalism students should help lab members understand the culture of journalism and seek opportunities to help lab members improve the way they engage with journalists. Moreover, the Principal Investigator of each lab – or his or her designee -- must explicitly approve any stories you produce about the lab, work being done in the lab or members of the lab, prior to publication. This is spelled out in the Story Lab Partnership Agreement.

Ideally, learning how to operate in each other’s spheres is reciprocal. Just as students have been welcomed into a lab, so, too, are members of the lab welcome to join the Tuesday evening classes to participate in any of the class discussions or lectures that might interest them. Students should convey this invitation to their lab members as part of the introducing themselves and the intent of this class.
The craft: Telling stories about science
This class takes up where JRNL 570 -- Covering Environmental Science and Natural Resource Issues ended. The fundamentals established in that class will be applied specifically to the nuanced challenges of telling journalistic stories on the science beat.

This class will use examples of best practices, as well as pitfalls, to guide exercises that allow students to practice identifying, translating, simplifying, reporting and structuring scientific news stories for a general audience. Students will routinely apply news judgment to peer-reviewed publications, evaluating which studies are newsworthy (which is to say, accurate, timely, engaging, meaningful,) to a general audience.

Several assignments will ask students to draw directly from their lab team. For these assignments, students will apply the practical lessons of the lab experience – the ability to forge relationships of trust and respect with scientists, the ability to understand the things that scientists value from communicating their work. Part of the challenge is to work within the availability of the members of the lab.

Journalism craft assignments for this class aim to help students sharpen their interviewing and note-taking skills and develop the ability to translate jargon, compress and simplify technical or scientific information and work on presenting stories about science in an active voice and engaging context.

Each student will work to publish or broadcast at least one piece from this class. The goal, as always at the University of Montana School of Journalism's Master's Program in Environmental Science and Natural Resource Journalism, is to share your professional journalism work with a broader audience.

Assignments & Grades

Assignment (% final grade)
Luis briefs (10%, all briefs) 1/30 @ noon
Lab briefs (”) 2/10
Video interview or fully reported breaking news story (15%) 2/24

Lab member profile (15%)
  - Quick pitch 3/3 in class
  - Rough draft 3/17 in class
  - Final draft 3/24

Final project (20%)
  - Pitch 3/24 in class
  - Plan 3/27
  - First draft 4/14
  - Final draft 4/28
  - Query 5/5 in class
  - Lab website translation (10%) Submit at any time before class 5/5.

Discussion leadership (10%) As assigned
Class participation (15%) Includes but is not limited to attendance, readiness, discussion participation, as well as in-class exercises, critiques.

The grade scale is:
- A  93-100
- A-  90-92
- B+  88-89
- B  83-87
- B-  80-82
- C+  78-79
- C  73-77
- C-  70-72
- D  60-69
- F Below 59

*All assignments are due by the time class meets of the day due, unless otherwise noted

**Briefing scholarly articles**
Due: Periodically or as listed above
Summarize an article from peer-reviewed scientific journal in 250-325 words. The summary should highlight the news value of the piece, cite its original publication, and identify key author or authors. It should be engaging, written in an active voice and appropriate for a general reading audience. Each brief should include a headline, a complete citation (Chicago or MLA, not included in the word count) and the link to one suggested additional article related to the subject of the brief (provide the URL and date accessed.)

Depending on the assignment, briefs or short breaking news of publication may be expanded to require one or more direct quotes, may be made longer. All science briefs will be graded and together they will account for 10 percent of the grade. Science brief assignments may be added in addition to the two specified by due date, above.

**Video Interview or breaking news story**
Due: 2/24
*Video interview:* Using Google Chat or Skype, conduct an interview with a member of your lab and record the interview. The goal of this interview is to learn who this person is, what type of science they do (what types of questions they ask,) what makes them interested in those questions and the impact they feel their findings have or might have. You will be assessed on the quality of the questions, your ability to control the interview (it must not exceed 30 minutes,) preparedness, professionalism. Submit a one paragraph summary of the interview and a link to the recorded interview. (Tech support: http://blogs.techsmith.com/tips-how-tos/skype-google-hangout-video-calls/)

*Breaking news story:* Identify and fully report a newsworthy journal article published in some association with your host lab. Fully report the finding in a 500-800 word story for a general audience. Reporting should include at least two interviews.
Profile of a Lab Member
Due: Quick pitch March 3; Draft review 3/17; Final draft 3/24
(One grade with quality points for pitch and draft)
Each student will write a profile (800-1000 words) of a member of their host lab. The profile will require at least one interview with the subject, plus additional interviews with members of the lab, university, discipline or others. The purpose of any profile is to present a vivid and engaging story of the subject and the lab in which they work. It should also help develop your lab relationship. Students should seriously consider publication options for these profiles.

Final Project
Due: Pitch 3/24, Plan 3/27, Draft 4/14, Final 4/28, Query 5/5 (5 + 50 + 40 + 5)
Students will produce one publishable story related to their lab. The story can be hard news or a feature with a news hook. Students will have their choice of medium for the project. Final Projects will be a 1000-1200 word written piece, a 3:00 radio production, a 2:00 video production, or a 20-25 photo package. Students may also propose suitably weighted multi-media piece. This project will be broken into several stages: pitch, plan, draft, polish, query.

Students will be required to present a formal pitch of their story to a panel of journalists on March 24.
A written statement outlining the Final Project is due on March 27. (Approval of this plan is not required prior to beginning work on the project. Ineffectual plans may be revised and resubmitted April 7 but this costs the student potentially valuable work or rumination time over break.) As always, these stories should be written for publication.

Found in Translation: Lab website assist
No later than May 8.
Each host lab has some kind of an online presence. The content on these range from minimal to ambitious, but eventually all of them struggle to clearly explain what the lab does, why it does it or what impact the work has had. Often, the struggle stems from jargon – a word or phrase that a general reader is unlikely to understand. This assignment asks each student to explore the web presence of their host lab and work to clarify those points. For example:

Jargon: Trophic effects. Definition: The effect a change to one part of the food chain has on other parts of the food chain.

Jargon: Cox-proportional hazards survival analyses. Definition: A statistical technique for exploring the relationship between survival of an individual and several explanatory variables.

These acts of clarification should start with creating very brief definitions that clarify jargon. Those definitions should be added to the site so that they appear when a cursor hovers over the word or phrase. Students will have to gain lab permission for the changes and seek the assistance of whoever maintains the site to add the hover-over pop ups (a not very daunting technical challenge.) Students must submit changes in a single word document showing the jargon and the suggested clarification or definition.
Case study presentations
Due, Weekly, as scheduled

What: Each student will research and present a case study that is germane to the topic of the day in class. These presentations should run 20 minutes, leaving 10 minutes for discussion and questions. They may take whatever voice or form the student chooses and may include supplemental reading for the class prior to the presentation.

How: Students will be responsible for choosing the focus of the case study – it might be an article, a person, an event, etc. You must relate the case study to issues covered in the course, teach the situation to your peers and use the case study to pose key questions related to the central issue you are focusing on. These questions should be used to develop and sustain conversation with your audience. You may assign an item to read, view or listen to in advance that will help your audience engage in conversation about your case study.

Meet with me: You will meet with me at least a week prior to their scheduled group discussion in order to review an outline of the direction for the discussion and any reading materials they would like to distribute prior to class.

Evaluation: Your case study should be true, new to your audience in some way, thought provoking and capable of sustaining a related dialog. The presentation should be articulate, thought provoking and appropriately timed.

Books
Readings will be assigned and made available online (through Moodle or Mansfield) during the course of the semester. The following books are also required. You should already own the first two and ought to own the third.

Best American Science and Nature Writing edited by Deborah Blum and Tim Folger (2014)

Other matters

Professionalism

Attendance
Course attendance is required. Missing more two classes will result in a full grade reduction (B becomes C,) missing three or more classes without prior permission automatically results in a failing grade in this course.

Deadlines
Deadlines are critical. Assignments are due by the time class meets except where otherwise specified. All assignments must be handed in on time. Detailed feedback will not be given on assignments submitted late. Late assignments will receive a failing grade but not necessarily a zero. Assignments must be posted to my email (and dropped in the shared folder on Dropbox.com) by the deadline assigned – this is your responsibility. In case of emergency, contact me to negotiate a solution prior to missing a deadline.
**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, which is available online.

**Same Work for Multiple Classes in J-School**
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 of both courses. To do so without permission will result in an “F” for the assignment and could result in an “F” for the course.

**Issues of accessibility**
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. Disability Services for Students will assist the instructor and student in the accommodation process. For more information, visit the Disability Services website.

**After Hours Access**
For after hours access to Don Anderson Hall, complete and submit the appropriate after-hours access form online by February 6. NO after hours access requests will be processed after that date. Complete only one request form per semester – be sure to list all courses you are taking. Codes will remain active until the last day of the semester.

-- Syllabus, as always, is subject to change --