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JRNL 575.01: Story Laboratory

Nadia D. White

University of Montana - Missoula, nadia.white@mso.umt.edu

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Story Lab Syllabus

JRNL 575 (CRN32790)

5:10-8 p.m., Tuesdays, Room 410 Don Anderson Hall

Professor Nadia White
408 DAH

243-6720 (office)
529-9839 (cell)

Office Hours:
Mondays 1-3
Wednesdays 9-11
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.

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 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. These quests inherent in each profession are creative undertakings, though scientists and journalists are both guided by the rules and cultures of their respective discipline.

The tools and processes each profession 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 may be 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 University of Montana 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, how research is funded 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 for this class only. 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 journalism students have been welcomed into a lab, so, too, are members of the lab welcome to join the Thursday evening classes to participate in any of the class discussions or lectures that might interest them. Journalism students should convey this invitation to their lab members as part of 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 -- 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 scientists value about communicating their work. Part of the challenge is to work within the availability of the members of the lab. This will vary from lab to 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

<u>Assignment (% final grade)</u>	<u>Due date*</u>
Science briefs, deconstructed news story, book review (20%)	Various
Reportage: 24 hours lab story (20%) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Pitch & approach - Rough draft - Final draft 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 2/11 in class - 2/21 Sunday 11:59, discuss 2/25. - 3/3
New discovery (25%) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Pitch - Plan - First draft - Final draft - Query 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3/24 in class 3/27 4/14 4/28 5/5 in class
Discussion leadership (15%)	As assigned
Class participation (20%)	Includes but is not limited to attendance, readiness, discussion participation, as well as in-class exercises, critiques and lab journal maintenance.
The grade scale is: A 93-100 C+ 78-79 A- 90-92 C 73-77 B+ 88-89 C- 70-72 B 83-87 D 60-69 B- 80-82 F Below 60	

*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 slug that includes the date (eg. White_AvianBrief_01282015,) a headline, a byline, the brief, and at the bottom, 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 15 of the grade.

Reportage: 24 hours with _____

Due: Pitch Feb. 11 in class; Draft 2/21, discussion 2.25; Final draft 3/3 by class with in-class discussion

Using all of the tools of reporting, with an emphasis on interviews, observation, contextual analysis, each student will produce an engaging feature story that follows a member of the lab or a lab enterprise with multiple members for a composite 24-hour cycle. The narratives should have a focus that provides cohesion and tension to the story (something that holds the story's focus, something that makes the reader care.)

Book review

Due: For presentation in class, Thursday, April 14, due prior to that class.

Select a non-fiction book about a scientist, a scientific finding or pursuit, or the scientific process. Review the book in a fashion suitable for publication or posting to Amazon.com, Goodreads.com. Your review should evaluate the book in a way that makes clear and supports your opinion of the quality of the piece. Post as a comment to the appropriate thread on the class blog.

New Discovery

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 about a new discovery 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 3:00 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.

Discussion leadership

Due: As assigned

Each student will lead a group discussion about a contemporary challenge in science journalism. These discussions should include a case study and examples and may take whatever voice or form the student chooses.

Students will be responsible for organizing the discussion, relating the paper to key topics covered in the course, and maintaining active engagement. Preparation may involve additional reading. Students will meet with me at least a week prior to their scheduled group discussion in order to review an outline of their direction for the discussion and any reading materials they would like to distribute prior to class.

Lab Journal

Ongoing.

Each student will keep a journal tracking their experiences in the lab. The goal is that by the end of the semester students will better understand the process of science; they will have a pragmatic understanding of how new knowledge is created. Students must visit their lab or meet with their lab group at least once a week to observe the operation of the lab and to inquire about current findings. Guided journal prompts will be assigned throughout the semester to help focus observations and allow for coherent class discussions

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.

Escape from the Ivory Tower: A Guide to Making Your Science Matter, by Nancy Barron (2010)

The Science Writers' Handbook edited by Thomas Hayden and Michelle Nijhuis (2013)
Best American Science and Nature Writing edited by Rebecca Skloot and Tim Folger (2015)

Also, you'll need a bound journal sufficient to contain your lab observation notes for the full year.

Recommended but not required:

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

Other matters

Professionalism

Attendance

Course attendance is required. Missing more than 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.

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

If you do not already have after hours access to Don Anderson Hall, complete and submit the appropriate after-hours access form online by February 5. NO after hours access requests will be processed after that date.

-- This syllabus is subject to change --