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JRNL 470.01: Covering Elections

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

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JOUR 470/Covering Elections, fall 2018

Instructors:
Lee Banville (DAH 406), lee.banville@umontana.edu
Dennis Swibold (DAH 432), dennis.swibold@umontana.edu
Class meets: TR, 2 a.m. to 3:20 p.m.

Objectives and outcomes
Successful students in this capstone course will learn how campaigns operate and how
journalists cover them. They will hone their reporting skills and insights by backgrounding candidates, fact-checking campaign statements, reporting election returns, and analyzing issues facing the next Legislature. Students will demonstrate their skill by producing election coverage in various formats and on platforms for Montana news organizations.

these are the candidates for US senate in Montana, a state with only one barber

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.
- Fact-check candidates' campaign claims. (Stay tuned for details.)
- Contribute to the class's election night and day-after coverage.
- Produce a legislative preview story.

About those assignments

Write a 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 and radio

Fact check two debates – Each of you will be responsible for fact-checking candidate statements during televised debates. You will prepare by analyzing the candidates' records and their advertising claims. We'll show you how, and we'll report what we find online.

Cover the election – The class will provide Election Day results and voter reaction for social media and the Montana Public Media website.

Legislative preview story – Each of you will produce a story (audio, video or text) analyzing the issues that are likely to emerge in the Legislature's 2017 session.

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 story – Sept. 21
Fact-checking – By Sept. 29.
Election coverage – Nov. 6 and 7
Legislative preview – Nov. 21

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 and tone it down on social media. 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. 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.

Remember, all your sources are going to be monitoring you as well, so keep that in mind. We want to reach a broad audience, not just the political tribes.

We 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. We'll also have to work

Grading

We expect your work to be newsworthy, accurate, compelling, timely, thorough and fair. We expect great sourcing, and we expect you to hit your deadlines. You'll need to write the two stories and participate fully in the fact-checking and Election Day coverage to get an "A."

We must send stories out to the participating papers and MTPR and so grading is based on how much editing and additional reporting is required to make the pieces publishable. Specifically:

- Stories that are well-sourced, newsworthy, compelling and well written will receive an "A."

- "B" stories are well reported but perhaps missing small details or additional sources. Writing is solid, although newsworthiness or pacing needs work.

- "C" stories are turned in on time and have adequate sourcing. Writing needs significant editing for tone and tenor. Details and primary sourcing is there but weak.

- "D" is still turned in on time but lacks adequate reporting. Writing needs major work and/or includes factual errors and multiple mistakes of spelling, grammar or style.

- "F" is late and/or does not meet the minimum standards to be edited.

We're fair editor and teachers. We'll give you credit for the work you do, a but a great story isn't worth anything if it is late, incomplete, or if everyone else has done it first. So make sure your story ideas are strong and timely.

*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. But we need to approve these beforehand.

Graduate students

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

- An additional story to be approved by the instructors. The student will make a class presentation on the story or initiative, which must include data analysis. OR
- A 10-page paper analyzing some pre-approved aspect of the Montana news media's role and performance in covering the 2018 Montana election. The paper will be due during the last week of classes.

Plagiarism warning

Plagiarism is representing another's work as your own. That includes writing a story based 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/VPSA/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 topics

- Course overview and assignments
- How campaigns work; how to write about them
- Federal issues in U.S. Senate and House races
- How to fact-check; exercises and assignments
- Money and advertising; exercises and assignments
- Problems in campaign coverage
- Issues in Montana legislative races

Special events

- Fact-check televised U.S. Senate debate (Saturday, Sept. 29) and televised U.S. House debate (Saturday, Oct. 6). We'll watch these together and report immediately afterward.
- Election Day (Nov. 6) It's not a holiday for us, but we'll make it up to you.
- Visit MTPR's "Campaign Beat" after the show talk back, TBA.
- Visit from political reporters Mike Dennison (MTN) and Holly Michels, Tom Lutey (Lee Montana) TBA.