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JRNL 575.01: Story Lab

Nadia White

University of Montana, Missoula, nadia.white@umontana.edu

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Course description

The goal of this class is to empower storytellers to put actionable scientific knowledge to work in the name of community and democracy; to train critical thinkers able to lead a general critique of scientific findings, the scientific community and the public use of science to forge policy and inform public debate.

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; to the challenges posed by “fake news” and contemporary challenges to fact-based discourse.

Presented as a weekly, three-hour seminar, this course requires students to prepare for and vigorously participate in class each week.
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.
• Be comfortable facilitating thoughtful peer discussions about the challenges of covering science for a general audience.

Books

“Lab Girl” by Jope Jahren, Vintage Press
“The Best American Science and Nature Writing 2017” Hope Jahren editor
“Beyond the Ivory Tower” by Nancy Barron
“Connection: Hollywood Storytelling Meets Critical Thinking” by Brian Palermo, Dorie Barton, and Randy Olson

Course Structure

The lab: Exploring the culture of science

Scientists and journalists are mutually 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 and scientists and journalists are 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 interacts 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. 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.

Students will be given -- or help generate -- a shared “lab prompt” each week. This question or point of inquiry will focus their time in lab for the week and provide the focus of the student-led opening segment of class each Thursday and for the brief Lab Journal entries filed before class each week via Moodle.

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 (while complying with the prior restraint requirement.) 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.

The class: Engaged learning, engaging community
Class will generally begin with a student-led conversation based on a lab-prompt and reading assigned the previous week. The point of these discussions is to share insight gleaned from each lab
and extend that insight about how science works into the question of how the processes of science might lead to journalistic opportunities or improved journalistic storytelling.

Focused lectures and class conversation led by faculty or guest speakers frequently fill the middle third of class. We’re going to read Lab Girl by Hope Jahren and use it as one unifying reference for taking deeper dives into areas including funding for science, sexism and gender discrepancies in the sciences and journalism, the use of sustained metaphor and story structure. Other areas of focus will include science policy, developing interviewing skills, prereporting, embargoes and science communication as distinct from science journalism.

Exercises, critiques of work underway and work on group projects frequently round out the balance of class time.

The Community: Creating a culture of discourse between scientists and journalists

The goal of this class it to empower storytellers who can put actionable knowledge to work in the name of community and democracy. To that end, students will plan and host a gathering of journalists and scientists with the express intent of sharing stories, expanding networks and creating the energy required to put ideas into motion.

Story Lab students will envision the format for the evening event. The theme will be “A Rowdy Conversation: The role of truth tellers --How can scientists and journalists work to re-empower facts?”. It will be held Thursday, April 12, in the upper level of The Press Box (based on availability.)

Assignments & Grade distribution

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<tr>
<th>Assignment (% final grade)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Science briefs, book review (15%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reportage: Wow! (15%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Pitch</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Plan</td>
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<td>- First draft</td>
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<td>- Final draft</td>
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<td>Interview practice, video and critique (10%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Profile: Print w video (20%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Pitch &amp; approach</td>
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<td>- Rough draft</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Final draft</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lab Journal entries, reflection and discussion leadership (15 %)</td>
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<td>Class participation (25%)</td>
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Includes but is not limited to attendance, readiness, discussion participation, as well as in-class exercises and critiques.

**Briefing scholarly articles & book review (15%)**
Summarize an article from peer-reviewed scientific journal in 250-350 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 of the article you are briefing (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.

**Related coursework and deadlines:**
Class: Jan. 25, Translating science

Read:
- Cloned monkeys and browse around the Axios science briefs.
- "The art of translating science," by Lise Saffran in Scientific America

Write:
Two briefs based on journal articles by Angela Luis about rodent-born disease
Assign and preview: Jan. 25
Due: Jan. 30, 8 p.m., Moodle
Discuss & critique: Class, Feb. 1
- [http://rspb.royalsocietypublishing.org/content/280/1756/20122753](http://rspb.royalsocietypublishing.org/content/280/1756/20122753)

Recent journal publications from your lab, lab members or that inform your lab’s work
Assign and preview: Feb. 1
Due: Feb. 6, midnight, Moodle
Discuss & critique: Class, Feb. 8

**Reportage: The sense of ‘Wow’ (15%)**
Tell a story that requires that goes beyond interviews, a story with color and smell, texture, maybe taste. Think New Yorker Talk of the Town. Find the nugget that shows something dynamic or fundamental about your lab and explain and explore it in creative ways.

Class: Feb. 15: Reportage -- using all of your senses.
Read: TK

Write:
- Pitch: Feb. 1, in class
- First draft: Feb. 24, midnight, Moodle
- Critiques: Class, March 1
- Final draft: March 6, midnight, Moodle
- Discuss: Class, March 8

**Feature profile: And, But, Therefore (20%)**
Using all of the tools of reporting, with an emphasis on interviews, observation and contextual analysis, each student will produce an engaging feature profile of a member of your lab. The science at the heart of this researcher’s work should be a fully-informed character in this story -- defined, explored, known, journalistically and empowered through narrative decision making. We will discuss the “And, But, Therefore” approach to storytelling and apply it to the challenge of developing narrative flow in these pieces.

**Related course work and deadlines:**
Class, Feb. 28: Profiles: How we write them and why people read (and love) them

Read:
- “The Physics Pioneer Who Walked Away From it All,” by Sally Davis (BASNW18 p. 189 or Nautilus, July 28, 2016.)
- “The Woman Who Might Find Us Another Earth” by Chris Jones (BASNW18 p.241 or NYT: Dec. 7, 2016)

Write:
- Assign and preview: Feb. 15
- Pitch, in class: Feb. 28
- First draft due: April 4
- First draft critiques: April 19
- Story pitches due: April 26
- Final draft due: May 3

**A Rowdy Conversation about keeping and building trust**
April 12, Pressbox
Details, as the class creates them
General information

Grading
Grades will be based on a scale of 100 percent and will use the University of Montana's plus/minus system. Your final grade will be given as a letter grade, but I'll be using numerical grades throughout the course. The equivalents are as follows:
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 60

Building access
For after-hours access to the rooms and doors listed below, please complete and submit this form. Complete only ONE request per semester. Be sure to select all courses you are taking which pertain to Don Anderson Hall. Here’s the link again: http://jour.umt.edu/current-students/afterhoursaccess/default

Please note that the building and its equipment are for the sole use of journalism students, who pay a special fee access.

Additional requirements
Academic honesty: Misconduct is subject to an academic penalty by the course instructor and/or a disciplinary sanction by the university. Students need to be familiar with the Student Conduct Code.

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 of this course. Doing so without permission will result in an F for the assignment, and could result in an F for the course.

Accommodation for students with disabilities
This course is accessible to 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.