

Advanced Writing/Public Affairs Reporting Spring 2014

Classes: M 12-3, CMA 6.146

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Description:

Students will focus on the skills needed to identify and do advanced journalistic writing/public affairs reporting in a democratic society. Attention will be paid to identifying and developing “reporting beats” tied to public affairs, public officials. Workshop-style training will be led by the instructor, with input from other professional reporters and editors. In particular, students will have regular access to a veteran reporter-editor from *The Dallas Morning News*. Students will form two-person reporting teams. This is a required course for masters degree candidates on the Professional Track in the School of Journalism.

Objectives/Goals:

- Think critically about what “public affairs journalism” means.
- Grasp the mechanics of public affairs stories.
- Immersion in, and familiarity with, a public affairs beat/topic.
- Develop and hone techniques for longer news stories.
- Examine issues of ethics, fairness and accuracy.
- Examine “neglected” or “under reported” stories.

Expected Learning Outcomes:

Outcome1:

Students will be able to demonstrate an initial understanding of and competence in identifying public affairs stories, issues, beats.

- Method 1: Students will identify, present, propose, public affairs beats and stories in editorial budget meetings and/or story memos.
- Metric 1: The instructor will evaluate the ability to identify, present, and propose stories by relying on class feedback and by using Appendix #1 (Assessment Grid) to this syllabus.

Outcome2:

Students will be able to gather and write public affairs news in an accurate, fair, comprehensive and clear manner as required to practice effectively as a professional in print or digital journalism.

- Method 1: Students will gather, report and write public affairs stories.
- Metric 1: The instructor will evaluate the accuracy, fairness, comprehensiveness and clarity of the work, using, in part, Appendix #1 (Assessment Grid) to this syllabus.

How The Classes Work

Students will form two-person reporting teams. Each team will work on 3 stories. Your work will be overseen by the instructor and by guest editors. These things are expected in each class:

- You will share your knowledge and opinion about the local, regional, national and international public affairs beats/stories worth reporting and writing.
- You will meet all deadlines.
- You will provide, at the end of each story, the contact information for the people you interviewed -- including anonymous sources.

Work

Each two-person team will:

- Identify a public affairs “beat” or area of coverage that you will pursue over the semester. Examples: The environment, education, housing, immigration, health and human services, law enforcement, public arts/music.
- You will also be asked to describe your reporting, defend it and comment on the reporting of your colleagues.
- You will be asked to do three stories related to your chosen beat:
- First Story: minimum 1500 words, minimum 5 different people quoted in the story. A news-oriented profile of a city, state or federal agency, institution, or organization based in Austin that touches on your “beat.” Examples: Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, Austin Environmental Board, Texas Parks & Wildlife Department, Texas Department of Public Safety, Austin Police, Texas Music Office, Texas Film Commission, Austin Film Commission, Texas Education Agency, Austin Independent School District, etc. With multimedia (your choice of photos, video, audio or data).
- Second Story: minimum 1500 words, minimum 5 different people quoted in the story. With multimedia (your choice of photos, video, audio or data). This story will show enterprise reporting – creativity, persistence and critical thinking in the reporting process. It will be a deeper look into an original story premise. You will find a newsworthy angle, in your beat, and you will flesh that story out.
- Third Story: minimum 1500 words, minimum 5 different people quoted in the story. With multimedia (your choice of photos, video, audio or data). This story will show enterprise reporting – creativity, persistence and critical thinking in the reporting process. It will be a deeper look into an original story premise. You will find a newsworthy angle, in your beat, and you will flesh that story out.

Factors That Go Into Grading

1. Class participation, including identifying a beat, presenting story ideas, constructive criticism of work done by your colleagues.
2. Instructor evaluation of the stories:
 - Needs very minor editing and additional material (facts, quotes, sources, etc.). Virtually ready for publication: A.
 - Needs major editing or major additional reporting **(but not both)**: B.
 - Needs major revision **and** major additional reporting: C.
 - Some effort at writing or reporting: D.
 - No serious effort at writing or reporting: F.
 - University policy allows use of “plus” and “minus” grades.
3. Deadlines: Miss a deadline and your grade will automatically go down one grade level (Example: Automatic reduction to a C for a story that had earned a B).
4. Attendance: If you miss three classes without advance notice to the instructor and the graduate assistant, your course grade can be dropped one level (Example: Automatic reduction from B to C).
5. The Assessment Grid (see Appendix).

The Grade Grid

Grades will be tallied according to the following percentage guidelines:

- | | |
|-----------------------|------------|
| ▪ First story | 25 percent |
| ▪ Second Story | 25 percent |
| ▪ Third Story | 25 percent |
| ▪ Class participation | 25 percent |

Suggestions

Read:

Texas Monthly, Austin American-Statesman, Austin Chronicle, Dallas Morning News, Houston Chronicle, Austin Bulldog, Texas Tribune.

Investigative Reporters and Editors: <http://www.ire.org/>

Center for Public Integrity: <http://www.publicintegrity.org/projects/>

ProPublica: <http://www.propublica.org/>

*Do not delay working on your stories

**Create a clear division of duties on your stories

***Read all relevant stories already done on your beat

Religious Policy:

The Texas Education Code specifies that an institution of higher education shall excuse a student from attending classes or other required activities, including examinations, for the observance of a religious holy day, including travel for that purpose. A student whose absence is excused under this subsection may not be penalized for that absence and shall be allowed to take an examination or complete an assignment from which the student is excused within a reasonable time after the absence. A student who misses classes or other required activities, including examinations, for observance of a religious holy day should inform instructor as far in advance of the absence as possible, so that arrangements can be made to complete an assignment within a reasonable time after the absence.

<http://www.utexas.edu/student/registrar/catalogs/gi03-04/ch4/ch4g.html#attendance>

Students with Disabilities:

Please notify your instructor of any modification/adaptation you may require to accommodate a disability-related need. You will be requested to provide documentation to the Dean of Student's Office in order that the most appropriate accommodations can be determined. Specialized services are available on campus through Services for Students with Disabilities. The University of Texas at Austin provides upon request appropriate academic accommodations for qualified students with disabilities. For more information, contact Services for Students with Disabilities at 471-6259 (voice) or 232-2937 (video phone).

<http://www.utexas.edu/diversity/ddce/ssd/>

Policy on Scholastic Dishonesty:

Do not plagiarize, make up quotes or make up facts.

The University defines academic dishonesty as cheating, plagiarism, unauthorized collaboration, falsifying academic records, and any act designed to avoid participating honestly in the learning process.

Scholastic dishonesty also includes, but is not limited to, providing false or misleading information to receive a postponement or an extension on a test, quiz, or other assignment, and submission of essentially the same written assignment for two courses without the prior permission of the instructor.

By accepting this syllabus, you have agreed to these guidelines and must adhere to them.

Scholastic dishonesty damages both the student's learning experience and readiness for the future demands of a work-career. Students who violate University rules on scholastic dishonesty are subject to disciplinary penalties, including the possibility of failure in the course and/or dismissal from the University. The Standard for Academic Integrity:

http://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/sjs/acint_student.php

The University Honor Code:

“The core values of The University of Texas at Austin are learning, discovery, freedom, leadership, individual opportunity, and responsibility. Each member of the university is expected to uphold these values through integrity, honesty, trust, fairness, and respect toward peers and community.”

Course Schedule (*subject to changes):

Jan. 13:

- Introductions: Instructors, graduate assistant, students.
- Review of syllabus.
- Students form two-person teams and begin deciding on a beat. You will have 14 days, until Jan. 27, to make a final decision on your beat.
- *What is “public affairs journalism?”*
- *What do you see missing in today’s news?*
- *What critical thinking questions do you think should be asked by public affairs reporters?*
- *How do you begin?*
- *The Three Part Public Affairs Reporting System: 1. Identify the areas of concern, 2. Identify the players, 3. Enterprise Reporting*
- (Skype with Ed Timms, editor/reporter with *The Dallas Morning News*).

Jan. 20: No class-Martin Luther King, Jr. Day

Jan. 27:

- **DUE:** Each team introduces and describes its chosen beat.
- **DUE:** Each team introduces a list of 10 people germane to that beat. These are sources you have found online or through any research: Experts, officials, observers, participants, advocates, critics, analysts, victims, supporters, detractors, politicians, etc.
- **DUE: You will be asked:** Why did you choose this beat? What is the immediate relevance of the beat? What under reported stories are tied to that beat? Have any publications explored that beat in any meaningful way?
- **Story One Assigned: minimum 1500 word “profile” of one city, state or federal agency, institution or organization – germane to your beat. Due Feb. 18.** Minimum 5 different people quoted in the story. A news-oriented profile of a city, state or federal agency, institution, or organization that touches on your “beat.” What does the place do? What is its purpose? What is its budget? How many employees does it have? Who is in charge? What are the main complaints about it? What do experts say about it? What do officials who work at it say about the it? What do citizens who have to deal with it say? Are there lawsuits against it? Are there defenders or critics of it? What controversies exist? What do politicians say about the it? Examples: Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, Texas Parks & Wildlife Department, Texas Department of Public Safety, Austin Police, Texas Music Office, Austin Film Commission, Texas Education Agency, Austin Independent School District, etc. With multimedia (your choice of photos, video, audio or data).
- **In class: Identify the agencies, advocacy groups, institutions germane to your beat & contact the public information officers for those agencies. Introduce yourself, set up interview times, ask them for other sources.**

Feb. 3:

- *Reporter's Tool Kit.*
- (Skype with Ed Timms, editor/reporter with Dallas Morning News).
- *Ways to profile an agency, institution, organization -- and the directors, presidents, heads, etc.*
- *Using the tool kit to build your profile.*
- *The Compositional Breakdown of different public affairs stories. Examples screened.*
- **DUE:** Editorial Budget Meeting. Each team presents an update on its story. Who have you interviewed, what data have you accumulated, etc.

Feb. 10:

- **DUE:** Editorial Budget Meeting. Each team presents an update on its story. Who have you interviewed, what data have you accumulated, etc.
- (Tentative): Jim Vertuno, *Associated Press*, Texas & W. Gardner Selby, *PolitiFact Texas* (Austin American-Statesman).
- *Dealing with public officials, covering politicians, filing on brisk deadlines.*
- Critical deconstruction of various student-created public affairs projects.
Tentative list:
- The "pop up newsroom" at <http://www.popupnewsroom.net>
- Indiana University's "Suspended Justice": <http://www.idsdavidcamm.com>
- University of Texas at El Paso: <http://mexodus.borderzine.com>

Feb. 17:

- **Due: Story One**
- Stories screened, critiqued. Student participation will be noted, assessed.
- **Story Two Assigned: Due March 24.** Minimum 1500 words, minimum 5 different people quoted in the story. With multimedia (your choice of photos, video, audio or data).

Feb. 24:

- **DUE:** Editorial Budget Meeting. Each team presents an update on its story. Who have you interviewed, what data have you accumulated, etc.
- *Dealing with state and national agencies, regulatory bodies, commissions.*
- *Filing Freedom of Information and Texas Open Records requests.*
- (Tentative): Brandi Grissom, *Texas Tribune*. Getting deeper into state, federal agencies.

Mar. 3:

- **DUE:** Editorial Budget Meeting. Each team presents an update on its story. Who have you interviewed, what data have you accumulated, etc.
- Student projects screened, critiqued:
- News21: <http://backhome.news21.com>
- News21: <http://foodsafety.news21.com/index.html>
- Professional projects screened, critiqued:
- ProPublica: <http://www.propublica.org/series/patient-safety>
- ProPublica: <http://www.propublica.org/series/internships>
- ProPublica: <http://www.propublica.org/series/out-of-order>

Mar. 10: No class/Spring Break

Mar. 17:

- *Under Reported Local, Regional, National Stories.*
- *Race, race relations and "minority" affairs. Listening posts.*
- Tentative: Susan Smith Richardson, editor, The Chicago Reporter
- **DUE:** Editorial Budget Meeting. Each team presents an update on its story. Who have you interviewed, what data have you accumulated, etc.

Mar. 24:

- **Due: Story Two**
- Selected stories screened, critiqued
- **Story Three Assigned: Due April 21.** Minimum 1500 words, minimum 5 different people quoted in the story. With multimedia (your choice of photos, video, audio or data).

Mar. 31:

- **DUE:** Editorial Budget Meeting. Each team presents an update on its story. Who have you interviewed, what data have you accumulated, etc.
- Experts, think tanks, non-profits.
- Tentative: Alexa Garcia-Ditta, communications director, Center for Public Policy Priorities. Garcia-Ditta is a recent graduate of the masters Pro Track program.
- GuideStar.org

Apr. 7:

- **DUE:** Editorial Budget Meeting. Each team presents an update on its story. Who have you interviewed, what data have you accumulated, etc.
- *The unjustly, unfairly accused and incarcerated.*
- *Finding those stories in everyday stories.*
- Tentative: Dave Mann, editor, Texas Observer

Apr. 14:

- **DUE:** Editorial Budget Meeting. Each team presents an update on its story. Who have you interviewed, what data have you accumulated, etc.
- *Data visualization*
- Tentative, Matt Stiles, National Public Radio

Apr. 21:

- **DUE:** Editorial Budget Meeting. Each team presents an update on its story. Who have you interviewed, what data have you accumulated, etc.
- **Due: Story Three**
- Stories screened, critiqued

Apr. 28:

- Course Instructor Survey
- Remedial
- Jobs, Careers, Resumes, Cover Letters
- Goodbyes

APPENDIX I

Assessment Grid for Advanced Writing/Public Affairs Reporting

Evaluating your work, the instructor will use the following framework:

1. The story reveals new facts, new information.

0 1 2 3 4

2. The work shows enterprise reporting – creativity, persistence and critical thinking in the reporting process.

0 1 2 3 4

3. The work is accurate and fair.

0 1 2 3 4

4. The work has multimedia components that are clear, make sense, appropriate.

0 1 2 3 4

5. Grammar, spelling and punctuation are correct.

0 1 2 3 4

6. The work provides required number of quoted sources and contact information for ALL people interviewed for the story.

0 1 2 3 4

7. The work has concrete and specific details AND a larger “sweep,” context or perspective.

0 1 2 3 4

8. The theme, premise and news value are clear, easy to follow and readily identified.

0 1 2 3 4