

MEJO 753 Reporting & Writing News – Fall 2020

M 4:45-7:30 p.m. | Carroll 143

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Student hours: On Zoom, by appointment

Introduction

Hello! This is certainly an unprecedented time to be alive, and an unprecedented time to be teaching and producing the news. I want to foreground this syllabus by stating that the keywords for this term are going to be “compassion” and “flexibility.”



The goal of this class is to teach you not just how to report and write, but to think critically about how we do it, why we do it, and who we do it for. This will include discussion of ethics, platforms, funding models, and our role in the broader public discourse. We will also discuss the additional challenges of covering the news in a rapidly-changing environment, and doing so in a safe and socially responsible way.

Each of you will pick a beat that is of interest to you personally and to the broader public. You will learn how to develop sources on your beat, uncover new information, advance public knowledge, and provide context and analysis for the news. We will spend time on the basics like inverted pyramid, AP Style, and interview techniques. We will spend a lot of time talking about current events and how journalists are doing when it comes to covering them. We will also spend time talking about issues like freedom of the press, libel law, the role of journalism in broader society.

This syllabus is a living document. I will be updating and making additions/changes throughout the term. I will always inform you of any adjustments, but please bookmark this page and come back to it regularly.

The four core elements of the practice of journalism:

- *Writing* — Grammar and spelling; ability to tell a story well, using of quotes, anecdotes and descriptive detail; use of active voice and strong verbs; ability to write ledes that are

compelling and get to the point; ability to write tightly and organize information in logical, compelling sequence; recognizing how long a story needs to be.

- *Reporting* — Enterprise and diligence; ability and eagerness to find promising angles; ability to identify the people, details, and documents that build your story; cultivating strong sources; understanding the need to include multiple viewpoints and stakeholders.
- *Speed, efficiency, and accuracy*— Knowing how to work on deadline; ability and willingness to manage more than one assignment at a time; skill with basic factual information such as names, addresses, dates and figures.
- *Judgment* — Commitment to fairness and understanding multiple points of view; ability to discern between facts and beliefs; respect for diversity in all its forms; knowing not just how to report the news, but why and for whom.

The four core elements of the philosophy of journalism:

- How do we think about “facts” and “truth”?
- What is our role in public discourse?
- Who is our audience?
- What role do journalists play in promoting or challenging the status quo?

Beats

The first assignment in this class is selecting your beat. I ask you to do this not to limit you, but to provide some focus as you report this semester. Developing a beat will help you get to know the subject and its key issues and controversies. It will help you get to know the playing field, like what other reporters and outlets are covering it, or the gaps in their coverage. It will also help you start to develop ongoing relationships with people and organizations who will be your sources.

Options include, but are not limited to: Environment, Health care, Immigration, Education, Economic inequality, Race/racism, Housing, Elections, LGBTQ+ rights. You can see the [beat doc assignment here](#), and an [example beat doc here](#).

You are graduate students, so I expect you to look beyond campus and into the city of Chapel Hill, Orange County, Durham, Raleigh, and at the state level. I encourage you to find local stories that speak to larger state and national trends and will be of interest beyond our region. Consider the limitations on in-person reporting and face-to-face interactions in our current environment and plan accordingly. I want you to get some published clips for your portfolios by the end of the semester, so aim high!

Required Texts

On Writing Well, by William Zinsser

AP Stylebook (you can buy a copy or [subscribe to use the online version](#))

Elements of Journalism, by Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel

The Influencing Machine, Brooke Gladstone

The Journalist and The Murderer, by Janet Malcom
The Oxygen of Amplification, by Whitney Phillips ([available free online](#))
The View from Somewhere, Lewis Raven Wallace
Bearing Witness While Black: African Americans, Smartphones, and the New Protest #Journalism, Allissa Richardson (This is on Amazon but was not available through the UNC bookstore; I will scan the chapters as well if you can't get it.)

News Discussion

In addition to the assigned readings, I expect you to be engaged consumers of news in many forms. Reading the work of others is crucial to developing your own voice and expertise, as well as your ability to critique that work (and your own!). Each week [one of you will be assigned to lead a discussion of the news](#). By 5 p.m. on Thursday, the discussion leader will post three articles of their choosing to our Google Group. They should be linked thematically in a way that helps facilitate discussion of not just the stories but the issues they cover. The discussion leader should also post three question prompts to get the rest of us thinking. Everyone should respond on the email thread at least once before we meet. *This portion of class will be done all online to include our classmates who are attending remotely and ensure that they can engage meaningfully.*

To further your news engagement, I suggest subscribing to at least one national newspaper (i.e. *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*) and one high-quality periodical (*The New Yorker*, *The Economist*, *The Atlantic*). You should also subscribe to at least one podcast on journalism (“On The Media,” “It’s All Journalism,” “The Digiday podcast,” “The Kicker,” “Catch and Kill,” etc.).

Assignments

Here is a short breakdown the types of story assignments you will have:

- Covering speeches, public meetings, and press conferences
- Covering public opinion, through “(wo)man on the street” reporting and/or survey data
- A news story built around a published report
- An “explainer” on a topic of relevance to current news
- A profile of a candidate or public figure
- A “trend” story relevant to public life
- An audio story of ~2 minutes
- An enterprise story on your beat
- A social and distribution plan for your enterprise story

All assignments should be turned in via Google Docs at the date/time specified. Please share them with both my Gmail and my UNC email (at the top of this page). Please make sure you have set the permissions so I can edit!

Weight of assignments in final grade:

- News discussion leadership -- 10%

- Beat doc and pitches -- 10%
- Attendance and participation -- 10%
- Stories -- 50%
- Final project - 20%

Late Assignments

This is the news -- we live and die by deadline. Your starting grade for a story submitted past deadline will be a C. If you think you are going to miss a deadline for reasons outside of your control, please let me know as soon as possible so we can discuss how to address it.

Assignment Grade Scale

- A (90 and above) - Could be published with little to no major editing
- B (80-89) - Could be published with moderate editing
- C (70-79) - Requires significant editing to be punishable
- D (60-69) - Not publishable -- poorly conceived, written, or sourced
- F (below 60) - Did not complete, or completed with major factual or ethical problem

Graduate Student Final Grade Scale

- H - High Pass - Clear Excellence
- P - Pass - Entirely Satisfactory Graduate Work
- L - Low Pass - Inadequate Graduate Work
- F - Fail

Attendance and face-to-face/hybrid learning

Not everyone will be able to attend this class in person/synchronously. I still want to make this a shared, equitable, and meaningful experience for the entire class. So, here's what our time together will look like, for the most part:

- *News discussion* -- This is asynchronous, to be completed on your own time before we meet in class. You should plan to commit about an hour a week to this.
- *Practice lecture/discussion* -- About 1 hour of class time will focus on the practice of journalism. I will present this in-person from 4:45 p.m.-5:45 p.m. every Monday. You can join IRL in our (socially-distanced, masked) classroom, synchronously via Zoom, or watch the archived version afterward.
- *Theory lecture/discussion* -- About 1 hour of class time will focus on the theory of journalism. I will present this in-person from 6 p.m.-7 p.m. every Monday. You can join IRL in our (socially-distanced, masked) classroom, synchronously via Zoom, or watch the archived version afterward.
- *Individual editing and coaching* -- Every student will have a devoted 30-minute meeting each week via Zoom. We will arrange a consistent, mutually agreeable day and time at

the start of the semester. This session will be a chance to discuss reporting challenges, get feedback on work, and develop pitches and ideas.

You are graduate students, so I do expect you to approach this class as you would a job. Even if you are not physically present, you will be expected to complete the work and engage with the rest of your classmates. If you experience a major obstacle -- a death in your immediate family, an illness that requires seeing a doctor, caring for a loved one -- please let me know as soon as possible so we can adjust expectations accordingly. Communication is key, so please be in contact with me at the point where you first encounter that obstacle, not when you are already falling behind on work.

Communication

I will create a Google Group for this class, which will be the primary means of communication with each other throughout this semester, and for me to communicate with all of you collectively. Please make sure to check the email account you link to this group! All of the class documents and resources will also be stored in a shared Google Drive folder for this class. I check email quite often, so that is the best way to reach me -- but please copy both kateshep@email.unc.edu and kateshepUNC@gmail.com.

Honor Code

I expect students to conduct themselves within the guidelines of the University honor system (<http://honor.unc.edu>). All academic work should be done with the high levels of honesty and integrity that this University demands. You are expected to produce your own work in this class. If you have any questions about your responsibility or your instructor's responsibility as a faculty member under the Honor Code, please see the course instructor or Senior Associate Dean for Graduate Studies Heidi Hennink-Kaminski, or you may speak with a representative of the Student Attorney Office or the Office of the Dean of Students.

Seeking Help

If you need individual assistance, it's your responsibility to meet with me. If you are serious about wanting to improve your performance in the course, the time to seek help is as soon as you are aware of the problem -- whether the problem is difficulty with course material, a disability, or an illness.

Diversity and Anti-Racism

The University's "Policy on Prohibited Discrimination, Harassment and Related Misconduct" [is available online here](#). UNC is committed to providing an inclusive and welcoming environment for all members of our community and does not discriminate in access to its educational programs and activities on the basis of age, gender, race, color, national origin, religion, creed, disability, veteran's status, sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression.

Additionally, given recent national and local events, I feel it is important to set out my expectations for class conduct and discussion -- both my own and yours. I do so in accordance

with the main purposes of both academia and journalism: to distinguish between valid and invalid knowledge and judgments, and to broaden our perspective on the world and the experiences of others.

In my class, I expect students to:

- Refrain from judging individuals according to the collective groups they may belong to (e.g. race, gender, class, sexual orientation, disability status, etc.);
- Assess ideas and arguments according to the evidence and not based on the identities of the individual who created them;
- Acknowledge and seek to better understand the historical and contemporary systems of racism, sexism, homophobia, and ableism that have created real disparities in people's lives, how they see the world, and the opportunities that are available to them;
- And consider the often invisible systems of power at play in a given situation and the perspective of those who do not have that power.

Special Accommodations

If you require special accommodations to attend or participate in this course, please let the instructor know as soon as possible. If you need information about disabilities visit the Accessibility Services website at <https://accessibility.unc.edu/>

ACEJMC Core Values and Competencies

The accrediting body for the Hussman School of Journalism and Media outlines a number of values you should be aware of and competencies you should be able to demonstrate by the time you graduate from our program. [Learn more about them here.](#)

No single course could possibly give you all of these values and competencies; but collectively, our classes are designed to build your abilities in each of these areas. In this class, we will address a number of the values and competencies. Specifically, this course is designed to help you:

- Understand and apply the principles of freedom of speech and press, including the right to monitor and criticize power.
- Demonstrate an understanding of professional ethical principles and work ethically in pursuit of truth, accuracy, fairness and diversity.
- Think critically, creatively and independently.
- Write correctly and clearly in forms and styles appropriate for the professions, audiences and purposes we serve.
- Critically evaluate your own work and that of others for accuracy and fairness, clarity, appropriate style and grammatical correctness.

Week-by-week schedule

Date	Topic	Readings	Deliverables
August 10	Introduction to course, beats	Fluid Beats ; Press freedom and government transparency during COVID-19 ; CPJ Journalists Security Guide ; Coronavirus Reminds Journalists To Prepare for Public Health Emergencies	In-class writing activity
August 17	Writing basics - News values, style, ledes / What is journalism for?	<i>On Writing Well</i> , Chapters 1-10; <i>Elements of Journalism</i> , 1-2	Beat docs due
August 24	Reporting basics - formats, quotes, organization / Who do journalists work for?	<i>On Writing Well</i> , Chapters 11-15, 23, 25; <i>Elements of Journalism</i> , 3-6; Reading on quotes	Planned event story due
August 31	Reporting basics - interviews and public opinions stories / What is the role of journalism in public life?	<i>Elements of Journalism</i> , 7-9; On public opinion stories	Breaking news story due
Sept. 7	NO CLASS - LABOR DAY	<i>Elements of Journalism</i> , Chapters 10-11	<i>News discussion and individual meetings are still on!</i>
Sept. 14	Research basics - database, library and online, w/ Stephanie Willen Brown / Explainers / What are our responsibilities as journalists?	<i>The Influencing Machine</i> ; An explainer on explainers and explainer examples: Popeyes , the 25th Amendment , Vaping	Public opinion story due
Sept. 21	Libel, press freedom and FOIA / Source development and relations	US Press Freedom Tracker ; <i>The Journalist And The Murderer</i> ; WaPo 2012	Research story due

		followup	
Sept. 28	Profile writing / Audiences and emerging technologies in news	Bearing Witness, Part 1; Profile examples: Gwyneth Paltrow , William Barber , Tucker Carlson	Explainer story due
Oct. 5	What do we cover, and how? / Discussion of trend and enterprise stories	<i>The Oxygen of Amplification</i> ; Voice of Hate in America ; Normalizing a Nazi	
Oct. 12	Audio fundamentals and writing for the ear w/ Adam Hochberg; Discussion of trend and enterprise stories	Print to Radio , Active Sound ; Trend story examples: White Claw , Baby Shark , Millenials and Cereal , Trend Piece	Profile due
Oct. 19	Recording tech and interviewing for radio w/ Hochberg	Finding Emilie , Listen to recent episodes of The Daily	Trend story due
Oct. 26	Pitch feedback and selection; audio editing tutorial; script example	<i>View From Somewhere</i> , Chapters 1-3	Pitches for audio due
Nov. 2	Social, promotion, and the reporter as brand; enterprise pitches	<i>View From Somewhere</i> , Chapters 4-7	Pitches for enterprise story due
Nov. 9	Review audio (2 mins); enterprise planning	<i>View From Somewhere</i> , Chapters 8-11	Audio story due
Nov. 16	So, you really want to be a journalist? / Peer-editing and trouble-shooting		Draft of enterprise story due
FINAL	Tuesday, Nov. 24 - 4 p.m.		Enterprise story due

Final exam

Tuesday, Nov. 24, 4 p.m.

20% of final grade

[Your enterprise story](#) will be due during our final exam period. You will present your article, multimedia element(s), and plan for social promotion and audience development.