

JOUR 311 SEMINAR: COVERING THE 2020 ELECTIONS

JAC-CV 136
MW 3 – 4:15 p.m.

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You could not have picked a better semester to take a class like this. You – yes, YOU – will be covering part of this campaign.

If you have paid at least half attention to the news over the past three years, you are already aware of how the 2020 presidential race will be one of the most bizarre in American history. If you are not aware, please drop the class now.....

Historians, pundits and various politicians have spilled tons of ink, epic amounts of electrons and hours of airtime just on the strange nature of the presidential race. And let's not forget some of the odd congressional, senate and governor's races throughout the land. For example, one campaign features a candidate who wants to deport members of a specific religious faith. Another showcases a candidate who is running an ad of him blasting an automatic weapon at some imaginary target – then grinning like a sadistic clown when he runs out of ammo. It is all like a bad reality show inside a media circus.

So, there is no shortage of material for stories despite efforts of some candidates to ban reporters from covering them. That kind of muzzle should alarm any citizen. Threats to the press such as this are direct threats to democracy. Good journalism gives people what they need to know to make informed decisions. Scholars and former editors Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenthal note that with “the primary purpose of journalism is to provide citizens with the information they need to be free and self-governing.”

That is where you come in.

In this course, we will look at the elements that go into campaign coverage, analyze that coverage and **produce our own original content**. Among other assignments, **you will cover virtual campaign events** for the Capital News Service and do **live fact-checking of the presidential, vice-presidential and other debates and post the results on Twitter**.

BOOKS

“Still Unbelievable,” by Katy Tur

NEWS READING

The New York Times (free, through UR)

The Washington Post (free, through UR; be sure to add “The Trailer” news feed)

The Richmond Times-Dispatch (not free)

The Virginia Public Access Project daily report (free)

<https://journalistsresource.org/> (weekly report - free)

<https://www.journaliststoolbox.org/> (as needed – free)

<https://www.campaignsandelections.com/> (as needed - free)

Your regular reading will also include Politico, some politics-oriented Twitter feeds and whatever other legitimate social media you prefer that curates and distributes news related to the election. You’ll also read select pieces in The New Yorker, the Hill, Esquire, the Atlantic, the Wall Street Journal, Vanity Fair, and the Virginian Pilot. And let’s not forget listening/watching CNN, Fox, MSNBC, CBS, ABC, NBC, NPR and the PBS Newshour.

I have already assembled a tasty helping of real-time journalism, analysis pieces, features and assorted social media readings that I will send your way one or two at a time. I would not want to overload you, of course.

Major class themes. No, not a song – but you are welcome to suggest some options – will include looking at the following:

Who determines the agenda for campaign and coverage?

Where do we find reliable information?

When did advertising and bypassing the media become a coverage topics?

How do we follow the money?

Why do polls matter so much, who does them and how are they done?

To enhance our learning about these themes, you will write three brief papers (500-750 words) on any three of the above questions. First one is due Sept. 13; second one Oct. 13; last one Nov. 13. More details to come.

Writing assignments include a minimum of six byline-worthy campaign coverage stories suitable for publication through the Capital News Service or other outlet. Surely you will want to write more during this exceptional campaign cycle.

Of course you will also Tweet through @urjournalism as the news demands and through your own accounts. That will help you to build your portfolio, which will help as you start looking for jobs

ATTENDANCE

The COVID pandemic will continue to be a factor this semester, so if you are ill **DO NOT COME TO CLASS** or try to gut things out. Seek medical care as needed. If possible, let me know in advance if you have to miss a class. I will help you to figure out how to catch up whatever assignments or materials were covered in class. I am reasonable about working with extenuating circumstances, but please communicate with me. Missing class does not mean you can miss a deadline, unless you are dealing with an emergency such as an illness or family crisis. Please keep me informed of such events as best as you can.

GRADES

I do not give you grades - you earn them. Your work will be graded according to professional standards, with more tolerance at the start of the course and less as we go along. In other words, your progress will be a good part of your final grade. If you are doing C or D work early in the semester, I am looking for A or B work at the end. The grades you get toward the last month or so of the semester are good indicators of your final mark. For example, if you start out getting Ds and Cs and head into the homestretch with consistent Bs, you are likely to get a B.

Here are some keys to getting good grades: pay attention to AP style; write clearly and accurately; use more than one source in stories; spell correctly; participate in discussions; score well on quizzes and tests; show effort and interest.

Here are some things that will get an automatic F on assignments: misspelling a proper name; writing stories with major factual errors; using only one source in your stories; inserting your opinion in a news story; failing to follow basic journalism ethics

GRADING KEY

A -- outstanding work that requires minimal editing before publishing.

B -- above average work that requires minor editing with no major error corrections before publishing.

C -- average work that requires substantial editing and no more than one rewriting effort before publishing.

D -- unacceptable work that contains multiple errors and requires extensive editing and rewriting before possible publication.

F -- see the note above.

Numerically, this is how I will break down your grades:

A+ = 98-100; A = 92-97; A- = 90-91

B+ = 88-89; B = 82-87; B- = 80-81

C+ = 78-79; C = 72-77; C- = 70-71

D+ = 68-69; D = 62-67; D- = 60-61

F = 59 and below

MAKING THE GRADE

60 percent: Writing assignments
15 percent: professional-grade social media use
15 percent: three academic papers
15 percent: progress, participation, effort

TEAM WORK

To approximate a professional journalism experience, you will be put into teams for coverage of specific campaigns. While you all will have general obligations to cover the presidential campaign, we will also cover in Virginia: Senate race (Warner v. Cade), 7th Congressional District race (Spanberger v. Freitas) and the 5th Congressional District race (Good v. Webb). We will also research two additional races to cover, so we will have five total races with groups of three of you providing team coverage. Who decides who covers what race? My teaching assistant, Random Chance, will assist with this.

NOTE WELL

We have a no-phones policy in class, regardless of whether we're in-person or remote. The usual no-laptop policy will not work this semester because your laptops will be necessary in class. However, I ask that you do not use it until I require it. Misusing electronic devices will get you removed from class for the day and a zero on any assignments that day.

Also, please make every effort to get to class on time. I realize many of our schedules have been altered and we may be coming from widely-scattered places on campus. Once you get to class, there are some additional university guidelines this semester about class attendance and health protocols. These include wearing a mask that covers your mouth and nose at all times, physical distancing, and no eating or drinking in class. You also will have assigned seats and some responsibility for cleaning your desk. Once you arrive, you must remain until class ends.

All of these expectations are designed to reduce disruptions, promote health and safety, and also enhance the type of journalistic engagement that we will discuss further in class.

REMEMBER

As most of you know by now, I will work with you on your stories at every step. On most assignments, I will coach you by e-mail before your work is due. I will do this to an annoying degree before publication. Ask for assistance and you will receive it. Do not wait until the last minute.

I will work with you like an editor on your stories before they are graded. I will work with you like an editor in my grading. I care about good writing and reporting and I want you to do well in this class. If you are eager to help yourself, I am eager to help you.

Buckle up, friends. This is going to be a wild ride on the campaign trail.