

Syllabus 2020 Fall Term

ENVIRONMENTAL JOURNALISM: REPORTING ABOUT SCIENCE, POLICY AND PUBLIC HEALTH

Environ/NRE 320, Section 001; ENG 344, Section 002

Instructors:

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Meets Thursdays from 9:40 a.m. to 11:40 on Zoom

Visiting Hours: We'll plan some regular times for you to drop in and chat with us via BlueJean video or phone conference. In addition, we're available by appointment for similar conversations. We use Slack as our main space for asynchronous communication with you.

Objectives: There are two. The first is to introduce you to basic research and writing skills needed to communicate with the public about emerging environmental and health issues. The second is to help you understand the revolutionary changes taking place in the way society defines, creates and shares information about the environment and public health.

Combined, these objectives will give you some critical tools needed to become agents of change through public communication. In this course, you will practice journalistic writing, a genre that emphasizes succinct, non-fiction articles. Journalistic writing differs markedly in style from academic writing, yet many of our past students have found that learning to write like a journalist has improved their ability to write for academic audiences as well. The interviews you will conduct for this course are analogous to the research that academics do before writing their papers for a scholarly audience.

This interdisciplinary course will incorporate methods from social sciences, natural sciences, humanities and creative work. The course will feature:

1. A series of guest speakers, including prize-winning journalists plus leaders in science, business and environmental activism.
2. A brief introduction to visual storytelling, including a requirement that you accompany one of your assignments with a photo.
3. The chance to imagine and write about new information-related products.

In this course, you will take an active role in shaping your learning. You will choose the topics on which you will focus most of your writing. The aim is for this class to be fun, scholarly and also full of practical tools.

Graded Assignments:

***Short News Article on food.** Following the class on food, you will be asked to find one additional source to interview, and then write a 500-word article based on the classroom discussion.

***News feature:** A magazine article of up to 1,250 words on an emerging environmental or public health issue of interest to the general public. You will be required to complete many steps towards a first draft and, eventually, a final, polished version.

***Edit of a fellow student's news feature,** providing feedback on content, structure and details such as word choice and punctuation.

*** Blogged News Critiques.** No more than 250 words, posted weekly as comments to our class blog, <http://dissectingthenews.wordpress.com/>. The idea is to generate written discussion of how and why news stories about the environment and public health are created.

***Knight News Challenge grant application,** giving you the chance to think like an entrepreneur. Working in teams, students will come up with innovative ways to deliver information about the environment and/or public health.

*** Pitch Video,** a three-minute clip promoting either your news story or your team's Knight Challenge idea. Then you'll have the chance to pitch your ideas live during our festive, end-of-term Pitchfest before a panel of judges who are editors and entrepreneurship experts.

All deadlines can be found in the calendar tab on Canvas. We recommend clicking on the month view to get the long-term picture that will help you plan. All assignments must be submitted by the time and date specified. You will lose points for each day past the due date. One of the most critical skills of a good journalist is adherence to deadlines, so we take this requirement very seriously.

All assignments should conform to the standard rules of English grammar and spelling, and be written to the stipulated length. Extensive re-writing of the news feature is required.

Plagiarism will not be tolerated. We are professional fact-checkers, and we will spot-check student papers for plagiarism and other possible ethical problems. Plagiarism is defined as taking material obtained from other sources and representing it as your own. It also includes using quotes that have been given in a public context without attributing the source of those quotes and making it seem as if you obtained those quotes by conducting your own interview.

Our class sessions involve much informal conversation. Because the class meets only once a week, we hope you'll attend all class meetings, arrive promptly and participate extensively unless you are ill. The ability to ask relevant questions is a key skill of a good journalist.

As a general overview, news articles will be judged on:

* Accuracy. This is the most important component of news articles. A credible news article must reflect the facts.

* Fairness. Ability to see all sides of an issue and adequately present them.

* Relevance. Ability to show the importance of the story and why you're writing it now.

* Organization. Ability to quickly synthesize the most important information, and then expand on the most relevant points.

* Use of color, description and anecdotes to hook reluctant readers. Originality is a plus.

Rubrics providing specific criteria for grading are attached to detailed descriptions of all assignments on Canvas.

Course Grade

News feature: 30%
Knight News Challenge: 25%
Class participation: 15%
Short News Assignment: 10%
Blogged news critiques (weekly): 10%
Edits of News Feature: 5%
Pitch Video: 5%

We approach grading with the mentality of a coach. We want everyone to do well. If you complete the readings, attend class and work hard, you will do well, regardless of your background in journalism, science, public health or the environment.

About first drafts in this course

Your first draft of the news feature is not optional. A portion of the grade for your final news feature will be based on the effort expended on your draft. We will give you many suggestions to revise your first draft and achieve your best writing by improving it over time.

Meeting deadlines is a key skill in any profession, especially journalism, so we expect you to submit all assignments on time unless there are extenuating circumstances.

Prerequisites

The only requirements for this course are curiosity, perseverance, attention to detail, adherence to deadlines and a modest agility with written words.

Reading List

A sampling of journalism and criticism selected by the instructors and posted to the course website on Canvas.

Selections from two books:

The Associated Press Guide to News Writing, Third Edition, copyright 2000, by Rene J. Cappon. This is available here:

https://www.thriftbooks.com/w/associated-press-guide-to-newswriting-study-aidson-the-job-reference_rene-j-cappon/413979/

And on Amazon:

<https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0028637550/>

Journalism next: A practical guide to digital reporting and publishing by Mark Briggs (third edition, published in 2015), available at all campus bookstores

Selections from Mediactive, available free online at <http://mediactive.com/book/how-to-get-it/>

Recommended for occasional browsing:

The New York Times, especially the Science Times section, which runs on Tuesdays.

The Wall Street Journal

A variety of news feeds and websites listed on our Canvas site plus a local news outlet such as *The Ann Arbor News*, the *Detroit Free Press* or *The Detroit News*

SEJournal, an online publication of the Society of Environmental Journalists

WEEKLY TOPICS

Week One. Thursday, September 3rd. **Introduction.** What makes for high caliber environmental and public health journalism? What are the criteria for a news story? Bias: is it ever acceptable for environmental and science journalists to reveal their own opinions about the issues they cover? How have customs about incorporating opinion into journalism changed over the years? How does revolutionary change in the news business create new opportunities for sharing information in the public interest? What are the current criteria for separating story ideas from junk? How do journalists develop an idea into a story? How should the public judge environmental and science news? How much do corporate representatives control news? How much do they spend trying? Changes in media ownership and how that might affect science and environment news. Considering urban sprawl as a classic environmental issue, one that historically intersects with segregation. Guests: Craig Welch, CEO and founder of Wexford Homes, Jennifer Fike, chair of the Ann Arbor Greenbelt Advisory Commission and operations manager at the Great Lakes Regional Center of the National Wildlife Federation and Mandy Grewal, Supervisor of Pittsfield Township. Instructors: Both.

Week Two. Thursday, September 10th. **Virtually Touring Detroit, Scouting for Environmental or Public Health News.** The video recordings preparing for this class meeting will provide guidance on the story-seeking process. During our class meeting time, we'll take a virtual tour of Detroit, hosted by the [Detroit Experience Factory](#)'s Jeanette Pierce. As we talk about the history of Detroit and some of the current issues the city faces, keep these questions in mind: Where do you find a great environmental or public health story idea -- in Detroit, on campus, or anywhere else? One place to start is with a topic that interests you, or that you may stumble across as you're visiting a city or going about your daily life. Who are experts working on this topic now? What are the unsolved problems, the new trends? Often, you need to interview experts before you can find a story. Sometimes you can start with a hunch about something that is compelling, something that is trending now. What draws your attention? Keep in mind that often, journalists look into story ideas that never pan out. That's part of the process. The trick is to keep asking questions, to be curious, until you find a good story that answers the key questions: Why now? Why care? Guest: [Orlando Bailey](#), Engagement Director, BridgeDetroit. Instructor: Askari

Week Three. Thursday, September 17th. **Food Wars and Sustainable Farming.** It seems that everywhere you look, there are articles exploring the impacts of modern food production on public health and the environment. We'll dive deep into this timely conversation and consider the best way to convey food information to the public. We'll look at everything from processed meat -- a hot topic in the news these days for its role in causing health problems and negatively impacting the planet -- to trends in nutrition, as well as the farming practices that bring us our food and the challenges faced by farmers of color. Are small farms really the best way to go from an environmental standpoint? Why are vegan and vegetarian diets the rage? Are there any nutritional drawbacks? What niche do cattle farms fill? Guests: Katie Serbinski, Director of Nutrition and Consumer Communications with the Michigan Beef Industry Commission; Susan Aaronson, Director of the Didactic Program in Dietetics in the Department of Nutritional

Sciences at the University of Michigan School of Public Health and Melvin Parson, Executive Director of We The People Opportunity Farm in Ypsilanti, Michigan. Instructor: Halpert.

Week Four. Thursday, September 24th. **News Innovation.** What are the most important trends that we should consider as we begin to work on our news innovation assignment, the Knight News Challenge? What are the biggest challenges that news innovators face? Why is it so important for many journalists to move beyond reporting and telling news stories to also thinking about the way we might want to gather and share civic information, such as news, in the future? We meet the mentors who have generously agreed to coach our Knight Challenge teams this term. Guests: [Reid Williams](#), Senior Director, Storytelling Studio, Gannett | USA Today Network; [Jo Adegbola](#), Sr. Software Development Manager, Amazon Web Services. Instructor: Askari.

Week Five. Thursday, October 1st. **Pipelines: Unraveling the Controversy.** We'll explore the varying approaches of journalists from different media outlets in covering the controversial energy sources delivered through pipelines: oil and gas. We'll look at examples of investigative journalism for major pipeline spills, including *InsideClimate News*' Pulitzer prize-winning coverage of the Enbridge rupture in Kalamazoo and how *Democracy Now* broke the story of the Native American protests against the Dakota Access pipeline. Closer to home, we'll focus on a particularly controversial example, the Enbridge Line 5, which travels under the Straits of Mackinac. We'll also look at the ways these pipelines are often built in impoverished areas, disproportionately affecting people of color. Guests: Holly T. Bird, Executive Director, Water Protector Legal Task Force, representing Native American communities and Paul Meneghini, Manager, Community Engagement, Great Lakes Region for Enbridge. Instructor: Halpert.

Week Six. Thursday, October 8th. **Pandemic News: At Times Too Much, And Also Not Enough.** Here we are, struggling through one of the biggest news stories of the century. The pandemic is a public health story first, though of course it touches every aspect of human society. How well have journalists done covering this gargantuan story? How have scientists and health officials done communicating directly to the public, as well as to journalists? What are some strategies for addressing the politicization of the pandemic, and forefronting public understanding of the issues? What are the story angles that we want to see developed in the months ahead? What are the opportunities the pandemic presents to reshape the human world? Guests: [University of Michigan Chief Health Officer Preeti Malani](#), and others. Instructor: Askari

Week Seven. Thursday, October 15th. **Writing and Editing Workshop.** This class session will be focused on providing you with an array of suggestions on how to write your news feature. You'll receive detailed guidance on the best ways to compile the range of information you've assembled to make it newsworthy. We'll also focus on some in class writing exercises to help you understand the process of writing under a tight deadline. We'll have plenty of time to answer all your questions about journalistic writing as well. Instructor: Halpert

Week Eight. Thursday, October 22nd. **Mining: Cutting Across Continents, Cultures, and Economies.** As the price of gold soars to record highs during a time of pandemic uncertainty, we explore news about mining -- of gold and other natural resources that make their way into

many common consumer products, including mobile phones, other computers and jewelry. What price do low-income workers pay for mining the materials that are essential to our motherboards? What price does the environment pay? What are the tradeoffs for regions rich in natural resources, where politicians are elected on platforms that include promises of supporting mining jobs? How can journalists tell these stories in ways that capture more attention and build public understanding? Guests: UNIMINUTO students and professors; a representative of the mining industry; a journalist. Instructor: Askari

Week Nine. Thursday, October 29th. **Bridging the Cultural Gap: Scientists vs Journalists.** We'll discuss why scientists don't trust reporters and why the ones who like to talk to reporters may not be the best ones for reporters to interview. We'll examine the role of government in stifling scientists who want to speak out. We'll hear about the attack on science and the implications of recent cuts to funding. We'll probe the culture clash. Given the differing goals of scientists and journalists, how can you get scientists to trust and confide in you? We'll discuss specific methods for translating complex scientific information into articles that will resonate with the average reader. Guest: Brian Nord, the youngest Black physicist to hold a position at Fermilab, a contract lab for the U.S. Department of Energy and co-founder of the Deep Skies Lab, a multi-institutional group of astrophysicists and deep learning experts. Instructor: Halpert.

Week Ten. Thursday, November 5th. **Visual Storytelling.** From early childhood, our schooling is focused on learning letters so we can read and write. Yet, visual communication is increasingly important, and far more popular than written communication. What is the grammar of visual storytelling that we can practice? As photographic and video technology improves, becoming less expensive and more ubiquitous, we all have the opportunity to capture great news photos and video. We'll talk about how to be inspired to use those tools with developing skill, and also with sensitivity. Guest: Regina Boone, [prize-winning photojournalist](#) at the [Richmond Free Press](#), founded by her parents as a black-owned news outlet in the former capital of the Confederacy (Richmond, Virginia). Instructor: Askari.

Week Eleven: Thursday, November 12th. **The Politicization of Science Under the Trump Administration.** With Donald Trump as President for the past four years, we take a look at the way environmental issues -- and science -- have been especially politicized and how both industry and environmentalists shape their messages to cultivate support for their initiatives. We will debrief on the recent election and how it could impact the agendas of both environmentalists and industry going forward. We'll explore the compromises and the deals made on environmental issues and discuss how to get behind the scenes. We'll get an in-depth view of environmental and industry strategies, looking at how this information is communicated through the media, focusing on fuel economy regulations as an example. Guests: Coral Davenport, Energy and Environment correspondent for *The New York Times*; Alyssa Tsuchiya, environmental lobbyist with the Union of Concerned Scientists and a representative from Ford's Department of Government Relations. Instructor: Halpert.

Week Twelve. Thursday, November 19th. **Climate Change & Youth Activists.** How are journalists amplifying the rising youth voices talking about climate change? We'll look at politics,

both inside and outside the newsroom, and how that impacts coverage of climate. We'll also consider how to talk responsibly about weather vs climate. What more should journalists be doing to bring clarity to public understanding of this issue? How can we talk publicly about climate change in ways that don't provoke excessive grief and resulting inaction? We'll also consider the complex issue of corporate responses, and shared responsibility. Instructor: Askari.

Week Thirteen. Thursday, December 3rd. **The Future of News and Your Place In It.** Even if you don't become a professional journalist, knowing how to communicate with the public is a valuable skill. How can you continue to develop that skill, and build your personal brand, when this class is over? We'll also hold our pitchfest. Each Knight Challenge team will choose one member to pitch its idea. Others may be called on to pitch their news feature. Course evaluations will be completed online. Invite your friends and family! Guests: Panel of judges will include John Hilton, editor of *The Ann Arbor Observer*. Instructors: Both.

Supplemental Readings in the Bonus Module on Canvas include :

- Sample Student Papers
- FOIA Readings
- Interviewing Techniques
- Writing Tips
- Common Writing Problems
- Reporting Tips

How to be OK during the pandemic: In case you haven't noticed, *there is a global pandemic*. None of us is completely OK all the time. If you tell us that you're having trouble, we're not going to judge you or think less of you. We hope you will extend us the same grace. So let's lay out some ground rules:

- You *never* owe us information about your health (mental or physical), or about anything else.
- We're always willing to talk with you about things you're going through, however.
- If we can't help you, we usually know someone who can.
- If you need extra help, or you need to miss class, or you need more time with something, just ask. We'll work with you.

Wellness resources: As a student, you may experience a range of issues that can cause barriers to learning, such as strained relationships, feelings of isolation and stresses due to COVID-19, increased anxiety, alcohol/drug problems, difficulty concentrating and/or lack of motivation. These mental health concerns or stressful events may lead to diminished academic performance or reduce your ability to participate in daily activities. The University of Michigan is committed to advancing the mental health and well-being of its students and we attempt to foster a supportive, inclusive classroom environment. If you or someone you know is feeling overwhelmed, depressed, and/or in need of support, services are available. For help, contact Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) at 734.764.8312 and caps.umich.edu during and after hours, on weekends and holidays, or through its counselors who may be physically located in schools on both North and Central Campus. You may also consult University Health

Service (UHS) at 734.764.8320 and <https://www.uhs.umich.edu/mentalhealthsvcs>, or for alcohol or drug concerns, see <https://www.uhs.umich.edu/aodresources>. For a listing of other mental health resources available on and off campus, visit <http://umich.edu/~mhealth>

Sensitive Topics: Please note that throughout the term, we will analyze news coverage of a range of topics related to racism, environment and public health including climate change, epidemics and injustices.

Safety Measures for COVID-19: The university has asked us to remind you that, if you are on campus, the State of Michigan and the University require maintaining a physical distance of six feet from others and properly wearing a face covering. Current information on university policies related to the pandemic are here: <https://campusblueprint.umich.edu/> It includes details about [contact tracing](#) and how the university will [manage positive cases](#).

Spaces for You to Study and Take Remote Classes: In addition to places like the outside canopies, Shapiro, the Union, the League, and the LSA atrium, here is [a map and list of the buildings and 70 LSA rooms](#) that are available for students to reserve.

Financial Support: The university recognizes that there may be a greater-than-usual need for financial support this term. Here is the [Student Employment Office site](#). In addition, you may be interested in seeking CARES Act Funding: [CARES Act Application](#) For more information, [go to this FAQ page](#). Further, there is [LSA Emergency Funding](#) to help those facing financial hardship due to unforeseen circumstances, including the pandemic.

Recordings: Course meetings will be audio/video recorded and made available to other students in this course. It is our intention to provide captioning for all course videos. As part of your participation in this course, you will be recorded. If you do not wish to be recorded, please contact Emilia and Julie in the first week of class (or as soon as you enroll in the course, whichever is latest) to discuss alternative arrangements, with guidance from the safe computing team in university's Office of Information and Technology Services.

Guest speaker portions of our class meetings may be posted publicly, as an educational resource accessible beyond the university.

Students are prohibited from recording/distributing any in-class activity without written permission from the instructors, except as necessary as part of approved accommodations for students with disabilities. Any approved recordings may only be used for the student's own private use.

Students with Disabilities: If you think you may need an accommodation for a disability, please let us know at the beginning of the term. Next, you should contact the Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) office located at G664 Haven Hall. The SSD phone number is 734-763-3000. Once your eligibility for an accommodation has been determined, you will be issued a Verified Individual Services Accommodation (VISA) form and we can arrange for your accommodation. Any information you provide is private and confidential and will be treated as

such. If you already have a VISA form from SSD, please present this form to us at the beginning of the term, but no later than at least two weeks prior to the need for the accommodation so that there is enough time for the appropriate arrangements to be made.

Academic Misconduct: The University of Michigan community functions best when its members treat one another with honesty, fairness, respect, and trust. The College promotes the assumption of personal responsibility and integrity, and prohibits all forms of academic dishonesty and misconduct. Plagiarism constitutes academic misconduct. All cases of academic misconduct will be referred to the Office of the Assistant Dean for Undergraduate Education. Being found responsible for academic misconduct will usually result in a grade sanction, in addition to any sanction from the College. For more information, including examples of behaviors that are considered academic misconduct and potential sanctions, please see: www.lsa.umich.edu/academicintegrity

Sexual Misconduct: Policy Title IX prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex, which includes sexual misconduct — including harassment, domestic and dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking. We understand that sexual violence can undermine students' academic success and we encourage anyone dealing with sexual misconduct to talk to someone about their experience, so they can get the support they need. Confidential support and academic advocacy can be found with the Sexual Assault Prevention and Awareness Center (SAPAC) on their 24-hour crisis line, (734) 936-3333 and at sapac.umich.edu. Alleged violations can be non-confidentially reported to the Office for Institutional Equity (OIE) at institutional.equity@umich.edu

Welcome! We look forward to getting to know you, and learning with you this term!