

# COMMUNITY NEWS REPORTING

COMM 621

Tuesday 9:45 a.m. - 2:10 p.m.

Fall 2020

## HELLO!

**Chris Halsne** is AU's first Investigative Broadcaster in Residence and has been on television for 30+ years. He's managed special-projects units in Seattle, Denver and Oklahoma City. He was recently awarded the Society of Professional Journalists Sigma Delta Chi award for investigative reporting and three National Press Club awards.

A documentary filmmaker, fiction author, and podcast contributor, he takes a multi-media approach to every news idea.

**Jeremiah Patterson** teaches a variety of digital, multimedia and broadcast courses. He is the Journalism Division's lead faculty member on digital communication and technology skills and he is fierce about bringing emerging media into the classroom. He specializes in digital news production and storytelling, with a background in web design. He is also the Director of the Journalism & Digital Storytelling MA program and he is currently a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Fellow at The Center for Teaching, Research and Learning on campus.

## CONTACT

Please identify yourself with first and last name when emailing or texting. And include **[COMM 621]** in the subject line of any class-related email you send us.

### CHRIS HALSNE

halsne@american.edu  
(303) 549-8749

### OFFICE HOURS

Available most business hours;  
appointment preferred.

### JEREMIAH PATTERSON

jnpatter@american.edu  
(440) 228-7546

### OFFICE HOURS

Available most business hours;  
appointment preferred.

## **PURPOSE**

This is an advanced-level digital journalism course focused on the gathering and multimedia storytelling of community news. It will teach you the fundamentals of covering a geographic beat, running a digital newsroom and publishing online content.

During the course of the class, students will:

- Publish stories on our graduate publication, The Wash.
- Understand the new media industry landscape.
- Become proficient in visual and multimedia literacy for journalistic storytelling.
- Study the operation of digital newsrooms and the modern journalist's toolkit.
- Collaborate as a class to simulate a digital newsroom.

We will be creating a series of online issues and multimedia packages to experience the wide-ranging world of online journalism and multimedia storytelling. The course consists of lectures, discussion, critiques and lots of hands-on work.

## **COURSE OBJECTIVES**

After successful completion of this class, you should have a grasp of core concepts of establishing and covering a beat. Other objectives include how to:

- Cover a geographic beat.
- Be an effective newsroom contributor in content and multimedia.
- Develop, write and edit at least five online packages and an additional election story.
- Experiment with emerging tech and platforms to expand storytelling.
- Manage time effectively to meet pitch, story and publication deadlines.
- Communicate effectively with sources and contacts in your beat.
- Work with social media tools and platforms to promote all of your packages.
- Navigate ethical and legal decision-making.

## **COURSE STRUCTURE**

During the first four weeks of this course, we will explore our communities, build sources, hear from industry experts and learn about emerging digital storytelling tools. This phase is meant to refine your community reporting skills before we enter the production phase — when you'll put them into practice.

Then, for the remainder of the semester, this class will run much like a local, digital newsroom with the professors serving as the editors-in-chief. You will work individually and in teams to write, report and produce web stories and packages for weekly issues of our online publication, The Wash. Each issue involves planning assignments, field reporting, editing, writing, formatting, rewriting, creating graphics, shooting photos or video or embedding other multimedia, publishing content and interpreting analytics.

You will have to produce five multimedia stories from your respective neighborhood — one every other week. (We'll have two sub-groups in each section, who rotate each week.) Additionally, you'll produce one election story. On the day your story is due, show up with a completed story that meets our final checklist guidelines. We will then edit the story with you before it gets published. On your "off" week, you'll be responsible for reporting your next story and submitting a progress report.

For each story, you'll have about eight hours of scheduled class time. Plus, we expect you to put in about five hours in your neighborhood outside of class. That amounts to about a day and a half of working hours per story — way more time than any future employer will give you.

## **ATTENDANCE**

This course will simulate a professional work environment — one that fosters the skills and discipline needed to produce online news. A news team requires all of its members to be present and active to create successful news site. For that reason, classroom attendance is not only vital but required.

We will take attendance at the beginning of each class, at exactly 9:45 a.m. Showing up late and/or leaving early without a legitimate, pre-approved excuse will be counted as an **unexcused absence**. If a medical problem, illness, religious observance, personal emergency or reporting obligation requires you to miss class, let your assigned professor know by email prior to the start of class. (It's best to talk with us as soon as you know you'll be missing class.) Assignments/stories are still due when they are listed despite having an excused absence. Again, **late assignments/stories will not be accepted**.

Every class missed (excused or unexcused) will result in a **25-point reduction** from your overall grade. If you have an excused absence, you will be able to make up those 25 points by reporting an additional story. If you have an unexcused absence, you will not be allowed to make it up. If you are absent, it is your responsibility to figure out what you missed.

During Tuesday newsroom hours, you may leave to cover breaking news in your assigned neighborhood and/or to continue reporting there. But, you must "check out" with your professor **before you leave home**. That's because we often will have other editing and production work for you.

## DEADLINES

Journalists live and die by deadlines in the newsroom. So, this is simple: **nothing late will be accepted**. Failure to complete an assignment on time or produce your story in time for publication will result in a grade of zero for that particular assignment/story. There is no flexibility with this policy, except for excused absences. Check the schedule now to understand what is expected of you and when it's expected.

- Stories must be published by 2 p.m.
- Progress Reports are due by 5 p.m. on Tuesdays
- Pitches are due by 5 p.m. on Thursdays

## SOFTWARE, TOOLS & MATERIALS

We will use a number of software packages, programs and platforms in the course of our work, along with other materials including, but not limited to:

- Content and project management systems: WordPress, Airtable.
- Cloud services: Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, etc.
- Adobe Creative Cloud (CC): Photoshop, Illustrator, Premiere, Audacity.
- Other interactive tools: Mapping and timeline tools, 360° video.
- Communication tools: GroupMe, Slack, Facebook Messenger.
- Cell phone with multimedia editing apps: iMovie (Mac), Filmora Go (Android) or Videoshop (both)
- Online readings, assignments and resources (including this syllabus) will be posted on our class website at **thewash.org/cnr2020**. We'll refer to this site regularly. We'll also use it to publish our weekly issues.
- Special equipment rented from the Equipment Rental Room.
- External hard drive to store and backup your multimedia work.

## EQUIPMENT RENTAL

If you're in D.C. and have access to campus, you have the ability to check out equipment from the Equipment Rental Room (The Cage) to use for field reporting — including video cameras, digital audio records, still cameras and more. The Cage is located in the terrace level of the Media Production Center. Sign out the equipment using your name and valid university ID. You are liable for any equipment damage or loss, which will be traced back to the last ID used to check it out. That said, you are encouraged to use your own mobile device for certain assignments, such as those for video, photography and audio. Please note there are additional safety precautions The Cage asks you abide by, given the pandemic, which your professors can share with you.

## GRADING CONSIDERATIONS

The point of this course is to learn to cover a community and produce digital news. Points are deducted for problems. Here are some examples:

### Minor Problems

Small layout issues with text and embedded media, small producing issues with multimedia, wordy writing, missed leads.

### Somewhat Significant Problems

Over/underexposed video or distracting audio, shaky video, spelling errors or grammatical mistakes, missing attributions, insertion of opinions, inaccurate quotes, sloppy writing.

### Major Problems

Disorganized layout, missing/poorly captured audio or video, jump cuts and gaps in video, factual errors, disorganized/incomplete story budgets, incoherent writing.

## GRADES

<b>100 pts</b>	Background Assignment
<b>600 pts</b>	Stories (5 planned, 1 election)
<b>100 pts</b>	Story Pitches (5 planned)
<b>100 pts</b>	Spot-News Story (1 unplanned)
<b>100 pts</b>	Professionalism
<b>1000 pts</b>	<b>Total</b>

**A** High-quality professional work that's suitable for publication on a reputable media channel/site. Or professional quality work with insignificant, minor errors.

A- 90-93.9      A 94-100

**B** Good quality work but some minor problems exist. Or work that meets assignment requirements but problems exist. Or work that fulfilled the assignment but had problems.

B- 80-83.3      B 83.4-86.6      B+ 86.7-89.9

**C** Incomplete work that does not meet portions of the assignment and has significant or major problems.

C- 70-73.3      C 73.4-76.6      C+ 76.6-79.9

**D** Incomplete work that has excessive problems, indicating a lack of effort and attention to the assignment.

D 60-69.9

**F** Incomplete work that missed assignment deadline or had major errors.

F 59.9 and below

## **ACADEMIC SUPPORT**

There is a wide range of university services available to support you in your efforts to meet the course requirements, including:

Academic Support Center (x3360, MGC 243) offers study skills workshops, individual instruction, tutor referrals and services for students with learning disabilities. Writing support is available in the ASC Writing Lab or in the Writing Center, Battelle 228.

Counseling Center (x3500, MGC 214) offers counseling and consultations regarding personal concerns, self-help information and connections to off-campus mental health resources.

Disability Support Services (x3315, MCG 206) offers technical and practical support and assistance with accommodations for students with physical, medical or psychological disabilities.

If you qualify for accommodations because of a disability, please notify me in a timely manner with a letter from the Academic Support Center or Disability Support Services so we can make arrangements to address your needs.

## **ACADEMIC INTEGRITY**

Please don't even think about cheating on your work. Plagiarism is to present any information or language that was prepared and written by someone else as if it were your own work. This would include copying and pasting information from the Internet without attributing the source. It would also include passing off another student's work as your own. For this course, plagiarism also includes using photos, audio, video or code from the Internet that you are presenting as original work. In other words, don't do it.

Standards of academic conduct are set forth in the University's Academic Integrity Code. By registering, you have acknowledged your awareness of the Academic Integrity Code, and you are obliged to become familiar with your rights and responsibilities as defined by the Code. Violations of the Academic Integrity Code will not be treated lightly, and disciplinary action will be taken should such violations occur.

The Academic Integrity Code includes but is not limited to: plagiarism; inappropriate collaboration; dishonesty in exams, papers; work done for one course and submitted for another; deliberate falsification of data; interference with other students' work; misrepresenting yourself (or having someone misrepresent you) as present during roll call; and copyright violations.

Please see me if you have any questions about the academic violations described in the Code in general or as they relate to particular requirements for this course.

## **EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS**

In the event of an emergency, American University will implement a plan for meeting the needs of all members of the university community.

Should the university be required to close for a period of time, we are committed to ensuring that all aspects of our educational programs will be delivered to our students. These may include altering and extending the duration of the traditional term schedule to complete essential instruction in the traditional format and/or use of distance instructional methods. Specific strategies will vary from class to class, depending on the format of the course and the timing of the emergency.

Faculty will communicate class-specific information to students via AU email and Blackboard, while students must inform their faculty immediately of any absence. Students are responsible for checking their AU email regularly and keeping themselves informed of emergencies.

In the event of an emergency, students should refer to the AU Student Portal and the AU information line at (202) 885-1100 for general university-wide information, as well as contact their faculty and/or respective dean's office for course and school/ college-specific information.

## INTEGRITY & PROFESSIONALISM

Specific to this class, it is a violation of the Integrity Code to manufacture information — such as scripting quotes for an interview, making up names or other information or staging multimedia to represent any news event. **No reenactments are allowed.** Other potential violations include using someone else's writing, video or audio as your own without express attribution.

All work for this class must be original and must be completed specifically for this class. No duplicate work will be accepted. If there is ever a question, please ask us before you hand it in.

You will not be able to get a grade in this class for work completed in your Reporting of Public Affairs course. While we may end up using material from that class on our website, you may not get a grade for them in COMM 621.

You are expected to act in a professional manner to meet deadlines, solve problems, cooperate with your peers and generally contribute to a positive class environment. We will evaluate you on your professional demeanor in the classroom. Remember, more than a classroom, **this is a newsroom.**

## GRADING EXPECTATIONS

You should note — and always keep in mind — that the average grade for average performance is a C. The grade of A is not earned for simply attending class and turning in assignments. Excellence not only requires significant effort, but also successful demonstration that you have completely mastered the subject matter, skills and materials required in any assignment. More than that, you are graduate students. You also must have a B average in your graduate classes. You are also representing our publication, SOC, AU and, notably, yourself and your own journalistic reputation. Keep all of that in mind as you complete work for this (and your other) classes.

### HOW TO SUCCEED

- Actively contribute to the team and complete the job you're responsible for.
- Find a way to get your story done on time.
- Show up with a good attitude and be ready to work under deadline pressure.
- Backup your work — corrupted/lost files aren't an excuse.
- Come to class, participate and turn in work on time.
- Keep us informed if you're struggling, behind or need to miss class.
- And, let us know if you have comments, issues or suggestions.

## SCHEDULE

This schedule is subject to change. We will post updated versions on our website and also announce changes in class when they happen. *Assignments/stories* are due the day they're listed.

### INTRO & SKILLS

**AUG. 25** **WELCOME,  
FIELD REPORTING**

**SEPT. 8** **PANEL/LIGHTNING TALKS**  
*Background Assignment*

**Sept. 10** *Group A Pitch 1*

**SEPT. 1** **COMMUNITY  
REPORTING BASICS**

**SEPT. 15** **LOGISTICS, WORKSHOP**  
*Group A Progress Report 1*

**Sept. 17** *Group B Pitch 1*

### ISSUES

**SEPT. 22** **ISSUE 1**  
*Group A Story 1; B Progress 1*

**Sept. 24** *Group A Pitch 2*

**SEPT. 29** **ISSUE 2**  
*Group B Story 1; A Progress 2*

**Oct. 1** *Group B Pitch 2*

**OCT. 6** **ISSUE 3**  
*Group A Story 2; B Progress 2*

**Oct. 8** *Group A Pitch 3*

**OCT. 13** **ISSUE 4**  
*Group B Story 2; A Progress 3*

**Oct. 15** *Group B Pitch 3*

**OCT. 20** **ISSUE 5**  
*Group A Story 3; B Progress 3*

**Oct. 22** *Group A & B Election Pitch*

**OCT. 27** **ISSUE 6**  
*Group B Story 3*

**Oct. 29** *Group A Pitch 4*

**NOV. 3** **ISSUE 7: ELECTION**  
*Group A & B Election Story*

**Nov. 5** *Group B Pitch 4; A Progress 4*

**NOV. 10** **ISSUE 8**  
*Group A Story 4; B Progress 4*

**Nov. 12** *Group A Pitch 5*

**NOV. 17** **ISSUE 9**  
*Group B Story 4; A Progress 5*

**Nov. 19** *Group B Pitch 5*

**NOV. 24** **NO CLASS**  
FRIDAY CLASSES MEET

**DEC. 1** **ISSUE 10**  
*Group A Story 5; B Progress 5*

**DEC. 8** **ISSUE 11**  
*Group B Story 5; Spot News*