Writing for Convergent Media  
Comm. 522.001  
MGC 332  
Spring 2009  
Professor Amy Eisman

Office Hours:  
On campus most weekdays; best to schedule appointments *  
Official hours: Tuesdays 2-5  
Office phone and location: 202-885-2106, Room 331D MGC  
E-mail: aeisman@american.edu  
Cell (use judiciously): 202-841-6840

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Traditional news writing styles are not well suited for today’s Web and multimedia environment. This course explores writing styles and content techniques (linking policies, social networking, search engine optimization, online surveys) used in online journalism and alternative methods of online reporting, information gathering and writing, including live blogs, citizen journalism, chats, forums, tweets and nonlinear storytelling. This is writing/presentation/online newsgathering class, not a Web design, digital skills or video course. But we will cover basic HTML briefly and touch on digital images, video storytelling and more.

(If you are looking for digital skills such as FLASH and Dreamweaver, or in-depth video editing, this is not the class. But here, you will explore everything from using online reporting sources to Web 2.0 and Twitter and hear from a host of speakers on the cutting edge of online news and delivery.)

The course this semester has an added value: The students will conduct a detailed research project on story comments, social networking and news that will be presented to top news executives at the Gannett Co., Inc., and may inform decisions on how social networking is used in news – both in article comments and in news dissemination.

COURSE GOALS

Consider this a “Boot Camp” in journalism Web-writing skills. If nothing else, the course will focus on presenting accurate, timely, balanced and credible content in a fast-paced environment – content aimed at distribution on multiple platforms. Our primary focus is on text, but not exclusively. The course will mix old-fashioned reporting techniques with the use of the Web for interviewing, research, writing and distribution.

There is going to be a lot of information flying at you. We are going to be ambitious. Some of the resources include:

- **Weekly chapter readings**: The required James Foust text, *Online Journalism, SECOND EDITION*, is excellent, as is Journalism 2.0, How to Survive and Thrive, by Mark Briggs. You can download the PDF for free online or I can help you get a copy for $6; (LINK: http://www.kcnn.org/resources/journalism_20/)
- **Extra links online**: You will have regular online reading assignments to accompany chapters;
- **Daily e-alerts**: You will stay abreast of industry news via required blogs;
- **Online training modules**: You will have access to news-writing modules I co-created for Gannett, the nation’s largest newspaper company, with Professor Larry Gillick, and with Professor Wendell Cochran for the Knight Citizen News Network.
We embark on this course as the news industry is reinventing itself. Job definitions have changed. Job skills have changed. Industry language is evolving (Tweet, SEO, UGC). Outlets, platforms are all changing. Business models are up in the air. Yet I believe that the ability to both communicate clearly and report accurately still are the key skills.

My expectations for you:

• You will complete all assigned readings, which include the textbook and online resources
• You will subscribe to the required e-alerts so that you can stay abreast of industry changes (believe me, this will be one of the most valuable things you do)
• You will complete writing assignments by deadline (!)
• You will attend all classes; more than 3 unexcused absences automatically lowers your grade
• You will follow Associated Press style
• You will participate in classroom discussions
• You will improve throughout the course
• You will be prepared for classroom speakers

What you’ll get in return from me:

• Projects graded and returned in a timely manner
• Individual mentoring
• Enthusiasm and career advice
• Honest assessments of your skill sets
• Exposure to some of the top speakers in online journalism!
• Concise classroom schedules and agendas, appropriate breaks and a lively pace
• Some class time to work on ongoing projects

REQUIRED READING

• *Online Journalism: Principles and Practices of News for the Web*, James C. Foust, with accompanying readings online; this is available in the bookstore—SECOND EDITION!

• *Journalism 2.0: How to Survive and Thrive*
  *A digital literacy guide for the information age*
  This can be found at [http://www.kcnn.org/resources/journalism_20/](http://www.kcnn.org/resources/journalism_20/).
  You can download the PDF for free.

• The Associated Press Stylebook (most recent edition, if possible); the stylebook also is available online for AU students at [http://www.apstylebook.com/american/](http://www.apstylebook.com/american/)

• Daily news content from any of the following: washingtonpost.com, usatoday.com, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/](http://news.bbc.co.uk/), cnn.com; (please make sure to check in with the deadline blog at usatoday.com, [http://blogs.usatoday.com/ondeadline/](http://blogs.usatoday.com/ondeadline/))

• Subscribe to E-Media Tidbits from Poynter.org

• Subscribe to journerdism.org

• If time, buzz [http://www.newstechzilla.com/](http://www.newstechzilla.com/)

SUGGESTED READING

• *The Elements of Style*, Strunk and White
• *We the Media*, by Dan Gillmor
• *Don’t Make Me think*, by Steve Krug ([http://www.sensible.com/buythebook.html](http://www.sensible.com/buythebook.html))

You may also want to purchase a Flip camera, for sale at a discount in the book store.
OTHER ACADEMIC RESOURCES

- Sreetips.com http://www.sree.net/tips/websites.html
  Tips for Web pages by Sree Sreenivasan, Columbia University
- Electronic Frontier Foundation (blogger and digital rights) http://www.eff.org/

*Noted with permission

ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADING

Routine writing assignments, participation and professionalism (5 percent)
There will be several spot assignments to practice your Web-writing, headlines and blurb-writing skills on deadline. These will be bundled into your overall participation and professionalism grade. Ongoing

Online Issue (15 percent)

Explore, in a 3-5 page paper, an online legal or ethical issue concerning Web content or delivery. Pick one issue (the more narrow the topic, the better) and cover:
1. What the issue is
2. What makes it unique to the Web vs. other media
3. What discussion about it is taking place
4. Offer an example if you can
5. If relevant, how you would handle it in your multimedia newsroom

The paper must quote or cite sources.

Some examples of topics follow. I will offer more guidance in class and with additional readings (see: http://www.poynter.org/content/content_view.asp?id=117350
This is a discussion at Poynter in August 2006 about proposed ethical guidelines for digital journalism)

- Guidelines for staff bloggers?
- Guidelines for staffers blogging on their own time?
- Hiring managers and Facebook/MySpace?
- How to handle citizen comments?
- How to handle deep linking issues?
- Guidelines for user-generated content?

This requires at least three sources -- at least two must be credible humans, the other can be documentation. Poynter is not usually available for interviews but sometimes take questions online.

Due: Feb. 6
Online Case Study (20 percent)

You will explore an online project by interviewing main players and writing a Web article for possible publication. The general topic is “How They Did That.”

I’ll present sites that showcase outstanding Web journalism. You’ll find others on your own. You will select one, send me the link for approval, and then interview three main people, the most important, by telephone (e-mail interviews are OK for two others). Write an article about how the project was done for a Web environment.

The case study was assigned for a reason. I really want you to learn about the skills, steps and specifics involved in preparing a news presentation for the Web. You should write this as an article for possible Web publication. At the very least, your article should include the following information:

-- Why the project was undertaken or started
-- What are its metrics of success (laws changed? page views? Community involvement?)
-- Describe the mechanics of the project: Who worked on it? What were their roles? How long did it take?
-- What were the skill sets of the people working on this project? Did someone have to know HTML? Did someone on the team have to know design? Did staffers do photography, video, audio and information gathering?
-- What did the players learn about the collaboration process?

Identify site by: Feb. 13 (ask me for suggestions but not the day before!)
Case study due by: Feb. 26

Live Event Blogs and Web articles (15 percent total)

You will create blogs and cover an event live. This is a fun assignment, and challenging.

Due: After American Forums (same evening) Feb. 17 and March 31. If you are unable to attend an event, you must cover a similar event during the same week.

Due: Feb. 17
Due: March 31

Final Project: Web-ready content (35 percent)

Idea due: Feb. 3
Draft due (no grade but if you want comments, by March 17
Final due: April 21

This is a story and presentation you will produce ideally for the Web. You do not have to build a page or site, but you will, at the very least, have this on a document you e-mail to me with live links.

The article should be 750-1,000 words long (the length depends on your topic and level of expertise). This will be a news feature. When I say “news,” I mean something that touches on a substantive issue – a sociological trend, a public policy issue, a news trend or “service” journalism. Choose something in which you have an interest. You may not, however, turn in something done for another class, or for work – that would be breaking the academic integrity code. Your article must be timely and contain substantiating evidence. The topic MUST BE LOCAL.

Be realistic! Take on a topic that is doable, fresh, that holds your attention and of which you will be proud. Pace yourself accordingly. You’ll be required to present the information for the online platform. Your package may be separate elements designed for a Web audience. Some of those elements can be charts, some can be interactive surveys, or some can be multiple 300-word chunks.
I am not grading you on your technical skills. For those who can, I will expect you to post the final package online. That is not required. But I am focusing the grade on reporting, writing and packaging, not on design, or bells and whistles.

Types of topics that would not work in this time frame:

- A look at the Iraq policy of the Bush Administration (too huge)
- An interview with Rod Blagojevich or Sarah Palin (isn’t going to happen)
- A history of the Washington Monument (not timely)
- A 15-year history of global warming in Alaska (too complex)

Types of topics that conceivably could work (not these ideas necessarily):

- A comparison of university enrollments in the last five years in Washington area
- A look at the job market for newly converged journalists (could be revealing!)
- Pet adoption trends in the Washington area
- The Obama administration and digital connections
- Trends in burial practices
- A profile of a community kitchen or shelter in a changing community
- Or, you can decide to take on any focused, slice of a story having to do with the new administration or politics: wooing participants for Teach for America or the Peace Corps; courses in Mideast politics or issues; students and the economic downturn, and more.

Reminders
Do not:

- Select a topic that is too broad
- Include your opinions, unless I clear it ahead of time
- Interview friends, family, co-workers, supervisors, employees
- Choose a topic that presents a conflict of interest with your job
- Pretend to be someone you are not
- Quote anonymous sources

Do:

- Ensure that all sides of a story are told
- Ensure the story is balanced and fair (this is not advocacy journalism)
- Have a minimum of FIVE human sources
- Make sure most of your major interviews are in person
- Limit your e-mail interviews
- Be flexible in scheduling interviews; you will have some class time for Sat. interviews
- Submit a source list (name and contact information); I may conduct checks

Your article must be timely and contain substantiating evidence. If you are writing about young people and the economy, you need credible data on how many, how old. Please pick a simple, focused topic. Be realistic. Hint: If you pick a place or a local trend, you will have an easier time completing this assignment.

I recognize the online news medium has yet to find a single voice. Part of what you will be doing is experimenting with a new form of storytelling. You must figure out how best to tell your story in an online environment, perhaps writing separate stories on specific elements, or using bullets to convey information or exploring interactive elements to enhance your information. The idea is to avoid “shovelware”—simply picking up content from what you would do for print and shoveling it onto the Web. Different media have different audiences -- a topic we will discuss a lot.

To make this easier, I suggest your final Web version have at least 8 elements. They could include but are not limited to the following 11:

1 -- Story content, in chunks with subheads
2 -- Headline
3 -- Blurb describing the overall package for readers
4 -- Proposal for an interactive element (online survey? Forum?)
5 -- Photos with captions
Social Networking and News Group Project (15 percent)

This is being finalized as the syllabus goes to “press” and will be discussed repeatedly in class.

Six class sessions are being devoted to this exciting research, and you will be at the helm. More on this will be explained in class.

GRADES

- 5 percent Routine writing, participation and professionalism
- 20 percent Case Study
- 10 percent Online Issue
- 15 percent Live Blogs and event coverage
- 35 percent Final Project
- 15 percent Social Networking and News, Group Project

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>95-100</td>
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<td>A-</td>
<td>90-94</td>
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<tr>
<td>B+</td>
<td>86-89</td>
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<td>B</td>
<td>83-85</td>
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<td>B-</td>
<td>80-82</td>
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<td>C+</td>
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<td>C-</td>
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<td>66-69</td>
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<td>F</td>
<td>65 or fewer</td>
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PLAGIARISM AND ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

Standards of academic conduct are set forth in the University’s Academic Integrity Code. By registering, you have acknowledged your awareness of the Code and should become familiar with your rights and responsibilities. Violations of the Code will not be treated lightly, and disciplinary action will be taken should such violations occur. Please see me if you have any questions about the academic violations in the Code in general or as they relate to particular requirements for this course.

Bottom line from me: If you cheat; fabricate interviews, quotes or information; plagiarize; take Web text, photos or design without attribution or permission; or conduct yourself unprofessionally or unethically, you will fail the course and could be expelled from the program.
Class Schedule *

- The schedule may change due to news events. I also will modify according to class level and skills shown in exercises.
- Note, too, that we have invited a series of speakers who are at the top of the field. Please recognize that news events could affect their schedules. Be prepared with questions – and be flexible to cover them live when assigned.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>TOPIC</th>
<th>AGENDA NOTES</th>
<th>HOMEWORK DUE FOR THIS DAY</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jan. 13</td>
<td>OVERVIEW Media Landscape</td>
<td>• Syllabus intro</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>• Media Landscape</td>
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<td>Jan. 16</td>
<td>BASIC WEB PACKAGE: Tools, Tech, Media Types, Review presentations</td>
<td>• Review Web tools and language</td>
<td>• Chapters 1-2, Foust</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>• Define convergence</td>
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<td>• First headline blurb exercise</td>
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<td>Jan. 20</td>
<td>NO CLASS</td>
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<td>Jan. 23</td>
<td>SPEAKER: HTML Review Part I</td>
<td>• Wendell Cochran</td>
<td>• Foust Chapter 3</td>
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<td>• Writing Assignment made for next week</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jan. 27</td>
<td>WEB WRITING, Headlines and Blurb Writing</td>
<td>• Headline tips (Ppt)</td>
<td>• First Writing Assignment due</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Introduce Group Project</td>
<td>• Class exercises</td>
<td>• Read: Chapters 1-3 Briggs (available online) and Chapter 7 Foust; plus <a href="http://www.ojr.org/ojr/wiki/Writing/">http://www.ojr.org/ojr/wiki/Writing/</a></td>
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<td>Jan. 30</td>
<td>SPEAKER: WRITING ABOUT THE WEB.</td>
<td>Topic: How to Find New Beats/ Ideas in Writing about the Web</td>
<td>• Read handouts from Professor for Vargas</td>
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<td>Jose Antonio Vargas, reporter,</td>
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<td>Washington Post; who writes about</td>
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<td>marriage of Internet and politics</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feb. 3</td>
<td>Gannett Social Networking Project I</td>
<td>Classroom work</td>
<td>• Project topic Idea due</td>
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<td>• Read handouts on Social Networking</td>
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<td>Feb. 6</td>
<td>Gannett Social Networking Project I</td>
<td>Classroom work</td>
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<td>Feb. 10</td>
<td>NEW FORMATS: LIVE BLOGGING, Blogging and</td>
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<td>• Due: Online Issue paper</td>
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<td>Tweeting the news</td>
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<td>• Read: Chapter 4 Foust</td>
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<td>• Read Chapter 5 Briggs (blogs)</td>
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<td>• Networked Link Journalism: See link</td>
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<td>DATE</td>
<td>TOPIC</td>
<td>AGENDA NOTES</td>
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| Feb. 13    | ONLINE REPORTING SOURCES                                              | • Due: Topic for case study  
• Chapters 5 Foust                                                             |
| Feb. 17    | (No Class Meeting) Assigned to LIVE BLOG American Forum tonight, 6:30-8 on News Industry | NOTE: If you have class at that time or are assigned the Forum for another class, you must live blog another event by the end of the week, Feb. 20 and send me the url. You must first clear with me. Due tonight: Live Blog |
| Feb. 20    | SPEAKER: NICHE PUBLISHING, with Lynette Clemenson, managing editor of theroot.com, begun by Washington Post | Writing for a niche site, finding your publication’s voice  
• Read: theroot.com; in addition, specific articles will be posted                                                             |
| Feb. 24    | SPECIAL SESSION: Digital Photograph with Professor Lynne Perri, combined classes | Meet in Anderson Lab  
Bring digital camera if you have one  
• Read: Chapters 10, 6 in Foust, Web design and photography |
| Feb. 26/7  | MORE WEB WRITING, headlines, writing, blurbs, packaging and presentation | • Due: Case Study  
• Read: Gannett module on Local Conversation at gannett.newstraining.gannett.com, see LOCAL CONVERSATION |
| March 3    | Gannett Social Networking Project II Discussion | • Read: Chapter 9, Foust |
| March 6    | Gannett Social Networking Project II Lecture | |
| MARCH      | SPRING BREAK                                                          | |
| March 17   | SPEAKER: VIDEOGRAPHY and Storyboarding, with Christina Pino-Marina, videojournalist formerly of washingtonpost.com | • Read Chapter 8 Briggs (shooting digital photos)  
• Reread Chapter 10 Foust  
• DRAFT DUE if you want comments from me. If it is not in today, I will not make early comments |
<p>| March 20   | SPEAKER: USING THE FLIP CAM, with Professor Carolyn Brown Hands-on in class; if you have a camera, bring it, otherwise you can try mine | |
| March 24   | Gannett Social Networking Project III | • (Use homework slots this week to work on final projects) |
| March      | Gannett Social                                                          | • (Use homework slots this week to |</p>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Details</th>
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<tr>
<td>27 F</td>
<td>Networking Project III</td>
<td>work on final projects)</td>
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<tr>
<td>March 31 T</td>
<td>American Forum, No class session to live blog</td>
<td>Same deal as before: if you are in a class, you can live blog something else</td>
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<td>• Due tonight: Live Blog</td>
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<td>April 3 F</td>
<td>Using links in stories</td>
<td>Lecture and Discussion</td>
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<td>• Chapter 8 Foust</td>
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<td>April 7 T</td>
<td>Online Ethics/Law</td>
<td>Lecture and discussion</td>
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<td>• Read: Chapter 11 Foust; <a href="http://www.kcnn.org/legal_risk/">http://www.kcnn.org/legal_risk/</a></td>
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<td>April 10 F</td>
<td>Crowdsourcing, database journalism</td>
<td>Lecture and discussion</td>
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<td>• Read: Relevant chapters for Tools for Citizen Journalists at <a href="http://www.kcnn.org/tools">http://www.kcnn.org/tools</a></td>
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<td>• Chapter 9 Foust: Multimedia and UGC</td>
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<td>April 14 T</td>
<td>SEO – what is it and what it means to you</td>
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<td>• Homework to be posted on Bb</td>
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<tr>
<td>April 17 F</td>
<td>NO CLASS TIME. TIME DEVOTED TO WORKING ON FINAL PROJECT</td>
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<tr>
<td>April 21 T</td>
<td>Your Web Project presentations</td>
<td>Participation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• FINAL PROJECT DUE</td>
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<td>April 24 F</td>
<td>Your Web Project presentations</td>
<td>Participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 28 F</td>
<td>FINAL WRAP-UP OF GANNETT SOCIAL NETWORKING PROJECT</td>
<td>Last class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 1</td>
<td>NO FINAL EXAM</td>
<td>8:30 a.m.-11</td>
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