

School of Journalism
Michigan State University
Fall 2020

Sept. 23 version

JRN 472/872: Environmental Reporting Lab Crossing Borders: Reporting on U.S.-Canada Transborder Environmental Issues

Tuesday & Thursday, 10:20 a.m. to 11:40 a.m.

Prof. Eric Freedman, Knight Chair & director. Knight Center for Environmental Journalism
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Virtual office hours: Thursday noon-2 p.m. and by appointment

Our thematic focus this semester is learning how to report about U.S.-Canada transborder environmental news, issues and events, but we'll also explore and build environmental journalism skills more broadly.

Great Lakes Echo (www.greatlakesecho.org) is our award-winning nonprofit, **professional-caliber** environmental news service that provides stories, photos, graphics and podcasts by students, faculty members and professional journalists. We cover environment-related stories in the Great Lakes region—Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, New York, Ohio, Ontario, Pennsylvania, Quebec and Wisconsin. Our audience includes media outlets, environmental and industry groups, government agencies, researchers and individuals interested in environmental topics. We explain environmental issues, events and controversies that people otherwise wouldn't know about, pioneer new ways of journalism and think creatively about engaging the public with complex, important issues.

Therefore, your stories and other material must be of **professional quality** before they appear on the Great Lakes Echo website and will be written in a style **understandable to ordinary people**, not merely scientists and other experts.

In this course, we are **journalists, not advocates or lobbyists**. As such, we offer coverage that is fair, balanced and accurate, and we adhere to high professional ethical standards. (Re)rad the J-School's Student Code of Ethics & Standards. We do not engage in environment-related political activity.

We also try to **break news**, not simply re-report what other media outlets already posted, published or broadcast.

The syllabus and schedule are subject to change.

OBJECTIVES

Our objectives include some elements common to traditional advanced reporting courses, plus other aspects tailored to environmental and science coverage, including related public policy and

social science. The semester's thematic focus is transborder U.S.-Canada issues, but we won't limit ourselves to that. **By the end of the semester, you should be able to:**

- Understand how to effectively interview scientists, researchers, advocacy group leaders, policymakers, governmental regulators and other experts on environmental topics.
- Read, digest and explain data, research reports and scientific studies.
- Cogently and coherently write or broadcast about these issues for lay audiences.
- Use graphics, photos and other visual materials to tell environmental news stories.
- Understand and be able to use freedom of information and open meetings laws.
- Demonstrate fairness and balance in stories that, in many cases, certain sources will want presented only in one light.
- Use multiple sources, and include women, minorities and multicultural sources, regularly rather than simply rounding up the usual suspects.

Follow environmental news. Subscribe free.

1. Subscribe to and read GreatLakesEcho.org daily. You may be quizzed on these stories, plus we'll discuss some of them in class.
2. Sign up for the KnightLine listserv <https://list.msu.edu/cgi-bin/wa?SUBED1=knightline&A=1>
3. Subscribe to state/province relevant listservs
4. Subscribe to the Great Lakes Commission daily news feed at <https://us13.list-manage.com/subscribe?u=5b672d7c62922dbb20bc7549e&id=5e793f89f9>
5. Read at least one major daily newspaper online or in print from your state or province.
6. NASA's weekly Earth Observatory: <http://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/Subscribe/index.php>.

You will be **assigned to cover** a particular Great Lakes state that borders Canada or to cover Ontario/Quebec. You will also be assigned to cover a U.S. or Canadian federal environment-related agency or research university whose activities may involve more than one Great Lakes state or province. Sign up for their RSS feeds. No turf battles allowed, so a student assigned, say, to Ontario, may pursue a story related to Minnesota.

You'll **meet individually** (virtually) with me partway through the semester to discuss your progress and again at the end of the semester. However, you're welcome to meet any other time during virtual office hours or by appointment.

Major assignments

- **Enterprise stories:** 5 for undergrads, 6 for graduate students. At least 2 stories must have some Canadian content, at least 1 story must be based on a research study and at least 1 story must deal with Great Lakes culture or heritage, such as a new book, foodways, historic site designation museum exhibition, ecotourism or music.
- **Team project:** The project will journalistically examine a transborder environmental topic in the Great Lakes Basin. It will include written stories, visuals and a short podcast or video. Teams will present their projects during the last week of classes (not finals week).

There also will be shorter reporting and writing assignments and required commentary about guest speakers. Graduate students will have added responsibilities.

There are **no textbooks** but are assigned readings. Do them. Your living textbooks are other news outlets, government and advocacy group websites, and the latest research reports. You need a recent edition of the *Associated Press Stylebook* and a map of your state or province and of the Great Lakes region. You also must register (\$20) for the Society of Environmental Journalists virtual conference in September.

Recommended but optional: Membership in the Society of Environmental Journalists(www.sej.org) at the \$25 student rate for the 1-year. It's an inexpensive way to access resources helpful in class, especially the SEJ listserv, as well as something to add to your resume.

Privacy disclosure: Stories, visuals and other material you produce are intended for posting on Great Lakes Echo and for reposting, reprinting or rebroadcasting by other news media, environmental and industry groups, public agencies and others. For example, Capital News Service distributes stories with a Michigan angle to about 30 newspapers and online news outlets across the state. Articles with an agriculture angle may appear on The Food Fix, a U.S. Agency for International Development-funded project of MSU's Global Center for Food Systems Innovation. Your material may be critiqued by other students in the course or working for the Knight Center, by other MSU faculty and by professionals working with the Knight Center for Environmental Journalism.

Technology: We expect to use primarily Zoom, Google Drive, Teams, email, PowerPoint and phone.

Cell phone policy: Turn cell phones off or to silent mode during class. The exception is during skills sessions when you'll be working on your stories.

Communications: I send communications to your MSU email address. If you don't use that, make sure your MSU account is forwarded to the account you use. Missing course email isn't an acceptable excuse for missing an assignment.

GRADING

JRN 472/872 is a **professional-level** course. Stories and team projects are graded on content and factors such as quality and quantity of work, ability to meet deadlines, ability to find and pursue stories and visuals, accuracy and ability to present news and information in the appropriate style and formats. There are no exams, but quizzes are possible. All assignments follow Associated Press style, Great Lakes Echo style and the instructor's pet peeve list.

We don't simply rewrite press releases and reports. It's your responsibility—not the instructor's—to identify story ideas, subject to instructor approval. The five (undergrad) or six (graduate students) individual stories account for 70 percent of the course grade. The team project accounts for 20 percent of the course grade. Because this is a team effort—as in common the work world—all members will receive the same grade, no matter what proportion of the work each student does. Individual stories are not graded. Grading considers such factors as clarity of writing and presentation, use of source, effort, diligence, news value, originality of

story ideas, improvement in skills over the semester, hustle (enterprise), accuracy and amount and depth of rewriting.

I will grade the 1st draft and the 1st rewrite of enterprise stories and average them to calculate your grade on the assignment. You may do additional revisions to make the story publishable — although they won't affect the grade for the assignment, those efforts get recognition as part of professional standards.

The rest of your course grade is based on **professional standards**. This encompasses a battery of criteria used to review your performance and considers important attributes for journalists and other communicators in professional jobs. These attributes are difficult to reflect as traditional grading components. They include participation and meaningful contribution to our discussions and interaction with guest speakers. Although professionalism accounts for 10 percent of your grade mathematically, substantially sub-professional performance may have a larger adverse impact on the course grade.

Accuracy is essential in any journalism course, especially one where your work is intended for a public audience. Mistakes in content, spelling, grammar, punctuation or style, especially mistakes in spelling of proper names, can seriously adversely affect grades—and your reputation.

Students in this course have diverse skills and backgrounds. Regardless of where you fall in that spectrum, you'll make substantive strides in skill and knowledge. Tips for success:

- Meet deadlines
- Rewrite many times—even before I see a draft for the first time. Writing well means rewriting. Often.
- Show substantive improvement between drafts. Nothing is as unproductive and intensely irritating as ignoring edits.
- Show creativity. Experiment.
- Hustle—and that's not merely sending an email and waiting five days for an answer. Reporters talk to people. Get on the phone. Show up at their office or lab, while practicing safe distancing. Dig. Be persistent.

Don't worry if you don't know a lot about science or public policy. Reporters don't need to be experts on what they report about (but should be experts about journalism, of course). They do need to be able to ask (and often re-ask) experts the right questions, understand what they're told and explain it to their audiences.

Identifying yourself: You are reporting for a professional news service with significant reach and credibility. Identify yourself as a reporter for the environmental news site Great Lakes Echo. If a source asks what that is, explain that it's a nonprofit news service operated by Michigan State University's Knight Center for Environmental Journalism. Give them the URL (www.greatlakesecho.org) so they can see what we're about. You don't need to identify yourself as a student but tell the truth if you're asked. Never lie. Read the phone professionalism handout for more guidance.

Anonymous sources: Never in this course. Everyone you talk to should be aware that you are interviewing them for publication. If they don't agree, find another source.

I may mark down your **course grade** one grade for each two unexcused absences. For example, if your grade otherwise would have been 3.5, but you had two unexcused absences, the grade could become 2.5. I will make provisions for illness, blizzards or calamities. Let me know as far in advance as possible of schedule problems so we can plan together. In addition, if you fail to complete two or more stories, your **highest possible** grade will be 1.5, no matter how well you do on everything else, and your actual grade may be lower.

COVID-19 MATTERS

Students won't be required or asked to do any field work that violates best health or safety standards as determined by the state or national public health officials. If students feel any field assignment endangers their health or safety, they can request an alternative assignment without penalty.

Follow Centers for Disease Control & Prevention guidance to stay home or self-isolate if you have been sick with COVID-19 [symptoms](#), tested positive for COVID-19 or were potentially [exposed](#) to someone with COVID-19. I will make accommodations if you must miss class due to illness or self-isolation. Such absences won't harm your performance or put you at a disadvantage in the class.

Everyone must wear face coverings indoors and outdoors on property owned or governed by MSU and while participating in MSU-related or sponsored activities. If you have a medical condition that may prevent you from safely wearing a face covering, contact [MSU's Resource Center for Persons with Disabilities](#) to begin the accommodation process. Follow the university's guidelines about types of acceptable face coverings. You must comply with MSU mask and social distancing requirements when reporting on assignments, even if off campus.

SCHEDULE & STORIES

Class **attendance** is mandatory. For any off-campus site visits, arrange to share a ride or use public transportation if you don't have a car.

Individual story ideas are due to the instructor by email by the start of class on dates on the schedule marked with *. Those stories will be due on dates marked with #. Rewrites are due one week after that. It's up to graduate students where in the semester to fit in their sixth story.

Team projects. I will assign teams. Team ideas are due by the start of class on Thursday, **Oct. 22**. The 1- version (not "rough draft") of the team project is due by the start of class on Tuesday, **Nov. 24**. The final version of the package is due Thursday, **Dec. 3**, by noon. Presentation of your projects to the class will be **Dec. 8 & 10**.

The course generally consists of a mix of lectures, guest speakers and work sessions with skills-related speakers and skills-building exercises, but there will be exceptions. Every story will be edited, revised, re-edited, re-revised and, if necessary, re-re-edited and re-re-revised until it meets our standards for Great Lakes Echo. As science fiction author Octavia Butler put it, "You don't start out writing good stuff. You start out writing crap and thinking it's good stuff, and then gradually you get better at it."

Guest speakers: Based on your preparation for each guest speaker and site visit, email the instructor before the start of class with at least two questions that you might ask.

Religious observance and conflicts with other classes: Make arrangements in advance for your absence. If you must miss our class to participate in another course's required activity, make adequate advance arrangements with me and provide written authorization from the other instructor.

Accommodations for disabilities: Call the OPHS Disability Resource Center at 353-9643 (voice) or 355-1293 (TTY).

Honors option: See me.

By Tuesday, **Dec. 8**, submit a detailed course critique and memo to me regarding your experience, including recommendations.

PLAGIARISM & PROFESSIONAL ETHICS

Don't cheat, fabricate or plagiarize or you may fail this course and risk other disciplinary action, including dismissal from the major. Plagiarism is defined as presenting another person's work or ideas as one's own. The School of Journalism subscribes to the guidelines on academic dishonesty specified in the General Student Regulations and in the All-University Policy on Integrity of Scholarship and Grades (both presented in Spartan Life: Student Resource Guide and Handbook and in the "General Procedures and Regulations" section of the university Academic Programs publication). We also follow the J-School Student Code of Ethics and Standards, which is distributed to each correspondent, and the Spartan Code of Honor. Ethical violations also carry the risk of failing the course and other sanctions. Be especially careful of conflicts of interest and activities that may impair the appearance of impartiality on your part and other students. For your stories, you cannot interview any faculty member whose course you're taking now. While you are in this class, you may not participate in political rallies, sign petitions, work (paid or volunteer) for candidates, government entities and officials, or advocacy/lobbying groups and associations that are involved in environmental issues. You also can't interview your friends or relatives. Don't identify or represent yourself as a Great Lakes Echo contributor unless you are covering a story or doing another assignment for Great Lakes Echo.