

How to cover the climate crisis – and fight disinformation

Course Dates: August 8, – September 4, 2022

Instructor: John Schwartz

About the course

Welcome to the Knight Center's new MOOC, "How to Cover the Climate Crisis – and Fight Disinformation," organized by the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas and sponsored by Google News Initiative. During this four-week massive open online course, which will be held from August 8 – September 4, 2022, students will learn about climate science and climate journalism, as well as efforts to undermine climate science with disinformation. Watch the video below and read on for more details, including instructions on how to register.

Goal

This course will help you cover climate change – a global crisis, and a political football. We will discuss what we know about the science that shows global warming is real and a threat, and how to spot and deal with climate disinformation. Most importantly, we'll talk about how to write about a warming planet in ways that reach your audience and (maybe) even persuade them.

Who can enroll? (Who is this course for?)

Journalists — any journalists, not just science journalists — as well as aspiring journalists, writers, podcasters, and storytellers interested in showing the public how the planet is changing and what it means. As the journalist Emily Atkin has said, “Everyone should be a climate reporter. And if you are not a climate reporter right now, you will be.”

Objectives

After completing this course, you will:

- Understand the basic scientific principles of climate change
- Learn to recognize and counter the methods and tools of disinformation that those who oppose action on climate change use to muddy the waters of climate science
- Be able to see the climate angles of a wide range of stories
- Develop a sense of how to tell climate stories — not simply through scientific papers, but through the lives of people experiencing it in ways readers can relate to.

Tools/Applications Required

This course only requires you to have access to an Internet connection and a web browser.

How the course works

Our MOOC is an asynchronous course. That means there are no live events scheduled at specific times. You can log in to the course and complete activities throughout the week at your own pace, at the times and on the days that are most convenient for you.

Despite its asynchronous nature, there are still structures in place for the duration of the course.

The material is organized into four weekly modules. I will teach each module, covering the topics through videos, presentations, readings and discussion forums. There will be a quiz each week to test the knowledge you've gained through the course materials.

The weekly quizzes, and weekly participation in the discussion forums, are the basic requirements for earning a certificate of participation at the end of the course. A certificate of completion is available for those who meet all of the course requirements and pay online an administrative fee of \$30 (thirty U.S. dollars). The certificate of completion is awarded by the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas, and will document your participation in the online course.

This course is very flexible. If you fall behind with the materials, you have the entire length of the course to complete them. But don't do that. Cramming doesn't get you the best result. Try to complete each of the following before the end of each week so you learn more effectively:

- Video lectures
- Readings and handouts/exercises
- Participation in the discussion forums
- Quizzes covering concepts from video lectures and/or readings

The course is divided into four weekly modules (Course outline)

Introduction Module: Course Description

Welcome! In the introductory module, you will get an overview of the course structure and meet John Schwartz, the instructor. The video will provide an overview of the course, and John will begin to discuss how covering climate change is as important a beat as we have in the world right now. You can also review the course's introductory reading materials.

Module 1: What we know about climate change and why we know it

(August 8-14, 2022)

This is where we'll be going over the basics of climate change – what we know about it, and why we know it. This kind of science has been building for more than 100 years, and we'll be exploring the many branches of science that have affirmed the existence of climate change and the effects it is having around the world. You'll also hear about what it takes to bring references to climate change into stories about phenomena like extreme weather events.

Module 2: What's a climate story?

(August 15-21, 2022)

The short answer to the question in the title of this module is: Just about everything is a climate story these days. We'll also be talking about how climate coverage has changed over the years, from a "both-sides" narrative that quoted deniers along with the experts on the science, and how we have evolved beyond false balance in covering climate issues – but still covering the genuine conflicts that come up in such questions as the best way to cut greenhouse gas emissions. We'll also talk about the importance of saying what climate change isn't, and avoiding the impulse to attribute every extreme weather event to climate change.

Module 3: Spotting and combating disinformation

(August 22-28, 2022)

In this module, we talk about the tools of deception that have been used for decades by the fossil fuel industry and its supporters, as well as other industries that want to avoid regulation. You will learn to recognize and counter the most common techniques in your work.

Module 4: Spotting climate stories and writing them

(August 29-September 4, 2022)

In our final module, we'll be looking beyond sad polar bears to tell the kinds of stories that grab readers – stories that include accurate representations of the science, but also tell human stories that your audience will feel powerfully. We'll be discussing survey research that shows what kinds of stories readers most want to read when it comes to climate change (hint: stories about solutions are very popular) and about the dangers of climate “doomism,” and why it isn't stupid to write about hope.

Meet the instructor

John Schwartz is a professor of practice in journalism at the UT Austin School of Journalism and Media and associate director of U.T. 's new Global Sustainability Leadership Institute. “Professors of practice” in the journalism department and spent most of his career in the field of journalism; Schwartz has worked at The New York Times, the Washington Post and Newsweek. In 21 years at the NYT, his beats included the U.S. space program, including the loss of the shuttle Columbia and its crew, Hurricane Katrina and the efforts to rebuild hurricane protection around the city, legal affairs and, most recently, climate change. At The New York Times and the Washington Post, he wrote stories for nearly every section of the newspaper. He retired from The Times on July 31, 2021 and joined the UT faculty the next month.

He has written several books, including "Oddly Normal: One Family's Struggle to Help Their Teenage Son Come to Terms with His Sexuality," and "This Is the Year I Put My Financial Life in Order."

He graduated from the University of Texas at Austin and the UT School of Law. He married his college sweetheart, Jeanne Mixon. They met a week before UT classes began in 1975. They have three children, who live in Texas, New Jersey and Australia, and two grandchildren.

Certificate of Completion

A certificate of completion is available for those who meet all of the course requirements, and pay online an administrative fee of \$30 (thirty U.S. dollars), using a credit card. After confirmation of course requirements, the Knight Center will send a message with confirmation that you fulfilled the course requirements and qualify for the certificate. The message will also include all the steps and instructions to pay the certificate fee using a credit card. Once your payment has been confirmed you will receive an email with instructions on how to download the certificate.

To be eligible for a certificate of completion, you must:

- Watch the weekly video classes and read the weekly readings
- Complete weekly quizzes with a 70% minimum score. (You can retake the quizzes as many times as needed. Only the highest score will be recorded.)
- Create OR reply to at least one discussion forum each week

The certificate of completion is not required in order to take the course; students can still take our free online course without purchasing the certificate. No formal course credit of any kind is associated with the certificate.

The certificate is awarded by the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas to attest to the participation in the online course.