

Explain this! How explanatory journalism informs and engages audiences

Course Dates: January 16 - February 12, 2023

Instructors: John O’Neil

About the course

Welcome to the Knight Center's new MOOC, **Explain this! How explanatory journalism informs and engages audiences**, organized by the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas with support from the Knight Foundation. During this four-week massive open online course, which will be held from **January 16-February 12, 2023**, students will learn techniques and formats for adding background and context to the news to help readers make sense of the daily outpouring of news, as well as to fight misinformation. Watch the video below and read on for more details, including instructions on how to register.

Goal

For the next four weeks, you will learn how to:

- Spot which parts of a story might need more explanation
- Find ways of adding context and background within breaking news stories without bogging them down
- Write clearly about subjects you know in-depth and get up to speed on subjects you don’t
- Choose subjects for enterprise projects
- Break big topics into manageable projects
- Turn explainers into “persistent content” that can fight misinformation

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

Reporters, editors, students, aspiring journalists, teachers and scientists, historians or other area specialists – anyone hoping to reach a mass audience through legacy media, podcasts or videos.

Objectives

Upon completion of this course you will be able to:

- Identify the jargon or shorthand in stories that can confuse readers or turn them off
- Address readers' need for background or context clearly and concisely
- Choose topics that call for more in-depth explanations
- Develop a sense of when to give a "micro" account by adding more depth to a specific point or a "macro" perspective that puts the news in a broader context
- Create content that is "evergreen" or easily updatable

Tools/Applications Required

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

How the course works

First of all, note that this 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. Each module will be taught by John O'Neil and will cover a different topic 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.

This course is very flexible, and if you are behind with the materials, you have the entire length of the course to complete them. We do recommend you complete each of the following before the end of each week so you don't fall behind:

- 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

Introduction Module - What is explanatory journalism?

Welcome! In the introductory module, you will get an overview of the course structure and meet John O'Neil, the instructor. John will provide an overview of the course, and he'll begin to discuss how explanatory journalism is an increasingly important part of the work of every reporter and editor, no matter what they're covering. You can also review the course's introductory reading materials.

This module will cover:

- What is explanatory journalism?
- What "everybody knows," leaving readers "kind of" informed, and misinformation
- What background, context and analysis are and what they can do
- The history of explanatory journalism and its role in the newsroom business model

Guest speakers

- **Margaret Sullivan**, professor of journalism at Duke University, former media columnist at The Washington Post and public editor of The New York Times
- **John Wihbey**, associate professor of media innovation and technology at Northeastern University

Module 1: What needs explaining? What are our tools? (January 16 – 22, 2023)

Readers today have access to more news and information than ever before. But with that torrent of content comes new challenges for readers in understanding the news – and for journalists, an ever-greater emphasis on making the news understandable. Explanatory journalism comes in a wide

range of forms and formats, from brief asides in breaking news stories to multi-part standalone enterprise series, and in podcasts, videos and graphic presentations, as well as stories. Here we'll start to look at what readers need and the tools you can employ for meeting them.

This module will cover:

- Two traps: familiarity and expertise.
- Why there's no such thing as a dumb question – from you or your readers
- How to see what's missing in a story
- Why what needs to be said depends on who's listening – understanding your audience
- The range of formats

Guest speakers

- **S. Mitra Kalita**, co-founder of URL Media and Epicenter-NYC, former senior vice president at CNN Digital
- **Juliana Barbassa**, deputy books editor and former Latin America editor, NY Times, author of "Dancing With the Devil in the City of God"

Module 2: Explaining within the news (January 23 – January 29, 2023)

The basic unit of journalism is still the news article. Here's where we'll talk about figuring out which elements of a news story need explanation and which don't, and what needs a lot of clarification or just a little. We'll look at ways of crafting brief explanatory asides and at how to weave bigger explanatory chunks into a piece without bogging it down, as well as where to find the information you need on deadline.

This module will cover:

- Spotting and filling in holes within articles
- Getting at the "nub" – the thing that's hard to explain
- Explanations on deadline
- The different challenges of explaining something you know well vs. things you don't know much about

Guest speakers

- **Kelsey Butler**, equality reporter and former credits market reporter, Bloomberg News
- **Lisa Beyer**, QuickTake editor at Bloomberg News, former foreign editor and Jerusalem correspondent, Time Magazine

Module 3: Sidebars and standalones (January 30 – February 5, 2023)

A lot of topics are hard to explain fully within a breaking news story. Here's where we'll look at the range of tools and formats at your disposal. We'll talk about explaining a specific aspect of the news in depth or putting the news in a broader context, how to gather the material you need, create a structure that's easy for readers to follow – and avoid “hand waving.” Explainers can and should convey a range of points of view, and can be an important tool in fighting misinformation. Done right, explainers can also be reusable – what can be called persistent content – and can save you and your colleagues work in the future.

This module will cover:

- Choosing between formats such as Q&A's, buzzwords, scorecards, listicles, plus podcasts and video
- Micro vs macro – digging in on one point or broadening the context
- Creating an outline and filling in the blanks
- Capturing a debate
- Fighting misinformation
- How to create and reuse evergreen or persistent content

Guest speakers

- **Mary Childs**, co-host, NPR's Planet Money, author of *The Bond King*, a biography of Bill Gross
- **Lisa Beyer**, QuickTake editor at Bloomberg News, former foreign editor and Jerusalem correspondent, *Time Magazine*

Module 4: Longform and enterprise (February 6 – February 12, 2023)

Not everything is a sidebar! Explanatory articles or series can stand on their own -- and can have tremendous impact. We'll talk about how sometimes the most powerful pieces are those that convey to a broad audience the things that “everybody” knows – everybody who's up to their ears in the subject, that is. Here's where we'll talk about narrative techniques and incorporating data and graphics. We'll also discuss how social media can be used both as a reporting tool and to promote finished work to a broad readership.

This module will cover:

- Choosing subjects – what needs deep explaining? Who are you explaining it to?
- Structure and narrative technique
- Researching a deep explanation
- Incorporating data and graphics
- Making use of search and social media

Guest speakers

- **Zach Mider**, features writer at Bloomberg News and winner of the 2015 Pulitzer Prize for explanatory journalism
- **Yue Qiu**, deputy managing editor for data journalism graphics, Bloomberg News (tentative)