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Faculty Focus

Northwestern Prison Education Program
Faculty expert testimony in historic civil lawsuits
Inaugural George R.R. Martin writing workshop



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▶ **Cover Illustration:** Courtroom sketch by Elizabeth Williams via AP Images

Professor Ashlee Humphreys testifies in E. Jean civil trial



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DEAN CHARLES WHITAKER

Almost since its

inception, Medill built a vaunted reputation as an institution that churned out highly skilled young professionals who could enter any newsroom, agency or marketing firm and “hit the ground running.” Our emphasis on training made for a somewhat awkward fit within a research-focused university like Northwestern. We were often dismissed as a “trade school” by some of our Northwestern colleagues.

But rather chafe at what some in the academy might consider an insult, Medill faculty, students and administrators wore the trade school moniker proudly. We leaned into our determination to provide students with real-world experience in the crafts we teach. In fact, in Medill’s early days, students were required to learn how to set lead type on the printing presses in the basement of Fisk Hall. It doesn’t get more trade school-like than that.

But times have changed. The industries we serve are trapped in a downward

spiral following a digital revolution that upended their business models and usurped their audiences. Time and again, we heard from desperate stakeholders that they were yearning for leadership and a laboratory for reinvention. They needed Medill to be more than a training ground. They wanted us to help chart a way forward. They needed us to provide research that would help them better understand the readers and viewers who fled to other platforms. They implored us to help them make evidence-based decisions about new storytelling forms and content and revenue-generating strategies.

Admittedly, we weren’t exactly built to fulfill this mission. Yes, we’ve always had a number of colleagues who engaged in seminal research. The way in which Don Schultz and his contemporaries reimagined our advertising curriculum as the groundbreaking Integrated Marketing Communications program is a prime example of the transformational leadership our faculty has provided over the years. But in order to guide the fields of journalism, marketing and strategic communications out of the digital wilderness of the new age, Medill needed to up the ante of our research and build an infrastructure to support it.

And so we have. You, no doubt, have heard and read about our Local News Initiative, a multi-pronged effort that combines research, analysis and training for both legacy and burgeoning news outlets and their leaders. Under the direction of Senior Associate Dean Tim Franklin, we have recruited a team of close to 30 full and part-time staffers dedicated to diagnosing what is ailing the news business and trying to prescribe effective cures.

In this issue of the Medill Magazine, you also will read about Associate Dean for Research Stephanie Edgerly’s exploration of the many ways in which individuals consume (and avoid) news,

research that is vital to helping news outlets maintain a citizenry that is able to make informed decisions about their communities and the people who lead them. We also have a story about Professor Patti Wolter’s spectacularly popular Media and Science Communications Certificate program, which trains STEM Ph.D. candidates – from med students to engineers – to translate their research for a general audience. It is an important initiative that may help combat the growing skepticism about science that continues to fester and pollute the news ecosystem with mis- and disinformation.

Our faculty’s research is also making news. You’ll read about how Professor Ashlee Humphrey’s expert testimony on the reputational damage wrought by social media factored into the judgments rendered against former President Donald Trump and his attorney, former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani, in their respective defamation trials.

Finally, we salute last summer’s launch of the George R.R. Martin Intensive Writing Workshop, which welcomed 12 amazing journalists who aspire to be novelists to campus for a one-week program that enabled them to spend time with celebrated authors, agents and publishers who encouraged and inspired them as they honed their works-in-progress. The workshop curriculum was developed by our inaugural occupant of the George R. R. Martin Endowed Chair, Cheryl Lu-Lien Tan, and promises to be an influential platform for new voices in creative writing.

What you’ll note as you read these stories is that we are not your grandmother’s Medill. While we have not abandoned our traditional mission of preparing smart young people to enter the worlds of journalism and marketing fully equipped to take those domains by storm, we are now so much more than that, which makes for an exciting time in the Medill universe.

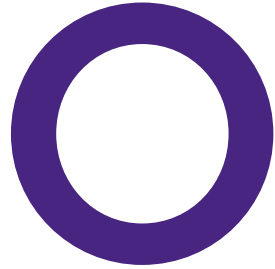


Teaching in the Northwestern Prison Education Program Is Life Changing —

FOR STUDENTS AND MEDILL FACULTY

BY MARGARET LITTMAN (MSJ94)

▲ **Above:** Daniela Lubezki (BSJ24) and Caroline Bomback (BSJ25) interview Oliver Crawford. At the moment this photo was taken, Lubezki said, “We really found the story we had wanted to tell.”



On the day of the week that Professor Louise Kiernan teaches at Logan Correctional Center, she gets an early start.

Swapping out her Apple Watch for an old-school analog, she grabs coffee for her three-hour drive from Oak Park to the Logan Correctional Center for female and transgender persons in Lincoln, IL.

When she arrives, Kiernan goes through prison security. That means leaving all her devices behind (hence the lack of an Apple Watch). She carries in her pre-approved, non-digital teaching materials and one factory-sealed water bottle. She heads to her designated classroom, where there is no clock (hence the analog watch). And then she waits.

Sometimes, she waits a while, because she depends on the guards to bring her cohort of students to her. Depending on what's happening elsewhere in the prison, they may or may not arrive on time.

It's not the average way to teach a college class. And Medill faculty who teach in the Northwestern Prison Education Program (NPEP) say it is anything but an average experience. Yet, across the board, they say it is worth any inconveniences, such as six hours of driving in one day, to be able to participate.

"I don't think I've met a single person who has worked with our students, or, even more broadly, within our community, who has not been changed for better," said Jennifer Lackey, director of NPEP and Wayne and Elizabeth Jones Professor of Philosophy and professor of law (courtesy) at Northwestern. "The work is life changing. I know sometimes we use that word a lot, but it truly is for the professors, for the incarcerated students, for the students who take courses alongside their incarcerated peers, and for graduate students and undergrads who go in each week to provide additional tutoring. Anyone who works in our community is changed."

NPEP is an initiative of Northwestern, designed to provide a high-quality, liberal arts education to incarcerated students statewide. NPEP is the only bachelor's degree-granting program of its kind offered by a top 10 university in the United States. Medill faculty and others teach



classes to cohorts in two different Illinois prisons, Logan and Stateville Correctional Center in Crest Hill. Medill courses include criminal justice writing, opinion writing, documentary filmmaking and more.

Part of the reason that Medill faculty can devote the time to the unusual demands of teaching a degree program in a prison, is that Medill made the commitment easier by allowing the classes to count toward a professor's regular course load. Lackey said this is an unusual policy decision for the school, and it allows more faculty to participate in the program, particularly non-tenured faculty.

Dean Charles Whitaker sees the mission of Medill and the mission of NPEP dovetailing well together and thinks that helping incarcerated people be impactful storytellers is a worthy pursuit.

"Prison should be about more than punishment, it should be about rehabilitation. If we have an opportunity to do a reset and help people become productive citizens, then we should do what we can to make that possible."

— Dean Charles Whitaker

▲ **Top and clockwise from bottom:** Henry Roach (BSJ24) and Rebecca Shaid (BSJ24) interview Michael Jorgensen about the impact of family loss while incarcerated. His interview is featured in the students' short documentary, "Grief Without Goodbyes."

▲ **Above and clockwise from bottom:** Atarah Israel (BSJ26) and Yasmin Mustefa (BSJ26) interview Christopher Greathouse.



Above: Bridgette Adu-Wadier (BSJ25) interviews Dewayne Robinson.

Medill faculty who have taught at NPEP say that the students are the most highly engaged of their careers. Those incarcerated students have been through a selective process to get a seat in class. In the last admission cycle, the program received 400 applications for 45 spots. The majority of applicants, Lackey said, were people who were willing to move into a maximum-security facility, with more restrictions, in order to participate. (To date, the program has only been offered at the two prisons, both of which are maximum security.)

From the applicants, NPEP evaluated personal statements and other criteria and then traveled to 13 institutions to conduct in-person interviews. Accepted students stay in a cohort together with a group, taking the same classes together. The admissions team is looking for critical thinking skills and the ability to read texts closely and work together in the cohort.

Meeting the needs of those students requires different preparation from faculty than their other classes. As Kiernan experienced with her watch, the technology available to teachers in the class and students outside of class is limited. Reading materials must be approved by the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) in advance and an off-site teaching assistant controls anything broadcast in the classroom. If the technology doesn't work, faculty adapt on the fly.

The actual teaching period is three intensive hours (assuming students are escorted to the room on time). Because there is no opportunity for office hours or out-of-class follow-up, Kotlowitz, who taught Criminal Justice Writing, feels he needs to be more organized than usual.

Students turn in their homework from the previous week during each class. Grading papers takes longer than it does for other courses, in part because everything students submit is handwritten. (In the case of Deas' Opinion Writing with Impact class, they were able to get access to 20 laptops, and several students taught themselves to type so that they could write on a computer.) Not only do faculty read handwritten assignments, but they also write out their edits in longhand.

Kiernan said the experience has helped her as an educator. "It has made me more open and flexible and better able to go with the flow."

"You are teaching with no smart devices, no projectors, no PowerPoints, it's just me talking to them. And you see they are able to grasp abstract concepts," added Deas. "They are brilliant."

Most students do not have laptops or access to outside sources to interview. In Kotlowitz's classes he gives the students one piece of narrative non-fiction to read each week. The students, he said, are able to extrapolate the themes of the stories they read and relate them to stories in their own lives.

They also are ambitious in their desires to improve their storytelling and writing skills. Kotlowitz describes himself as a tough editor. "There are a lot of red lines when I'm done," he said. "It's an act of love."

That kind love has translated into results for the students. One student had a piece published in Chicago magazine, and Kotlowitz said it was ready for publication by the time it had been revised in class. Several have had other articles and books published.

Earlier this year, NPEP graduate Michael Broadway died while in custody.

The circumstances surrounding his death, on a day where the heat index hit more than 100 degrees, are under investigation. At the time of his death, he was at work on his second book.

"Michael was guided by his moral compass and exuded wisdom and thoughtfulness in all that he did. He approached every barrier with grace, with his determination and resilience on full display when he didn't let the loss of a close family member and a stage four prostate cancer diagnosis stop him from earning his bachelor's degree from Northwestern University in November of 2023, making history as one of the first incarcerated students in the United States to graduate from a top-ten university," NPEP said in a statement.

One NPEP graduate, Bernard McKinley, who has since been released from prison, is now enrolled in Northwestern Law School. "The impact on people's lives really can't be overstated," Lackey said.

Professor Brent Huffman taught a documentary class at Stateville and will teach the same class again in Fall 2024. He brought 10 Evanston undergrads and made eight short documentaries inside Stateville prison, collaborating with the cohort of incarcerated students. Their work, "Documenting Carceral Injustice Films," premiered on Northwestern's campus in June 2024.

To get the course approved through IDOC, there were some restrictions to which Huffman and NPEP agreed. Students were not allowed to critique Stateville, or to talk about the conditions of their cells or day-to-day life in the cell. Stories were more focused on the incarcerated students' childhood experiences, their arrests and what led to their incarceration.

"A lot of them are wrongfully arrested and accused and they have no other outlet to speak. In this class they have the opportunity to tell their story," Huffman said, noting that many of the stories were emotional, as students recount experiences such as being separated from their families at a young age.

"The strength, character and intellectual clarity of each student in the cohort we worked with is unimaginable. These are extremely talented minds and I am so honored to have been able to work with them."

— Atarah Israel (BSJ26)



"They are extraordinarily talented, and it has been a really moving experience to see the evidence that people have second and third acts in their lives."

— Alex Kotlowitz, Professor



"There is so much brain power behind the walls of Stateville. The only thing separating incarcerated writers with others is resources."

— Michael Deas, Assistant Professor

“While helping some of these people was not a goal initially, I feel a greater sense of responsibility to help them,” Huffman said. “We do care about the subjects, not exploiting them.”

In his class, students learn how to balance the issue of objectivity. In these documentaries, they don’t add narration or put text on the screen with an outside perspective, Huffman explained.



“We are giving them a voice. We are allowing them to tell their story. We are not saying these stories are the objective truth, but here is this person’s story in their own words.”

— Brent Huffman, Professor

The documentary class experience differs from some other classes. NPEP recommends faculty not research the names of incarcerated students or ask about the circumstances that led to their imprisonment. While some students share information in conversation or in writing, faculty agree that it is important to meet students where they are now, not who they were in the past.



“I want to connect with the person who is in front of me in the classroom. I don’t think I am naïve. I know a number of

the people in the classroom have been convicted of doing terrible things. I do believe all of us are capable and worthy of grace.”

— Louise Kiernan, Professor



Some of the men in NPEP committed crimes when they were teenagers and have already served 30-to-40 years of a sentence, so they have matured and changed since that time. Their maturity comes through in their work, faculty say.

Faculty report having created bonds with their incarcerated students. While the conditions in the prison itself may be deplorable, Deas said, in some ways it felt like home, because a disproportionate number of the incarcerated people at Stateville are men of color. “We just had a vibe when we saw each other. The experience teaching there really humanized people who are incarcerated and really illuminated the inequities to me.” Deas plans to keep in touch with some members of his cohort after class ends.

The first class of students graduated with their degrees in November 2023. Journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates delivered the commencement address.

“I have been to scores of graduations in my life, and [NPEP] was one of the most moving I have been to,” Whitaker said.

Regardless of change, faculty are committed. “NPEP has pointed out what I love about teaching, pointed out what is more important. It changed my life to have had this experience and makes me think completely differently about human rights,” Huffman said. “I feel empathy in a bigger way.”

▲ **Above:** Students from the Northwestern Prison Education Program (NPEP) made history as they received their bachelor’s degrees from inside Stateville Correctional Center in Crest Hill, IL, on Wednesday, Nov. 15, 2023. Center: Professor Jennifer Lackey.

“We just had a vibe when we saw each other. The experience teaching there really humanized people who are incarcerated and really illuminated the inequities to me.”

— Michael Deas, Assistant Professor

Earlier this year, Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker announced plans to dedicate funding to rebuild both Logan and Stateville. Both facilities have critical infrastructure issues. NPEP will be moving to Sheridan Correctional Center, which is a medium-, rather than maximum-security facility. (Sheridan is closer to Evanston than Logan, but farther than Stateville.)

◀ **Left top:** Acclaimed author Ta-Nehisi Coates delivers the commencement address.

◀ **Bottom row left:** James Soto, who is the longest wrongfully incarcerated person in Illinois and was exonerated in December of 2023, processes into Stateville Correctional Center’s theater for the commencement ceremony.

◀ **Bottom row right:** NPEP graduates celebrate making history with Provost Kathleen Hagerty; Lt. Governor Juliana Stratton; and NPEP Director Jennifer Lackey.

Professor Humphreys Takes The Stand

Assesses Reputational Damages To Plaintiffs in Trump And Giuliani Cases

BY ALAN CUBBAGE (BSJ78, MSA87)

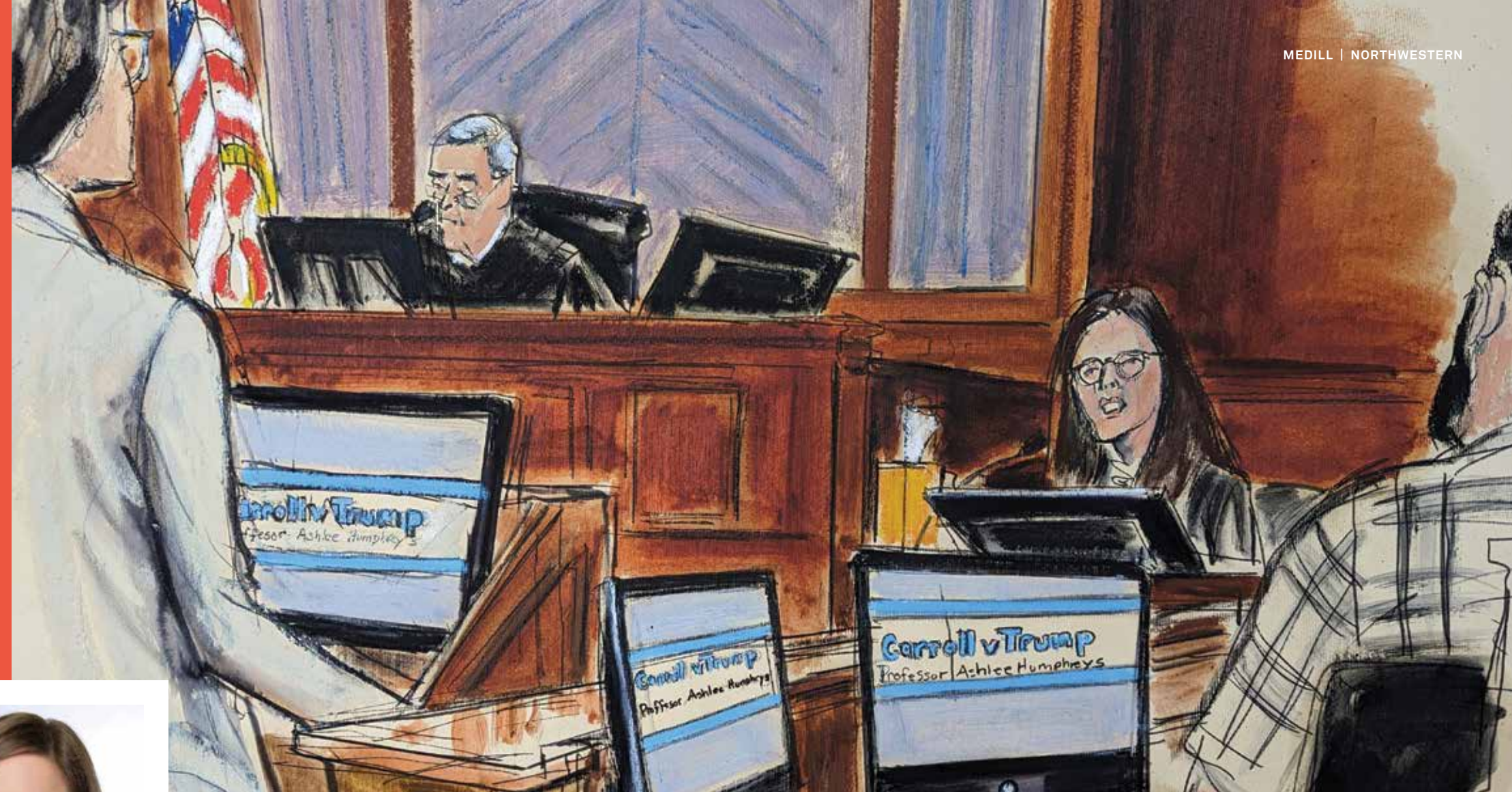
In all of Donald Trump's legal battles, one person who may end up costing him a lot of money is a quiet Medill professor who describes herself as "a bean counter."

Ashlee Humphreys, a professor in the Integrated Marketing Communications program, served as an expert witness in the two civil lawsuits by E. Jean Carroll against Trump in which he was ordered to pay judgments totaling \$88 million. Humphreys' testimony was key in those trials, as it also was in the successful defamation lawsuit against Rudy Giuliani that was brought by two Georgia election workers.



◀ **Left:** Professor Ashlee Humphreys.

▶ **Above:** Courtroom sketch by Elizabeth Williams via AP Images.



In that case, Humphreys was "incredibly prepared," said Meryl Goverski (MSJ04), one of the attorneys for Ruby Freeman and Shaye Moss, who were awarded \$148 million in damages against Giuliani for defamation and related charges. Humphreys had testified that it would cost \$47.5 million to mount a PR and social media campaign to repair the damages to their reputations.

"Dr. Humphreys really showed her professionalism," Goverski said. "I think she had been deposed in one of the Carroll cases just a week before she testified in our trial, and she had just had a baby and then sat in front of a full courtroom on the witness stand. It could be an intimidating situation for anyone, but you wouldn't have known it from watching Dr. Humphreys testify. She was incredibly prepared and competent, and she had an answer for everything. It really resonated with the jury."

Humphreys said that she had her third child in October 2023, testified in the Giuliani trial in December and the Trump trial in January 2024, a period in which she said she and her spouse had "given ourselves to the chaos."

Humphreys had worked previously with another attorney in the Giuliani case, Michael Gottlieb (WCAS99), creating a report on the reputational cost to someone who was not a public figure. Historically, most defamation cases have involved well-known individuals, such as actors, and only recently have cases looked at the impact of social media.

That's where Humphreys came in.

After receiving her undergraduate degree in economics and philosophy from Northwestern's Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences, Humphreys earned a Ph.D. in marketing from the Kellogg School of Management with a focus on cultural sociology in 2008. She now holds a joint appointment in Kellogg. Her research since then has examined how newly legalized industries, such as casino gambling and cannabis sales, have come to be generally accepted and how consumers learn about those industries, particularly through social media.



▲ **Above:** Humphreys participated in a panel in Chicago on April 5 to discuss the *Carroll v. Trump* and *Freeman v. Giuliani* cases. From left: David McCraw, lead newsroom lawyer for *The New York Times*; Humphreys; and Shawn Crowley, partner at Kaplan Hecker & Fink, LLP and counsel on the *Carroll v. Trump* case. Photo by Cory Dewald.

Assessing Reputational Damages

For her work on reputational damages, Humphreys draws on her marketing expertise, knowledge of social media and a method of using computers to analyze textual data that she helped introduce to marketing. In each case, she creates a detailed report assessing how many people saw the defamatory information, how much damage was done, and how much it would cost to counter that information.

“It’s a very quantitative process,” Humphreys said of her reports, noting that her work comes into play only after a judgment has been rendered that the statements in question were indeed defamatory.

“I don’t decide whether a claim is defamatory or not. I just provide information on if it was defamatory, how much would it cost to repair a person’s reputation.”

— Ashlee Humphreys, Professor

To create the reports, she uses a three-step process:

Step One

Impressions model: estimates how many people saw the defamatory statements

Step Two

Impact analysis: assesses how many of those people found the statements believable

Step Three

Damages model: estimates what the cost would be to mount a strategic communications campaign to change people’s attitudes about the statements

“The first step is to estimate how many people saw the claim. For that you need to understand how information travels on social media. For example, not all of your followers see the message — only a small fraction will see what you post. So you have to make all kinds of calculations to estimate how many people see a message,” Humphreys said.

“The second step is to assess the qualitative impact. For example, to look at the comments under the message — what did Donald Trump say about E. Jean Carroll and did the people who saw it appear to believe him, did they endorse it, do they threaten further harm or action? You then have to consider what percent of people would believe what Trump said. Fortunately, there is a lot of research publicly available on media. For example, how many people who are Republicans read *The New York Times* and how many are sympathetic to him. So then you just do the math and calculate how many viewers of claim might believe it.

“The third part is to determine if you were to run a strategic communications campaign to change people’s attitudes about that statement, how much would that cost? You’d have to expose them to a counter-attitudinal message three to five times, and it should come from a trusted source. So you just sketch out how much it would cost to place the message with influencers, to take out social media ads, and so on.”

On the Stand

Although she had been deposed in connection with lawsuits previously, the Trump and Giuliani trials were the first times that Humphreys had testified in court. The two high-profile cases were heard in overflowing courtrooms and garnered massive media attention. Humphreys said that nevertheless, she was able to maintain her composure, noting that she wore “my standard uniform of a black suit” and remained calm despite being on the witness stand for hours, including rigorous cross-examination.

“If you’re doing your job well as an expert witness, you are the least interesting part of the trial — and I think I try to be the least interesting part, which honestly is not hard. In the Carroll trial obviously there were some sensational types of witnesses and claims and there was drama about other things that had nothing to do with me, so I try to be as boring as possible.”

“In both of these cases, particularly the Giuliani case, the opposing attorney was very aggressive and very bombastic, and that’s a style I deal with well because you just become an energy vampire and be the calm one.”

In preparing her report for the Carroll case, Humphreys worked with a team from Voluble, a litigation research firm, that included Tianhua Zhu (IMC19), who had served as Humphreys’ teaching assistant while at Medill. And in the Giuliani case, she had both a former student and a current IMC student help her prepare the report.

“One happy surprise in getting into this work is that our IMC students are very good at doing this kind of work. They know very well how to measure media and how to conduct these kinds of campaigns,” Humphreys said. “It’s been good to find that this is a career path for some of our IMC students that they find fulfilling.”

Humphreys said she is working on reports for other lawsuits now, but she quickly added that Trump and Giuliani cases were not run-of-the-mill lawsuits. “Once you’ve been in a trial (as an expert witness), a lot of people contact you because a lot of other people want \$148 million. But in these particular instances, the messages spread very broadly, very deeply in our society, and your typical defamation case is not going to yield these kinds of damages.”

Professor Stephanie Edgerly, photo by Eileen Moloney.

EDGERLY LEADS NEWS RESEARCH EFFORTS

Studies How Audiences Consume News — Or Avoid It

BY ALAN K. CUBBAGE

If you want to understand how the public consumes news — or doesn't — and views the organizations that report on it, ask Professor Stephanie Edgerly.

From timely surveys of political coverage to scholarly analyses of media trends, Edgerly, a Medill professor and associate dean of research, conducts multifaceted research across a wide variety of current topics in journalism and media.

Her research findings occasionally can seem like the grim totals of a losing baseball game:

57% of teenagers don't consume news at all

48% of U.S. adults were already tired of news about this year's election by last May

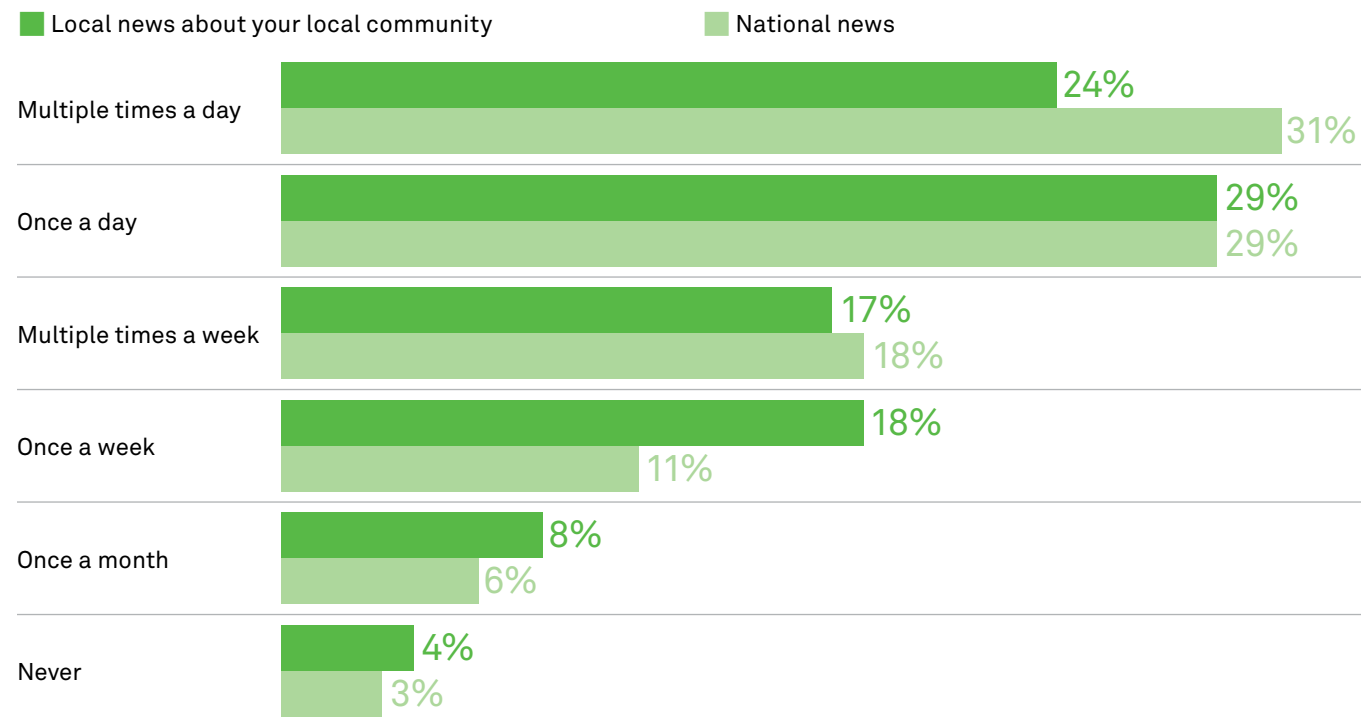
9% of Chicago-area residents said they read printed newspapers and magazines often

But Edgerly believes strongly that understanding the public's attitudes toward news and consumption of news is critical to the future of the industry.

"I've always been interested in the relationships that people develop with media. My primary identification is as an audience member; my first move is to think like an audience member," Edgerly said. "Wearing a journalist hat or an industry hat is not my first go-to instinct, unlike many of my Medill colleagues, who have had decades-plus working as journalists."

"I was raised by a single mother who was very active in her place of work and her union but didn't really consider herself political. And probably if I'd given her a survey, she would have said she wasn't a news consumer. But she consumed a lot of television news and the occasional tabloid magazine from the grocery store, so it was interesting to see how she made sense of politics and the world around her. That experience has inspired me to think about how people who are not necessarily socialized into reading The New York Times or the Wall Street Journal come to understand big important events and are mobilized to do something about it."

How Often Respondents Consume Local vs. National News



NOTE: Because of rounding and the omission of missing responses, rows may not total to 100.

Reaching News Avoiders

A key focus of Edgerly's research has been on "news avoiders" — those people who don't consume news regularly.

"These are people who don't make room for news in their lives, who don't have an everyday habit of consuming news," she explained. As a result, they have abandoned — or never started — consuming traditional news media. And while small online news startups have begun to sprout across the country, Edgerly notes they face the same challenges.

"I worry that startups have run into same problem that older legacy organizations are running into — there is a sizable group of people who don't regularly consume news. So how do you reach an audience that has grown up largely not seeing the value of local news. How do you cut through the clutter of everyday life to reach these people? You can write the most amazing, thought-provoking, important story, but if it doesn't find an audience, is it successful?"

Election Challenges

The upcoming presidential election highlights the importance of reaching those audiences, Edgerly said.

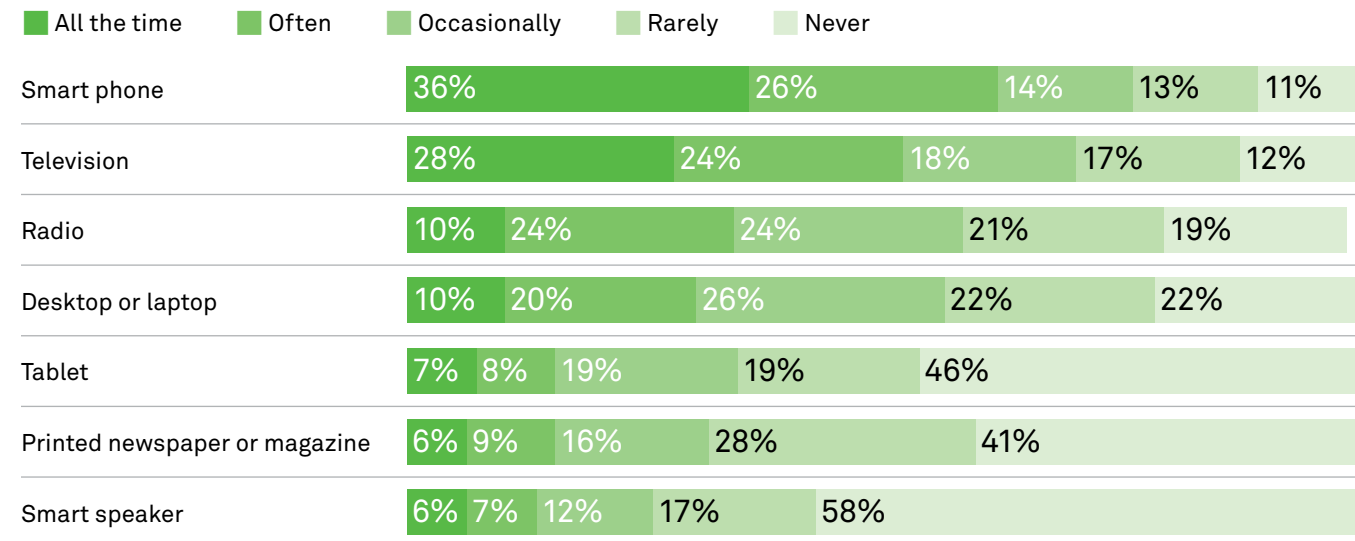
"In terms of the 2024 election, there will be a group of people who are largely not consuming news but will be impacted by the election outcome. This election will be decided by thin margins in specific counties in specific states. The big question for me is how do we get people to consume quality journalism and to see it as being part of their daily life? How do we create ways of delivering news, ways of telling important news stories that bring some of these people into the fold, and that can entice people to vote with credible information at their fingertips?"

At the same time, Edgerly is sympathetic to those news avoiders who have tuned out the wall-to-wall election coverage. "There is actually a less bad side of news avoiders," she said. "A lot of times if you ask people if they have actively avoided news, you'll get a group of people who say, 'Yes, absolutely,' but they still are regular consumers of news. Initially this finding really surprised me. But as I researched it more, I found that some people have developed a coping technique to stay tuned in while also engaging in some news avoidance. They put time limits on their news consumption, or they regulate what they read by using filters. This is, dare I say, a healthier way of dealing with all the news that's coming at them. As we march forward toward the election, one of the key messages is getting people to develop healthy strategies of news avoidance so they continue to stay engaged and don't just throw their hands in the air and check out altogether. Small breaks are OK, especially if it keeps you engaged in the long run."

"We know there are people who don't vote and are less participatory in their communities. For me, it's worrisome that these people, who tend to be younger, less educated and low income, are not having their voices count and don't have a stake in their communities."

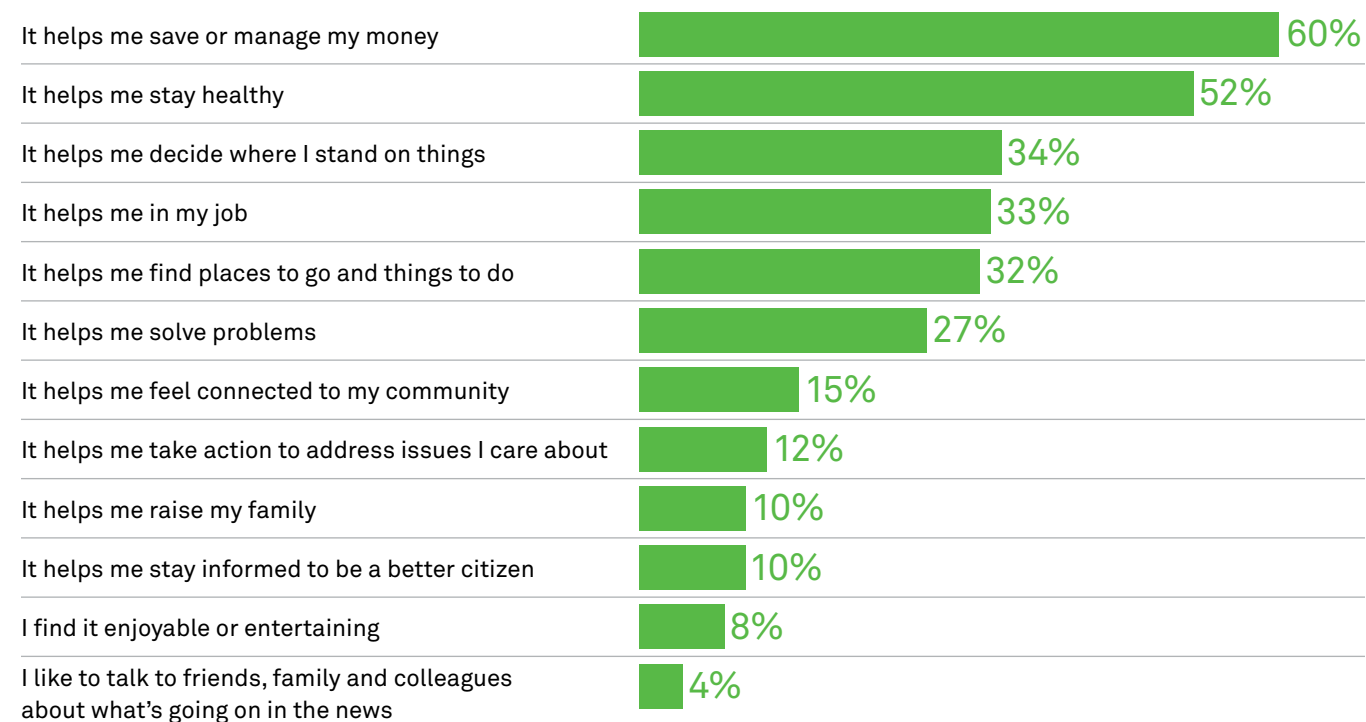
— Stephanie Edgerly, Professor

How Often Respondents Use Each Device to Consume Local News



NOTE: Because of rounding and the omission of missing responses, rows may not total to 100.

Reasons Respondents Consumer Local News



Research at Medill

Ederly joined Medill in 2012 after earning her Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin’s School of Journalism and Mass Communication. A prolific scholar who has published in many academic journals, she is a member of Northwestern’s prestigious Institute for Policy Research, which focuses on current societal issues. In 2020, she received the Martin E. and Gertrude W. Walder Award for Research Excellence, given annually to a Northwestern faculty member for their outstanding research work. She was only the second faculty member from Medill to receive the Walder Award, and the first from the journalism department.

However, Medill historically has been known less for research and more for its practical and practicum-oriented approach to journalism education. As a result, Ederly has found it important that her research not be focused strictly on academic publishing, which can often involve timelines and a peer-review process that stretches into years.

“At Medill, I try to design projects at the intersection of industry-relevant topics and academic theory-building — and it’s not easy,” Ederly said. “Oftentimes there’s a tension because one is quick and fast, and the other is, well, the opposite. I try to be strategic about my opportunities to deliver industry-relevant research — to quickly get data to help stakeholders — industry leaders, legislators, community activists — in making important decisions right now. Then much of my work transitions to writing academic publications, which involves developing and testing theory-driven research questions. The best research projects are successful in doing both.”

That assessment was echoed by Tim Franklin, senior associate dean and John M. Mutz Chair in Local News, who heads Medill’s Local News Initiative.

“Stephanie is an invaluable partner of the Local News Initiative. One of the things that differentiates LNI from other local news-focused programs around the country is our ability to do research that can be acted on in the industry. Stephanie’s expertise in polling and news audiences gives Medill a huge advantage over other programs,” Franklin said.

“She’s helping unlock new knowledge and insights in news consumption at a time when local news leaders are clamoring to better understand how their audiences’ behaviors are changing. Her research is absolutely critical to the work of LNI, to the industry and to other scholars.”

— **Tim Franklin**, senior associate dean and John M. Mutz Chair in Local News

For her part, Ederly finds the need to remain timely and relevant to be helpful, both in her research and her teaching.

“Being at Medill improved my research by having to confront the industry implications and pulled me away from getting too lost in esoteric theory-building that ignores the real world. At Medill, you confront reality every day. It has sharpened the kinds of research questions I take on and it’s forced me to be a better communicator in the classroom about why research matters.”

“It’s super-energizing to have a classroom environment where I get to impart knowledge and do my part to help grow and educate people who pretty soon will be in the industry,” she added. “I’m not just teaching into the void, but I have the opportunity to be in front of people who are going to be decision-makers in industry, and a lot of students are interested in infusing research with their journalism skills.”



Top: iStock.com, JDawnInk

Above: Elise De Los Santos in regalia for her 2012 graduation from Medill.

Right: Elise De Los Santos is a lecturer at Medill and the editor of Medill Reports. She teaches undergraduate and graduate classes on reporting and writing.

MEDILL'S NEW COLLABORATIVE PH.D.

Rhetoric, Media And Publics

BY RAFAELA JINICH (BSJ25)

Last fall, Medill, the School of Communication and Weinberg announced a new joint Ph.D. program in Rhetoric, Media, and Publics.

This new degree program replaced the Ph.D. in Communication Studies (Rhetoric and Public Culture) and asks the fundamental question of how people influence, reflect, and transform society through mediated practices.

The program explores how individuals and societies influence each other through mediated practices, focusing on the production and circulation of meaning in various texts and institutions. Through qualitative inquiry, candidates analyze how different media shape distinct publics and social relations within historical contexts, aiming to understand global inequalities perpetuated and challenged through communication practices.

Medill faculty member Elise De Los Santos is one of four candidates in this inaugural Ph.D. class. She talked to Medill magazine about the program and her area of research.



Can you provide a brief overview of what you are doing right now?

I'm pursuing a Ph.D., which is nearing completion, while also teaching at Medill. My research focuses on how language in news evolves over time, particularly concerning identities like race and gender. The program, titled Rhetoric, Media and Publics, spans two years of coursework followed by three years of research. It's a joint effort between the School of Communication, Weinberg and Medill.

How does your interest in journalism's evolving language relate to your background?

Having worked as a copy editor at the Chicago Tribune, I witnessed firsthand the shifts in style, especially regarding identity-related language. This experience motivated my research into why and how these language changes occur. From a former journalist and current instructor perspective, there's a shared concern for representation and language use. However, the fast-paced news cycle often leads to on-the-fly decisions, making it vital to step back and analyze long-term trends.

Who do you think will be most influenced by your findings?

It's not straightforward. Different actors, including journalists, editors and newsroom leaders, contribute to language changes. By understanding these dynamics, we can better inform future decisions and interrogate existing practices.

How has your time at Medill influenced your career and research?

Medill has equipped me with the skills and critical thinking necessary for my career, from my undergrad days to working at the Chicago Tribune. The emphasis on AP style, though evolving, remains crucial in journalism.

What advice would you give to undergrads navigating language styles and rules?

Start with the rulebook, but understand it's not static. AP style, for instance, evolves, and it's essential to grasp the context behind changes. Moreover, explaining these shifts to others, even family and friends, fosters greater understanding.

Looking ahead, how do you envision your career post-Ph.D.?

Ideally, I aim to integrate my journalistic background with my academic insights, continuing to teach while bridging the gap between theory and practice in journalism education.

How do you see your research impacting journalism and readers?

As journalism adapts to societal changes, understanding evolving language norms becomes paramount. We can enhance representation and engagement with diverse audiences by questioning traditional practices and embracing inclusivity. I'm grateful for the opportunity to delve into these topics and hope my research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of language's role in shaping journalism and society at large.

New Medill Program Aids Science Researchers In Communications

Professor Patti Wolter Leads Training For Ph.D. Students

BY ALAN K. CUBBAGE

As a first-year journalism student in the 1980s, Medill Professor Patti Wolter also thought she wanted to be pre-med.

“Two weeks of calculus shattered that dream,” she joked. Instead, she pursued a magazine editing and writing career and, for the past 22 years, has been guiding and inspiring journalism students. Now, however, the Helen Gurley Brown Magazine Professor has brought science back into her life teaching research scientists.

Working with Northwestern’s Graduate School, Wolter has launched the Medill Media and Science Communications (MMaSC) program. The program, now in its second year, provides Ph.D. students in the sciences, medicine and engineering the opportunity to learn how to explain and write about their research in a way that general audiences can understand it.

Northwestern Ph.D. students in the sciences are some of the best in the world, working in labs with top Northwestern faculty to conduct research on a wide variety of topics — some of them quite abstruse — in fields ranging from applied physics to biomedical engineering to neuroscience and more. But explaining that research to the public can be challenging; using journalism instruction strategies provides a unique approach to helping Ph.D.s master communication skills along with science skills.

◀ **Left:** Patti Wolter and Ph.D. students in Fisk Hall at Medill.



Many National Science Foundation and other research grants now require community outreach. As a result, Wolter said, the classes in the program have become increasingly popular among science Ph.D. students. Nearly 300 students have taken the initial course in the sequence in the past nine years and close to 20 Ph.D. students are pursuing the full certificate.

“The students have to apply, and we always have more applicants than we have space for,” Wolter said.

“Certainly, this generation of Ph.D. students understands that communicating with the public is part of their mandate.”

— **Patti Wolter,**
Northwestern Professor



An Innovative Program

The MMaSC program offers Ph.D. students the opportunity to receive a certificate, which is a five-course sequence, or a cluster, a three-course sequence. In both cases, students start with a course entitled Skills and Careers in Science Writing, in which they learn the best practices for science writing and communications, including how to avoid using scientific jargon, improve their writing and increase media literacy.

“It teaches students how to see your science as a story. The final deliverable for the class is an 800-to-1,200-word piece about your own area of research. It can be in the form of an op-ed, a personal essay or an expanded explainer, but it’s really working on speaking to a lay audience, getting out of your discipline’s jargon,” Wolter said.

To do that, Wolter not only focuses on writing skills, but also challenges the students to communicate in fun ways, such as to describe their science with emojis or social media.

The scientists then join Medill undergrads in Wolter’s Health and Science Reporting class, where they learn how journalists approach writing about science and the Medill students learn about how scientists describe research. Wolter calls the class “one of the most amazing teaching experiences I’ve had. For the last two years, I’ve had three to four STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) Ph.D.s in the classroom with undergraduate journalism students and the cross-pollination where they learn from one another is absolutely fantastic.”

The MMaSC students then go on to take a course in data visualization, as well as an additional course in science communications taught by Yarrow Axford, the William Deering Professor in Geological Sciences, and another elective in Medill.

While other universities offer graduate-level science writing programs, those usually require additional time and cost, Wolter said. Medill’s, by contrast, allows science Ph.D.s to take the classes in tandem with their Ph.D. work. Although science Ph.D.s are notoriously pressed for time, the response to the program, despite the additional time classes, has been “overwhelming (in a good way),” Wolter said.

Crossing Academic Disciplines

Axford, a pathbreaking researcher who studies climate change, has taught a public science communications class at Northwestern for years and worked closely with Wolter to develop the MMaSC program. As a key assignment, Axford brings her students to Wolter’s science reporting class to conduct a mock press briefing about their research. The topics include whatever the science students are researching, including such topics as synthetic chemistry, plant biology and conservation, climate science, developing new methods for recycling plastics and many others.

“Part of the power in what Patti’s doing is that it brings together graduate students from such a wide range of fields from psychology to medicine to earth science, materials science and more. When they’re in a room together, they really have to break out of the ways of communicating that they’ve become channeled into in their departments. Graduate students end up having relatively few opportunities to talk about their research with interested people outside their area, so the practice of doing so is very valuable for any scientist,” Axford said.

“The program has created a cohort of STEM graduate students on campus who share a really strong interest in scientific communication and who are seeking substantial training in it. It’s been such a neat, rich collaboration between Medill and the sciences on campus.”

— **Yarrow Axford,** William Deering Professor in Geological Sciences

Although Wolter is careful to note that the program is not designed to convert potential research scientists into journalists, some of the students say it has made them aware of opportunities beyond academia or laboratory research.

Molly Sun, a fourth-year chemistry Ph.D. student who focuses her research on polymers, said she hoped to go into science communication and policy as a career, using the skills developed at the program.

“Science includes some of the most complex ideas, and those can be difficult to explain, so I think getting scientists interested in the interface between science and the public and how to communicate is one way we can knock down that gatekeeping. The value of the program is not only that it democratizes science and makes it accessible for the public, but it shows it’s possible for scientists to communicate and make a connection. It’s inspiring.”

Wolter said that the program has given her new insight into the scientific research being done at Northwestern.

“I love this work and one of the things I love about it is as someone who is a generalist and science-curious is that I have this amazing window into the most incredible research going across this university. I have this really unique opportunity to see this range in a way that few people get to, and it’s awe-inspiring to see what these students are doing.”



A Novel Idea

Journalists With Novels in Progress
Come Together for Medill's Inaugural
George R.R. Martin Summer Intensive
Writing Workshop

PHOTOS BY JENNA BRAUNSTEIN

Left: Instructors, fellows and George R.R. Martin Chair in Storytelling Cheryl Lu-Lien Tan, center, at the welcome reception on July 10 at the Patrick G. and Shirley W. Ryan Center for the Musical Arts on the Evanston campus.

Medill's Inaugural George R.R. Martin Summer Intensive Writing Workshop took place July 10–17 in Evanston.

Twelve professional journalists working on their first novels gathered to learn from writers, agents, publishers and each other about the art of fiction and how bring a book to market.

The fellows worked hard to hone novel-writing skills and learn from the best in the business to improve their manuscripts. They also were treated to a few special events with celebrity authors, including bestselling novelist Scott Turow and Medill alumna and Hall of Achievement member Gillian Flynn, author of "Gone Girl," "Sharp Objects" and "Dark Places."

Three instructors, in addition to chair Cheryl Lu-Lien Tan led the workshop: Sarah Schulman, endowed chair in nonfiction at Northwestern; National Book Award winning novelist Julia Glass; and Medill alumna, Hall of Achievement member and award-winning author Tananarive Due (whose novel "The Reformatory" is the 2024 Shirley Jackson Award for outstanding achievement in the literature of psychological suspense).

► **Top right:** American novelist Julia Glass, whose novel, "Three Junes," won the National Book Award for Fiction in 2002 and bestselling legal thriller author and lawyer Scott Turow at the welcome reception.

► **Bottom right:** Instructors Julia Glass, Cheryl Lu-Lien Tan (Chair), Sarah Schulman and Tananarive Due at the conclusion of the inaugural George R.R. Martin Summer Intensive Writing Workshop.



“Being able to workshop our early pages with peers too was super valuable for me. I have beta readers for my novel who can give useful feedback and I found a new tribe in this post-pandemic world where everything feels a little fractured and fragile. Having that connection with the people in this workshop has been truly life-affirming.”

— Honey Ahmad, Malaysian screenwriter, podcaster and food journalist

“I learned to write in a way that reflects a character’s private thoughts, or consciousness, something that can only be accomplished in fiction. I’m very grateful.”

— **Michael Rezendes**, Associated Press investigative journalist and member of the Boston Globe’s Spotlight Team, whose work in exposing the Roman Catholic church’s cover up of clergy sex abuse won the 2003 Pulitzer Prize for Public Service

Speakers included Vinson Cunningham, 2024 Pulitzer Prize finalist, New Yorker writer and author of the bestselling novel “Great Expectations,” Armando Lucas Correa, author of the international bestseller “The German Girl,” and Grove Atlantic vice president Peter Blackstock.

“The fellows arrived with good beginnings to their novels and, after days of intensive workshopping and revisions, left Medill with terrific pages,” Tan said. “We look forward to seeing these vital novels out in the literary world.”

“The GRRM workshop was one of the most exciting things I’ve ever done as a writer. It was humbling, eye-opening and thrilling to be returned to the position of a student, my professional identity stripped away, learning from some amazing teachers that yes, writing can be taught, and there’s a lot to learn about crafting a novel even after writing and publishing several non-fiction books. I will continue to draw on this experience, and these relationships, for the rest of my life.”

— **Anne Midgette**, American music critic and chief classical music critic of The Washington Post from 2008 to 2019



◀ **Far left:** From left: Cheryl Tan, Honey Ahmad and Gillian Flynn.

◀ **Middle left:** Instructor Julia Glass leading a working session.

◀ **Left:** Bestselling novelist and alumna Gillian Flynn, author of the No. 1 New York Times bestseller “Gone Girl,” for which she also wrote the Golden Globe-nominated screenplay, with Medill George R.R. Martin Chair in Storytelling Cheryl Lu-Lien Tan on July 12 in Evanston.



“I really felt the bond with my fellow journalists, some of the most talented writers in the field, who, just like me, have novels waiting to be released into the wild. I’m still in awe that I was a part of this cohort. Medill is where my journalism career started. Now, I hope it’s where my novel career will start.”

— **Ernabel Demillo (MSJ93)**, Emmy Award winning Reporter/Host of “Asian American Life”

ASTRY RODRIGUEZ
 REPORTS ON THE
**National
 Association
 Of Hispanic
 Journalists
 (NAHJ) Annual
 Convention**

BY ASTRY RODRIGUEZ (BSJ25)

In July I attended the National Association of Hispanic Journalists (NAHJ) convention for the third time, and each time it never fails to amaze me how much I can learn about being a responsible and capable journalist, and how meaningful the connections I make there are.

Having an affinity space that also helps me grow professionally has allowed my passion for journalism to grow.

This year, the convention was held in Hollywood, Calif. The five-day conference served as a good reminder to me that the rooms I never envisioned I could step into truly are attainable. With so many strategies to make the best of the convention under my belt — being intentional about the workshops I attend, not being afraid to visit booths of organizations more than once, taking notes on what truly speaks to me and I find valuable, while making time for myself — I was able to make the most of the event this time around.



Astry Rodriguez (far left), chapter members and Medill faculty at the convention in Hollywood. Credit: Astry Rodriguez.

As a person whose native language is Spanish, it is comforting to see at the event that there are journalists striving to make room for Spanish-speaking audiences in their publications, by providing meaningful stories in English and Spanish.

As an immigrant, I also appreciate the emphasis a lot of the workshops and panels had on not convoluting the migrant experience and ensuring that all types of stories of people coming into the country for a better life are heard, as there is no single immigrant experience. I attended a panel called “Holding Ourselves Accountable: Responsibly Reporting on Immigrant Communities.” There, I learned to always self-reflect on topics I am personally connected to, so as to not contribute to stereotypes, such as people’s idea of what the typical immigrant looks like. Often, immigration stories focus on political unrest or economic crises as the reasons people leave their home countries, but issues such as climate are also big contributors to immigration.

I received tangible advice that I would carry not only in my early career, but throughout my profession. One I found very useful was a live pitch panel,

where editors from organizations such as The New York Times shared what they want to see in freelance pitches. I have only freelanced a handful of times, but I gained confidence from the information shared — which covered that it is important to be concise, have prior research, support claims with authority and understand a media outlet’s voice — to do so more effectively and hopefully, more often. It was also interesting to hear people’s pitches and watch the editors workshop the ideas in real time.

The conference provided me a real-world look at the topics that are often discussed in my journalism classes. It does so in a very current and immersive way, allowing me to appreciate the work journalists are actively doing.

Environmental coverage has been one of my main areas of focus since taking an environmental reporting class my sophomore year. Seeing how intentional the convention was in providing educational panels exploring the best ways to address climate change and the importance of environmental efforts in such a polarizing political climate when it comes to these topics was reassuring. I learned from various professionals about the importance of covering environmental issues in every beat, and not being afraid to be firm with crucial climate topics, for example.

Connecting with alumni at Medill’s mixer event, I met with successful journalists who less than a decade ago were in my shoes, approaching their senior year and being hit with the multitude of possible routes they could take for a career in media.

I also appreciate being able to bond with chapter members in a way I truly cannot throughout the school year, as a weeklong trip is much more effective in helping me understand

their interests, especially when we are able to get together and share our favorite parts of the convention each day.

The connections I make at these conferences are ones that I maintain long after the events. I often hear back from recruiters I met and shared my resume with regarding programs they think might interest me, or about open positions that align with my journalism experiences. I feel comforted in knowing that when I do begin my job search next year upon graduating, I will have many avenues to search for opportunities, thanks to the convention.

The conference also granted ample opportunities for me to speak on behalf of the university NAHJ chapter, as Co-President this past school year, to invite professionals to speak with chapter members about how they got their start in the industry, or about getting involved with media organizations.

It is not only the event itself that I enjoyed about these conferences but also the ability I have to venture into new places and explore major cities with distinct cultural atmospheres and media markets. The topics that are prevalent in Midwestern news are not always those important to the East Coast market or other areas, for example. Thus, taking part in the conventions has taught me a lot about where I see myself being able to cover news that matters to me.

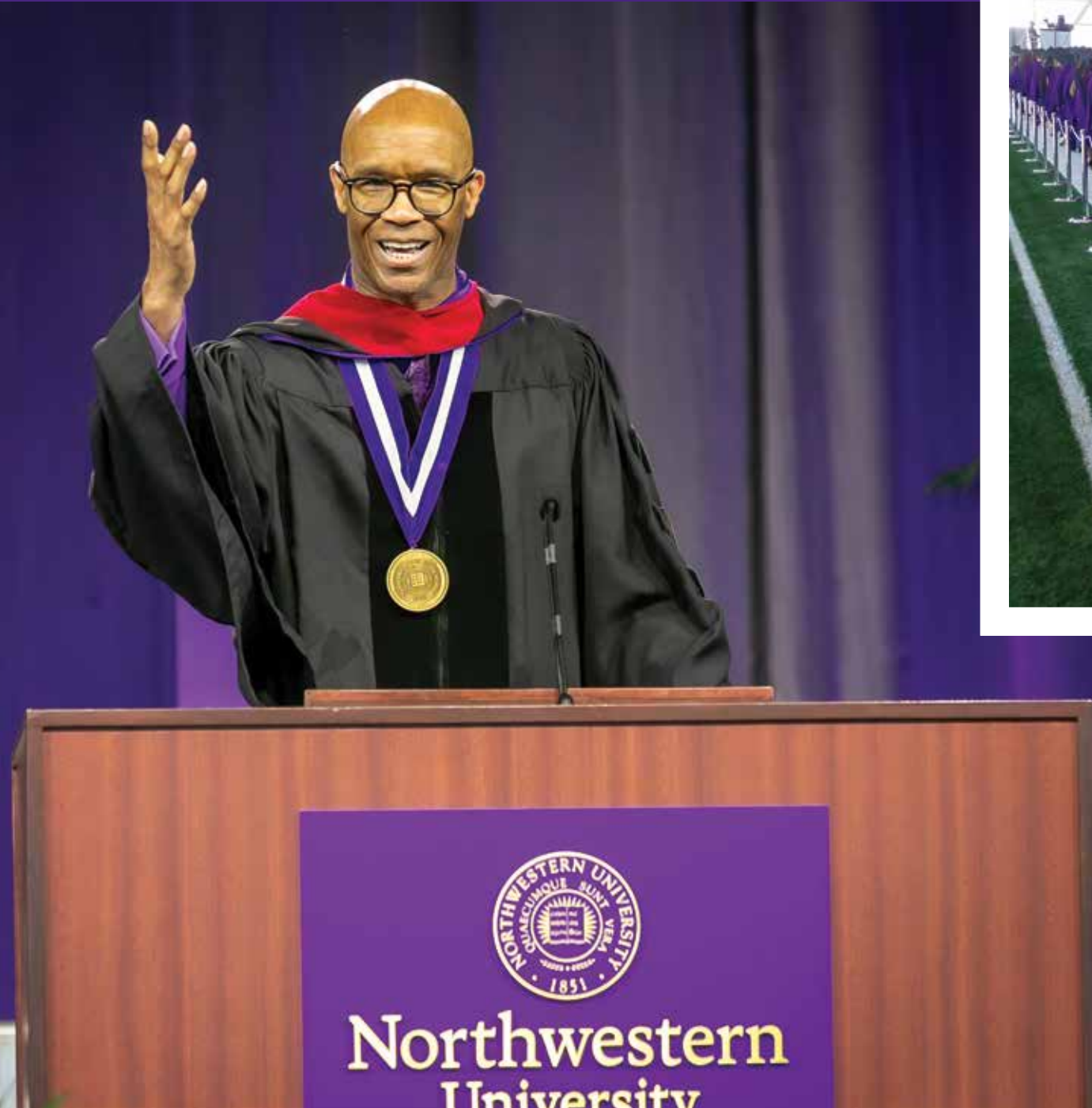
It is also interesting to see how different the Latine and Hispanic communities are in each city. Bonding over culture and an interest in contributing to the world through journalism is a beautiful opportunity gained through the convention. I cannot wait to see what my experience brings with the NAHJ career expo in Chicago next year.



Astry Rodriguez at the NAHJ Conference in July

“I feel comforted in knowing that when I do begin my job search next year upon graduating, I will have many avenues to search for opportunities, thanks to the convention.”

Medill Celebrates the Class of 2024!



Far left: Dean Charles Whitaker welcomes the crowd at the 2024 Medill Convocation.

Left: Graduates walking into the Ryan Fieldhouse on June 10.

Bottom: From left, Samantha Anderer, Jenna Anderson and Julianna Zitron.





● **Far left:** MSJ graduates Isabelle Senechal, Malavika Ramakrishnan and Karishma Bhuiyan.

● **Bottom left:** Pulitzer Prize-winning author and Washington Post reporter Robert Samuels (BSJ06) delivered the 2024 convocation address.

● **Above:** MSJ24 graduates Sean Graney and Grace Xue.



SUPPORT THE FUTURE OF MEDILL THROUGH YOUR ESTATE PLANS

➤ **Above:** BSJ graduates Hannah cole, Braedyn Speight, Julianna Zitron, William Clark and Olivia Alexander.

➤ **Right:** Sidra Dahhan (MSJ24) and guests.



“Ken and I chose to include Medill in our estate plans because we believe in the transformative power of a Medill education. Through our bequest, we will provide future journalism students with equitable learning and career opportunities and support Medill’s world class programs.”

— Sherry L. McFall '78

The outlook for Medill is stronger thanks to Sherry L. McFall '78 and Kenneth Porrello '78, '82 MBA.

The couple has included a charitable bequest to Medill in their estate plans, providing support for next-generation students and faculty and ensuring that Medill remains a leader in journalism and integrated marketing communications education.

This is Sherry and Ken’s Legacy at Medill. What legacy will you leave?

If you have included a gift to Medill in your estate plans or would like to learn more, contact Maggie Wave at **847-644-1027** or **maggie.wave@northwestern.edu**.

Explore planned giving at **giftplanning.northwestern.edu**



Lance Wilhelm (BSJ26) and David Louie (BSJ72) in June at the Radio Television Digital News Association (RTDNA) scholarship event in Milwaukee. Wilhem received the 2024 David Louie Scholarship, a \$2,000 scholarship given to full-time Medill student with a preference for applicants of Asian American descent.

CONGRATULATIONS