



## COVERING ELECTIONS THROUGH STUDENT SOCIAL MEDIA REPORTING

How do we get students to pay attention to important elections? One way is to have their peers create the coverage. Student newspapers can do a lot to make elections salient, giving students clear information on how to participate and helping them sort through candidate positions and claims. But students, particularly journalism, communications, and political science students, can also create valuable coverage through other channels, like social media. Here are two award-winning approaches through which communications professors helped their students cover the elections.

In the first example, students in Virginia Commonwealth University's communications department used Ipads to shoot interviews with fellow students and 2013 candidates, and to break a story on gubernatorial candidate Ken Cuccinelli's education policies. The interviews ran on YouTube and on the website of the local CBS affiliate, a partner in the project. The previous year, students at Rhode Island's Roger Williams University covered the 2012 elections for their campus by using the school's election website, [HawkTheVote.com](http://HawkTheVote.com) to live stream key events and post videos. They reported on campus forums, interviewed candidates, and were the first media outlet to break local city council results. Faculty leading both programs believed they had a significant impact in engaging their campuses in the elections and in preparing student participants for subsequent professional placements.

Obviously efforts like these can be developed most fruitfully with maximum lead time. But we'd encourage you to adapt and incorporate whatever elements of them you can, and help students implement as many of their approaches as possible. If you're a communications, political science, or journalism professor, you can offer extra credit for helping cover the election for your school, ideally through collaborative teams. If you work in other areas, like student affairs, then you can approach communications classes to carry out these approaches, or gather together students who you think have the skills. You may not have all the optimal tools, but you should be able to find students with the skills and technology to create and post video interviews if you can help guide them in their approaches and create an appropriate public channel for their participation. Even if you can do only part of what these schools did, it's still going to create greater awareness and interest, and models you can continue to build on. Here are the examples:

### VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY “IPADJURNOS” ELECTION REPORTING PROJECT 2013

Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA

The 2013 “iPadJournos” election reporting project was a mobile and social media reporting course run by the Richard T. Robertson School of Media and Culture at Virginia Commonwealth University. In the journalism capstone course “Mobile and Social Media Journalism,” 14 students reported on Virginia’s gubernatorial election for the website of local CBS affiliate WTVR-CBS 6. The students used iPad reporting kits for their reporting and produced 30 multimedia stories for the TV station’s website.

The “iPadJournos” project ran for the third time that fall semester, but it was the first time that the reporting was solely focused on politics and an election. For two months, students reported on the election’s major issues, including interviewing the three gubernatorial candidates on their policy platforms. They provided live Election



Day coverage on social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram and worked alongside professional news crews at the candidate's election parties.

Developed by VCU journalism professor Dr. Marcus Messner, the “iPadJournos” project began in spring 2012 as a special topics class. It was a cooperative effort between the Robertson School and VCU’s Center for Teaching Excellence, and each participating student was equipped with an iPad that allowed them to experiment with mobile and social media reporting channels and to develop mobile reporting strategies. The class established a partnership with WTVR, allowing students to work in a newsroom-like environment, where they could pitch, research, and report multimedia stories for a professional news organization. This built their reporting portfolios and let them experience the pressures and demands of a professional newsroom. As an example of “learning by doing,” the project enabled participating journalism seniors to both sharpen their skills and increase their competitiveness in the job market. Many have since been hired as interns or in starting positions at local and national news organizations.

Participating students develop their own election story ideas and pitches. After their instructor signs off, students pitch their story ideas to WTVR’s director for interactive media through the course’s Facebook group. Students, instructors and WTVR contacts are all members of the group, allowing for immediate conversations. Through tagging, their WTVR contacts are alerted of new pitches and can respond within a few minutes with suggestions or sign-off approval.

Students then use their iPad reporting kits, which include tripods, mounts and lavalier microphones, to interview candidates, voters and political experts. Students write their stories in Google Drive documents that can be immediately and remotely edited by the instructor if necessary and then shared with the media partner. The students use the iMovie app on their iPads to edit videos and share them on YouTube.

This workflow allows students to report their stories in a very timely manner and publish their work in professional workflow times. For instance, one student reporting team was able to secure an interview with Republican gubernatorial candidate Ken Cuccinelli at an evening campaign stop. The student shot the interview with their iPad kit and immediately went to work to produce a breaking news story, which was then edited by the instructor and published by WTVR. Later they produced a second, longer news story, which detailed Cuccinelli’s higher education policy answers.

With their mobile reporting kits, students are able to report breaking news on Facebook and Twitter, provide in-depth reporting on election issues for WTVR, and produce video interviews with major candidates that they then publish on YouTube. On Election Day, students interviewed voters at polling places in three counties and the City of Richmond. They also reported from the Northern Virginia and Richmond election-night parties of the gubernatorial candidates.

Throughout the election season, students promoted their stories on social media channels. A Knight News Challenge Bridge Grant from the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC) also enabled the “iPadJournos” project to invest in Facebook advertising to target their stories to other VCU students and engage them in the election. Participating students also cross-posted their stories on the social media channels of the broader [VCU Votes](#) campaign (a campaign that significantly increased student voter turnout), and “iPadJournos” won the VCU Community Engagement Award for Teaching as part of these efforts.



# CAMPUS ELECTION ENGAGEMENT PROJECT

register. volunteer. vote. [campuselect.org](http://campuselect.org)

**Moving Forward:** The success of the “iPadJournos” election reporting project has convinced the department to make it a regularly scheduled course every fall semester. In 2014, students covered Congressional Midterm Elections and major Virginia races. The university has also invested in renewing the iPad reporting kits, which now include an iPad Air with Bluetooth keyboards, tripods, mounts and wireless lavalier microphones. For fall 2014, the course moved to an experimental classroom with flexible seating and six video walls that will be used for social media monitoring during the election coverage.

#### For Further Information:

Course website: <http://wp.vcu.edu/socialmediajournalism/>

Mobile reporting for WTVR.com: <http://wtvr.com/author/vcu-ipadjournos/>

Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/iPadJournos/117107498412523>

Twitter account: <https://twitter.com/iPadJournos> Tumblr news curation: <http://vagovwatch.tumblr.com/>

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## HAWK THE VOTE ELECTION MEDIA LAB 2012, ROGER WILLIAMS UNIVERSITY, BRISTOL, RI

#### What We Did:

The HawkTheVote Election Media Lab was an interdisciplinary collaboration of faculty and students from Journalism, Political Science, and Computer Information Sciences at Roger Williams University.

Undergraduate students produced multimedia news coverage in the 10 weeks prior to the 2012 general election and on Election Day. Their news reports and live stream feed are archived at [www.HawkTheVote.com](http://www.HawkTheVote.com)

This was the first time RWU students produced live field coverage on election night. In the absence of news reporters from other outlets, HawkTheVote student reporters broke the news about the winners elected in the race for the Barrington (RI) town council. The HawkTheVote Media Lab: Election 2012 won First Place from the Society of Professional Journalists for Online News Reporting (Small Colleges).

#### Why We Did It:

RWU journalism students recognize that they are entering a fast-changing field. Our new journalism major focuses on digital media and mobile journalism and offers skills-oriented courses that simulate a contemporary newsroom setting. Students practice news reporting with multimedia tools and publish in online, print, and broadcast platforms. We find that the practice of teamwork is as essential to the learning process as the knowledge of theory, research, and the tools that allow students to report a story accurately in a balanced and engaging manner. The HawkTheVote Election Media Lab required that students with varied expertise and skill sets practice communicating across disciplines while reporting on deadline.

#### How We Did It and How You Can, Too:

The series of video interviews, studio roundtable panels, and live breaking news reports produced for the HawkTheVote Election Media Lab revolved around four topics students deemed relevant to their peers: the economy, student debt, health insurance, and our military involvement overseas. Students met once weekly as a group over the course of 10 weeks to assign news coverage, design and assemble the project website, [HawkTheVote.com](http://HawkTheVote.com), rehearse studio production, practice field reporting skills, coordinate research, outline pre-production requirements, and discuss promotional messages and materials. The news and production teams then



devoted extra-curricular time to produce research, conduct news reports, and create content and materials for the website.

The website features archives of student-produced news reports recorded in the field prior to Election Day, four studio events recorded in front of a live audience, and election night news coverage reported live from candidate headquarters and anchored from our studio at Roger Williams University. The site also includes edited video clips of interviews with Congressional candidates and with members of the campus community.

On Election night, student journalists reported live via iPhone and Skype from the field at four local campaign headquarters in Rhode Island. The news reports were switched live into the feed produced in the studio, where a political science student and a member of the journalism faculty anchored commentary in front of a live audience as election results poured in from student reporters and from the Web. The live feed, produced by students and directed by faculty, was live streamed on the Web via Ustream and was broadcast over the air on the university's student-run radio station, WQRI 88.3 FM. Two social media editors live tweeted the news coverage in English at @HawkTheVote and in Spanish at @Hawkthevoteenes .

In addition to the HawkTheVote Election Night Watch and the ongoing coverage of candidates and student responses, the project held events before a live audience. Participating students live tweeted the events, which were also live streamed at the HawkTheVote website. In addition to the election night challenge, they included:

**Roundtable: Scientific Controversies and the 2012 Presidential Election.** A panel of 4 RWU scientists discussed how each candidate's platform framed scientific issues. The panelists discussed evolution literacy, basic research funding, stem cell research, and vaccination, policies and politics that impact women's health, energy policy, sustainability and climate change. Four faculty presenters, one moderator, and two student producers relayed questions from the team and from the live audience.

**Social Justice Presentation: The Impact of Mega Events on Brazil's Urban Poor.** Catalytic Communities Director Dr. Theresa Williamson presented a talk and follow-up discussion on sustainable urbanization worldwide, accompanied by a screening of the film "Favela as a Sustainable Model."

**Candidate Platforms:** A panel of political science experts addressed the four main topics of interest to students this election: the economy, student debt, health insurance, and our military involvement overseas. Political science professor June Speakman moderated the event and Q&A session.

**Lessons Learned:** At the conclusion of the Media Lab, students recorded testimonials in which they discussed what they learned from the experience. They named a wide range of skills (operating a studio camera, conveying information to the website developers, nailing an interview source) and pinpointed challenges (scheduling, timely sharing of information, technical troubleshooting). What seemed to be most memorable to them was the opportunity to produce live coverage the way "real" reporters do. They felt inspired and were proud of their accomplishment, which are archived and available for inclusion in their portfolios and reels.

The HawkTheVote Media Lab required many hours of extra-curricular involvement from students and faculty mentors. Faculty weren't quite sure at the beginning what to ask for from the students but were willing to bootstrap it and let the students have a substantial input into the ultimate vision. To say that Election Night was a defining moment for these students underplays everything that came before where they experimented, failed,



learned, and tried again. That the project won a national award from the Society of Professional Journalists shows that it indeed carved out new territory for multimedia journalism in an undergrad program.

See [www.hawkthevote.com](http://www.hawkthevote.com)

Election 2012 Media Lab news clip <http://youtu.be/MU4xgxO3CwA>

Access photo feed at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/87678289@N04/>

Twitter streams @HawkTheVote and @HawkTheVotenees (Spanish-language feed)

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This guide is available on the CEEP website at <http://www.campuselect.org/covering-elections-through-social-media.html>