

# Watching the vote

UA Students enrolled in JN 430 Digital Media Workshop monitor polling places in a nationwide effort to counter voting problems during the 2016 election.

BY ERIN MOSLEY

Despite the polarizing nature of the 2016 presidential election, a class of journalism students at The University of Alabama turned a blind eye to politics and focused on assisting voters in their state, Mississippi and Florida through a project called Electionland.

“We weren’t really focused on the outcome of the election at all,” says Shawna Bray, a senior from Naperville, Ill., double majoring in public relations and journalism. “For the most part, we

tabled that conversation entirely. We were working together.”

In an effort to combat common voting obstacles such as long lines, malfunctioning machines, voter rolls with missing names and unrequired requests for photo identification, the nonprofit news organization ProPublica launched Electionland. The project engaged a nationwide coalition of nearly 100 media outlets including TV and radio stations, newspapers and websites in 49 states as well as journal-

ism departments at 13 universities.

“Too often the extent of voting problems is caught after polls close, when citizens’ right to vote has already been abridged and potential votes have already been lost,” ProPublica stated in a press release.

Primary challenges Alabama, Mississippi and Florida voters faced on Election Day 2016 were long lines and broken machines. According to a study produced by the Brennan Center for Justice, long lines disproportionately affect African-American and Hispanic communities.

“Many of the long lines that manifested on Election Day in 2012 could have been mitigated with planning that looked for facts known before the day of the election, like the number of registered voters and the level of resources allocated to each polling place for Election Day,” the study states.

With the aid of social media platforms such as Twitter, Electionland sought to cover voter issues in real time, acting as a cross-country, virtual newsroom. Journalism students were trained to monitor and verify social-media reports, which ProPublica editors checked and sent to local media organizations for swift

investigation and reporting.

**Fifteen journalism students manned The University of Alabama’s Crimson White newsroom throughout the day Nov. 8, 2016, working a total of 112 hours. Students constantly checked social media for reports of polling-place problems while TV monitors displayed local news. As a result of the students’ efforts, Electionland partners including AL.com, WBRC FOX6 News, the Commercial Appeal and the Tallahassee Democrat investigated dozens of polling places across Alabama, Mississippi and Florida.**

Prior to Election Day, students attended workshops to learn how to use verification tools and reverse-image search engines.

Bray says helping a voter in Mississippi was the most rewarding experience for her. “I spent about 20 minutes verifying the report and finding the exact location,” she says. Most complaints, like the one Bray received, were related to long lines and excessive wait times, usually caused by computer malfunctions. Many of the tools Electionland utilized were developed by First Draft News, a nonprofit coalition founded in 2015 to “raise awareness and address challenges relating to trust and truth in the digital age,” according to the organization’s website.

Cokie Thompson, a senior from Memphis, Tenn., majoring in journalism, says one reason projects like Electionland are valuable is because they connect journalists to the public. “Any



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way that journalism can have contact with community members and build trust is really important,” Thompson says. “We are here to keep information open and accessible.”

When Chip Brantley, senior lecturer of emerging media and JN 430 instructor, added a service-learning component to the course in Spring 2014, it was through a project called Lost Stories. Students work alongside editors at AL.com to research photographs from the Alabama Media Group archives. “I saw these cool photos and thought, ‘These are amazing,’” Brantley says. “I couldn’t believe they were just sitting in this file cabinet.”

Brantley came up with a plan for his students to revive histories in danger of being forgotten. “It was taking from these photos that had been lost in time and making them public again, and finding stories to tell that were contemporary,” he says.

Brantley recalls a photograph of a 1931 murder scene in which a group of men stand crowded around another man slumped behind the wheel of a car and clearly dead. The man, William Lee Taylor, was a prison guard who had a feud with brothers Drennen and Cecil Baggett, who were later

convicted of the crime. A group of students contacted Drennen Baggett’s son, Drennen Baggett, Jr. “It turned out to be this great story that deepened our understanding of what happened in the photo, but also was a portrait of this man who remembered his father,” says Brantley.

This type of journalism is not generally taught, Brantley says, but telling these stories is conducive to community building.

**In addition to their work with Electionland, students in the Fall 2016 Digital Media Workshop course produced 15 articles for AL.com as part of the Lost Stories project, dedicating 200 hours to the assignments.**

After the 2016 election, Brantley’s course became involved with the First Draft Partner Network, which aims to improve skills and standards in the reporting and sharing of information online. Partners work together to increase news literacy among social-media users, streamline the online-news verification process and improve eyewitness accounts. “I see these types of projects being a part of this class going forward,” Brantley says.

**To learn more about JN 430 Digital Media Workshop, contact Chip Brantley at [chip.brantley@ua.edu](mailto:chip.brantley@ua.edu).**



Throughout Election Day 2016, journalism students including Dylan Walker [left] and Raiha Bajwa monitored and verified social-media reports of polling-place problems. photo by Dysen Neeb