A Guide to Professional Project Proposal and Execution

Manship School of Mass Communication

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Manship School of Mass Communication

Policy on Master's Degree Professional Project

The professional project of the Manship School of Mass Communication is designed as an alternative to the thesis for those master's degree students who have consciously structured their programs to develop their skills in preparation for careers in media-related industries. It is presumed that this means the student has used their class alternatives for professional reasons, i.e., the selection of two classes under the clusters available to focus on print or broadcast journalism, public relations or advertising and use of the electives for additional professional classes.

The Process

Students will be expected to declare their intention to pursue a professional project as early as possible, but no later than the beginning of the second year of study. Students will initiate this declaration in one of two ways: 1) by indicating it on the Student Committee Form or 2) by meeting with the Associate Dean for Graduate Studies and Research to select and appoint a Graduate Advisory Committee. The professional project committee will be comprised of a major professor (chair) and two other faculty members. Both must be members of the graduate faculty. For details and guidelines on selecting your committee, please refer to the “Graduation Advisory Committee” section in the Manship Master of Mass Communication Policies and Procedures Handbook.

With guidance from the Graduate Advisory Committee, especially the chair, students will prepare a detailed proposal that will outline in detail the project to be completed as well as a complementary research component. This will be presented for approval of the committee. Once this proposal has been approved, the student will conduct the project, under faculty guidance. Upon completion of the project, the student will schedule a committee meeting, during which the student will discuss and defend the professional output of the proposal as well as the research component. Approval of the project must be achieved by posted Graduate School deadlines.

To receive academic credit for a professional project, the student must register for MC8002. A total of at least six hours must be accumulated to meet degree requirements.

The Proposal

The proposal will be comprised of two principal parts. The first is a detailed outline of the project itself, including presentation of readings that support and/or complement the purpose and value of the project; a specific statement of the process to be used, including principal sources of information; a detailed statement of the goals to be achieved; a summary of expected findings; and a statement of possible sources of publication, broadcast, or other form of implementation. In addition, it is expected that the student will conduct an original research project, either as a means of collecting information to be used in the professional project or as complementary research that supplements or enhances in some way the professional project. To this end, as part of the proposal, the student should present a brief, but thorough, outline of that research, possibly including statement of the problem, literature review, research questions, method(s) to be used and a statement of the relationship between the professional project itself and the research component.

The proposal is a formal document. Presentation files, one-pagers, email memos etc. are not considered formal proposals.

Committees should sign and submit a completed Proposal Defense Form to the Associate Dean for Graduate Studies and Research.

The Project

The project is to be a work of professional excellence. It may be, for example, an in-depth series of articles designed for publication in a print medium. It may be a radio or television documentary; a public relations or advertising campaign, including all materials to be used in the campaign; a comprehensive and carefully done social media plan; or a communications or advocacy campaign of some form. Details are provided later in this document through specific examples of how such projects may be accomplished.

All standard materials and techniques available to the professional mass communicator

should be utilized by the student in preparation of this project. Most of the information presented should be from original sources, i.e., interviews, documents or professional observation and evaluation. The goal will be to present a finished product that is suitable for professional use, complete with an original research contribution. If special equipment is required, the student must accept the responsibility of gaining access to such equipment. The Manship School cannot guarantee that equipment will be available or provided.

The Defense

Once the student and the committee chair are satisfied with the project and the research, the student will schedule a meeting of the committee to review the final product. The full product and research report should be given to committee members no later than two weeks prior to the scheduled defense. To initiate the defense, the student will make a formal presentation, including presentation of the product itself, a full explanation of the processes used to compile the information and prepare the product as well as a brief discussion of the research project.

Each committee member will be given an opportunity to ask questions. The committee will then determine whether the product and research report are acceptable. It will make one of three decisions: (I) Pass; (2) Acceptable but requiring additional work or revision; or (3) Fail. In a case in which the committee requires additional work, the chair will assume responsibility for overseeing that work and determining whether it is necessary that the committee conduct a second review. In the case of a fail, the student will be required to wait for at least three months before another defense may be scheduled.

Before graduation, the student is expected to provide a completed final product with all paperwork to the Manship School. This should be presented to the associate dean for graduate studies and research.

Examples of Professional Projects

The actual components of a professional project depend upon the subject of the project

itself, professional requirements and the student's interests and abilities. For example, a journalism project may include carefully planned use broadcast, print and Internet. It is possible that advertising and public relations may be combined into one major campaign. Again, students should discuss this possibility carefully with their chairs and committees.

The following sections provide examples of how projects may be organized and what content they may contain. Students must work closely with their chairs and committees to determine the precise format for their projects.

Example: Internet project

A student may pursue an Internet project as the professional project to fulfill the requirements for the master's degree. The project should meet the following requirements:

1. Covers a topic of social significance and with important political, economic, cultural or social implications
2. Provides adequate elaboration and justification in support of the topic
3. Shows depth in covering the issue (for example, examining multiple aspects)
4. Contains research to collect original information from primary sources
5. Exhibits analytical capacity and the competence in solving complicated problems
6. Utilizes efficient means to present the project on the Internet, including Internet writing, audio, video, info graphics, photos and appropriate interactive elements
7. Demonstrates competence in using technological devices for the Internet
8. Demonstrates competence in applying principles of visual communication

The final product could be a live Web site with multiple sections and pages published online containing all information presented in the format accessible through a Web browser.

Example: Public Relations or Social Media Campaign

In a public relations or social media campaign, several major research initiatives and strategic communication strategies are often interconnected as part of a cohesive plan for a business, non-profit or brand. Following is an example of elements expected in a plan.

1. Executive Summary

2. Organizational Background
    a. Client Overview
        - Organizational mission
        - Staff, board of directors, volunteers, clientele, etc.
        - Position in industry
        - Competition
        - National trend data
    b. Communication Audit
        - Recent and/or significant media coverage
        - Websites, releases, brochures, social media use and analytics, interpersonal communication and accompanying documents, etc.
        - Implications of the audit
    c. SWOT Analysis (chart and accompanying narrative explanation)
    d. Literature Review (Guiding theory and relevance to project, application)
        - Implications of the literature review
    e. Problem Statement
        - Make sure it is not a general or organization/company problem statement.
    f. Publics: Target audiences analysis
        - (Primary and secondary with accompanying rationale)
    g. Research Plan
        - Key findings from background research
        - Primary research you will conduct, if applicable (survey, focus groups, interviews, etc.?) Include methodology
        - Explain method and sample (If doing interviews, surveys or focus groups, provide narrative and interview questions in the appendix)
3. Outline of Campaign Action Plan (Provide a brief introduction)
    a. Goals (Desired communication results/outcomes)
        - Informational, attitudinal, and or behavioral

b. Objectives (SMART: specific, measurable, actionable, realistic and timed)
c. Strategy (Overall approach)
d. Tactics, channels (Must be logical, connected to research findings; must align with appropriate goals, objectives and publics, must be quantifiable
e. Theme
f. Key Messaging
g. Primary and Secondary Messages
h. Evaluation
i. Stewardship
j. Proposed deliverables

4. Timeline for completion of the project (in proposal)

Example: Political Communication Project

A political communication professional project may consist of several major research undertakings and reports, each linked to the other as part of an integrated marketing plan for a candidate or a cause (referendum, ballot initiative, or public lobbying). Below is an example of a "candidate" project.

Candidate Project

The professional project entails all the elements that political consulting firms and a candidate or potential candidate's staff would assemble as part of a plan to assess the feasibility of a run for office. Budget limits preclude a master's student from conducting some of these steps beyond the planning stage, but all require substantial research and preparation. The components of the candidate-related project may include:

1. Candidate Profile (real or fictitious)
    a. Biography
    b. Family description
    c. Political history
    d. Resume
    e. Catalogue of major "image" strengths
    f. Catalogue of known positions on major issues

g. Self-oppositional research
h. Summary of positive and negative attributes for a candidacy

2. Profile of Race and Region (must be real)
    a. Describe office candidate will run for
    b. Describe area
        i. Location
        ii. Geography
        iii. Population
        iv. Demographics
        v. Sociographics
        vi. Psychographics
        vii. Major local issues
        viii. Political parties and constituencies
        ix. Voting history (minimum of20 years)
3. Profile Opposition (real or fictitious, estimated or actual)
    a. Oppositional research
    b. Summary of positive and negative attributes for a candidacy
        i. General
        ii. Relative to our candidate
        iii. Opportunities for comparative advertising
4. Survey & Focus Group Research Plan
    a. Polling (Survey) Plan
        i. Objectives for a benchmark survey of voters
        ii. Questionnaire for a benchmark survey of voters
        iii. Rationale for choosing target populations for survey
        iv. Budget for survey
    b. Focus group plan
        i. Objectives for focus groups
        ii. Major questions
        iii. Moderator's introduction

        iv. Budget for focus group

5. Message Plan
    a. Key themes of campaign
        i. Justification
        ii. Description
        iii. Sample key phrases, slogans, and imagery
6. Media & Marketing Plan
    a. Overall objectives as related to Message Plan
    b. Target segments in community
        i. Who (workers, core, leaners, swing, lean-aways, naughts)
        ii. How best to reach
    c. Television Plan
        i. Description of kinds of spots (as related to Message Plan and Candidate and area)
        ii. Sample script
    d. Radio Plan
        i. Description of kinds of spots (as related to Message Plan and Candidate and area)
        ii. Sample Script
    e. Print Plan
        i. Description of kinds of print ads for newspapers and printed material for mailing or door drop-off (as related to Message Plan and Candidate and area)
        ii. Sample ad and leaflet
    f. Internet Plan
        i. Description of Website key components (as related to Message Plan and Candidate and area)
        ii. Description of e-mail uses in coordinating workers and viral marketing to voters
    g. Campaign Events (as related to Message Plan and Candidate and area)

        i. Justification for voter and free media attraction

    h. GOTV P!an
        i. Main targets for volunteers
        ii. Main targets for core, leaners, swing, lean-aways, naughts
        iii. Contact plan
        iv. 72-hour election plan

7. Fundraising plan
    a. Estimated costs of overall campaign
    b. Major and minor targets

Example: Television Journalism Project/Long-Form Story/ Short Documentary Film

A master's student may pursue a television news documentary, set of stories or documentary surrounding a topic of public relevance and importance. It should depict appropriate depth and breadth of research to cover the backstory/background of the subject matter. Students should also complete a reflective short essay to discuss their process, lessons learned, and other elements of their creation experiences in their final project. Students should also include their plans for publication and post-production if there by any. The
project should meet the following requirements:

1. Covers a topic of social significance and with important political, economic, cultural or social implications
    a. Plan should include justification of topic, potential stakeholders (sources), context, depth of coverage to be completed, communities to be included, diversity, multiple aspects/perspectives to be covered.
    b. Shooting plan for video, source interviews, natural sound
    c. Interview guide, storyboard for visuals and shot list
    d. Anticipated use of graphics
2. Provides adequate elaboration and justification in support of the topic
3. Shows depth in covering the issues (for example, examining multiple aspects)
4. Contains research to collect original information from primary sources

5. Exhibits analytical capacity and the competence in solving complicated problems or exploring complicated cultural problems
6. Presents a well-told, well-organized and concise story or stories
    a. Use of narrative structures evident
    b. Quality of video
    c. Quality of lighting
    d. Quality of natural sound
    e. Quality of and effectiveness of writing and voice track
    f. Effective use of sound bites and/or voiceover/narration
    g. Effective use of graphics
    h. Evidence of quality interviewing
    i. Quality and effectiveness of editing
    j. Scripts in appropriate television news format (EZ News)
    k. Flow
    l. Pacing
    m. Quality and effectiveness of on-camera talent work
    n. Effective and well-thought out organization and presentation of information
7. Demonstrates technical competence with all relevant field, studio and editing equipment.
8. Time and structural guidelines (this must be approved by the committee prior to beginning the coverage):
    a. 30 minutes of coverage, for example, one 30-minute documentary; five stories of at least 6 minutes each in length; 2 stories (6 minutes each) and 10 stories (I :30 to 2

       minutes each); or another combination of stories that add up to approximately 30 minutes and contains at least two longer format pieces
    b. final project should be presented to the committee in a digital format (e.g. Youtube, Vimeo, etc) that is pre-approved by the committee. It should also include closed-captioning and other elements designed for accessibility
9. Final video project should be accompanied by a written reflective paper on the project. This is the equivalent to a discussion section in a thesis.

Example: Print Journalism project

A professional project in print journalism will result in production of an in-depth article or series of articles on a major social issue. It maybe written in magazine or newspaper style and should be structured for a specific medium, either local or national. Among considerations to be made are the following:

1. Selection of a subject of significance
    a. Major issue of the day
    b. Detailed statement of goals to be achieved
    c. Background reading that supports the significance
    d. Precise question to be answered
2. Context/content
    a. Why is this a problem?
    b. To whom?
    c. Why is it important?
    d. What's the history?
    e. What needs to be added to current knowledge?
    f. Perspectives to be covered?
    g. What are financial implications?
3. Sources
    a. Interviews
        i. Officials
        ii. Experts
        iii. Impacted citizens
        iv. Seek multiple points of view
        v. Sources must be named (see chair for exceptions)
    b. Documents
        i. Governmental
        ii. Historical
        iii. Scientific evidence as appropriate
    c. Observation

        i. Detailed description
        ii. Analysis
    d. Original research
        i. Surveys
        ii. Others
4. Development of the human angle
    a. Include affected citizens from the "community"
    b. Cases or examples of impact on people
5. Illustrative material
    a. Photographs
    b. Charts
    c. Graphs
    d. Other sidebar material
6. Writing quality
    a. Technical perfection
    b. Precise, complete, accurate
    c. AP Style

    d. Effective use of direct quotations
    e. Conduct discussion/dialogue
7. The publication
    a. Description
    b. Detailed rationale

Example: Advertising project

An advertising professional project should result in a campaign plan for an existing client. It is the student's responsibility to find a real client with whom to work. The student must have sufficient access to the business or organization to allow him/her to identify key problems and opportunities. The plan must entail primary and secondary research and may include these components:

1. Executive Summary
2. Table of Contents
3. List of Tables
4. Situation Overview
    a. Introduction
        i. Brief statement of client's marketing goals.
        ii. What are the key issues/questions your campaign will address?
    b. The Industry
        i. Outline trends in the industry
        ii. economy's impact on industry
        iii. seasonality of sales
        iv. trends in marketing within the industry
    c. The company
        i. Structure of company/organization
        ii. Competitive analysis
            1. sales and market share
            2. comparison of product features
            3. advertising expenditure analysis
        iii. Past and current marketing/advertising approaches
            1. research that measures campaign effectiveness
    d. Target audience
        i. How will you define targets for product/service?
        ii. Provide specific demographic and psychographic profiles of each of your targets.
        iii. What are consumers' current perceptions of product/service, as compared to competitors?
5. Integrated Communications Plan
    a. Explain the hierarchy of effects (visuals are good) and break down your objectives
    b. Show how various promotional elements (advertising, direct marketing, sponsorships and promotional events) will hit each segment of the target. Again, visuals are good.

c. Development of the creative concept.
    i. Explain testing of various concepts.
    ii. How does the chosen concept speak to each segment of your target
    iii. audience?
    iv. What elements will ensure campaign consistency (tagline, logo, visual elements)?
    v. How does it build on past advertising?
    vi. Examples of creative executions
d. Detailed sponsorship, promotions and specialty advertising plans

6. Media Plan
    a. Separate objectives for each segment of the target
    b. Separate media strategies and tactics
7. Budget Summary
8. Detailed plan to evaluate the campaign's effectiveness
9. Appendices

Example: Podcasting Project

Podcasts are a form of storytelling that allows people to share their experiences, opinions, knowledge, and realities on a grander scale than through interpersonal interactions. Their content ideally resonates with a specific audience who identifies with the podcasters in some way, which ultimately functions to create a collective or community centered around the podcast and/or said content.

Podcast projects should introduce a novel podcast as a platform for a specific audience. You are creating a podcast that follows the typical podcast development process but with a scholarly angle added. The scholarship will involve the integration of published and reputable journal articles that inform every aspect of the podcast, such as audience analysis, format, structure, and episode content.

- Annotated bibliography - An annotated bibliography is a list of journal articles and books with a description and evaluation of each. Most of your research must come from journal articles that justify every decision you are making about every aspect of the podcast and throughout the development stages. Popular press sources are appropriate as well because they speak to the appropriateness and relevance of your chosen content audience

- Audience analysis – What is the justification or rationale for your target audience? Students should use credible sources (i.e. demographic data, journal articles, etc). What qualities do they possess that reflect the need for your series?
- Explanation and justification of podcast niche/angle.
    - How will your target audience connect to your audience? What are the short and long-term impacts and value for your audience? How will guests appeal to the audience?
    - What will your content be? Identify themes and episode topics that reflect the unique needs of the target audience. Use articles to support the justification.
    - How will the following characteristics be accomplished?
        - a. Creativity – You are likely competing with other podcasters for space. Use creative ideas and approaches to content delivery that will capture your audience's attention. Ask yourself, "What would they want to hear? What would they find interesting? How is the content unique?"
        - b. Expertise – You are the expert on this topic or content; therefore, you must do your research and become even more of an expert on the topic. Your knowledge will increase your credibility and trustworthiness for your audience.
        - c. Passion – You should be very passionate about your content. The enthusiasm you express will carry over to and engage your audience.
- Program schedule (e.g. bi-weekly broadcast for 6 months, monthly broadcasts for 12 months, etc.)
- Podcast format (e.g. interview, news, talk show, panel discussion, instructional, etc.)
- Description of podcast tone – educational, entertainment, conversational. Be mindful that the target audience is the focus; therefore, their ideals she be prioritized.
- List of potential interviews for each episode. Include bios/descriptions of expertise and planned interview questions. Demonstrate how they are further bolstering the high quality and credible podcast you are proposing to develop.
- Episode summaries - Provide an in-depth overview of the specific topic(s) to be discussed and the important lessons and information audience members are expected to receive. Each summary should be directly related to the podcast theme and convey to potential audience members the content to be discussed by the host(s) and guests.
- Episode scripts/transcriptions

- Links to recorded episodes - Individual hyperlinks to each digital file of the podcast episodes must be submitted as documentation that this portion of the project has been completed. Ensure that the episode is as “polished” or professional as possible.
- Topics for future broadcasts