



School of Journalism
and Mass Communication
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

SJMC Insider

SPRING 2026

School of Journalism and Mass Communication

ALUMNI IN COMEDY

Endless Laughs.



Meet six alumni
who are using their
storytelling skills to build
community through comedy.

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE

WSUM named Best Station in the Nation
CODE Lab bridges AI and human behavior
Distinguished Teaching Faculty Debra Pierce
retires after 20 years

Letters from the Directors



Last week I cried watching the end of “Apollo 13.” Anyone on the 5th floor of Vilas Hall or past students who remember me on a last class day will tell you – crying is nothing new for Katy Culver. And “Apollo 13” is one of Hollywood’s great emotional rides.

But this viewing hit me a little differently. As the ship is on final entry, commander Jim Lovell says, “Gentlemen, it’s been a privilege flying with you.” That’s exactly how I feel as I wrap up my term as SJMC director. It’s been three years of unexpected challenges, scrappy resilience and coming uncertainty. And I have never been more proud of us.

The single greatest challenge of my term has been fiscal. When federal grant funding went into a tailspin and international enrollment dropped, all of UW-Madison was forced into painful budget cuts. Yet with help from creativity, hard work and philanthropic support, our research, teaching and service missions emerged stronger.

Like the Apollo astronauts, we’ll be dealing with the burns of reentry from this, as well as the implications of AI, social divisions and many other challenges. I am so happy to report that I’m handing the reins off to Mike Wagner, a colleague who is prepared, hard-working and ready to lead in exciting new ways.

When I started as director, I wrote, “I’m struck by a single word: gratitude.” That feeling has only grown. Thank you to the students, staff, faculty and alumni who have made this job deeply rewarding and – believe it or not – often fun.

J-Schoolers, it’s been a privilege flying with you.

On, Wisconsin!

Kathleen Bartzen Culver

Outgoing Director, School of Journalism and Mass Communication



I am thrilled, inspired and deeply grateful to become the 15th Director of the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at UW-Madison. Moving to Madison in 2012 to work in the SJMC has been the greatest decision of my career. I love this place – my colleagues, students and community.

Yet, when I look at what’s ahead for higher education, it is clear that we are navigating some uncharted waters. I am excited to help guide the SJMC into a future where serious scholarship is championed and effectively applied to inform our world-class teaching so that our classroom education and mentoring work leads to new opportunities for our students and alums.

In the SJMC, everything flows from our faculty. When they’re producing cutting-edge research, good things follow – for students, staff and the community. Expanding that research leadership, and who contributes to it, is priority one.

Katy Culver leaves behind a genuinely remarkable legacy – new resources, stronger alumni engagement, a level of creativity and care in how we think about our mission, and the best team we’ve ever had. I know I’ll benefit from the strong position she leaves for us.

The best part is knowing I’m not alone. People love the SJMC and want to help. Faculty, students, alumni – there’s a real passion for the school and what it stands for. Tapping into that support and helping us improve the public good is part of the cure for what ails us as a society.

On, Wisconsin!

Michael W. Wagner

Incoming Director, School of Journalism and Mass Communication

STUDENTS

More Than a Game

Students explore stories, culture and journalism behind the 2026 FIFA World Cup

By Hannah Lindow

This summer, the most-watched sporting event is bringing its excitement to stadiums across the United States, Canada and Mexico. For one month, fans from all over the world will come together to cheer on their favorite players and enjoy the atmosphere that only the FIFA World Cup can create.

As the world prepares for this global celebration of sport, School of Journalism and Mass Communication (SJMC) Teaching Faculty Matt Hermann is focusing his summer sports reporting course on the 2026 FIFA World Cup.

“The World Cup is the biggest sporting event in the world,” Hermann said. “There are going to be a lot of interesting stories to be written.”

Throughout the summer, students will examine how sports journalists convey compelling storylines, learn how to cover a match concisely and effectively, analyze sports opinion pieces, and produce sports broadcasting audio stories.

“Some of the best sports features are about fans and fan culture,” Hermann said. “[I’m] going to

encourage students both to read and discover ways to create new means of connecting with audiences through sports.”

While the goal is to train students to report like professional journalists attending the World Cup, access to players, coaches and dedicated fans is limited in Madison. Hermann will encourage students to find creative solutions that center their own communities, such as local watch parties, fan traditions or cultural connections to the tournament.

“Having the opportunity to give students a window into how you create interesting coverage around a tournament like this and encourage them to look into new things is very satisfying to me,” Hermann said.

This course also provides an opportunity for Hermann to share his lifelong passion for soccer reporting and the World Cup. He cites his time as a reporter for the 2010, 2014 and 2018 World Cups as the driving force behind his excitement.

“There is something infectious about engaging with the World Cup, and I hope I can bring that about for some folks,” Hermann said.



Photo: My Profit Tutor/Unsplash

SJMC Insider

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Cover: Charlie Berens (BA’09) warms up in a backstage dressing room before performing at the Wisconsin Union Theater on Jan. 26, 2018. (Photo by Jeff Miller/UW-Madison)



Students from WSUM traveled to New York City to accept their awards from the Intercollegiate Broadcasting System. (Photo: Courtesy of WSUM)

STUDENTS

Award-Winning Airwaves

WSUM Named Best College Station in the Nation

By Hannah Lindow

This February, students from WSUM, UW–Madison’s student radio station, traveled to New York City to accept the award for Best College Station in the Nation from the Intercollegiate Broadcasting System (IBS), the program’s highest honor. In addition to this award, WSUM received four other awards for their work in sports and news and their mobile app.

With over 3,000 entries submitted by more than 100 schools nationwide, competition for IBS media awards is intense. John Raider, WSUM’s Production Director, was among the student representatives in attendance to accept the award. Raider said hearing the title of Best College Station in the Nation go to WSUM felt surreal.

“For me, it wasn’t just about accepting the award. It was about representing the thousands of students who have put their time, creativity, and passion into WSUM over the years. I honestly wish we could have all been up there together so everyone in the room could see just how much passion our members have for this place,” Raider said.

As a member of WSUM for two years, Raider said the station’s sound evolves with each new wave of students.

“Our DJs, producers, sports broadcasters, and news team members all work together and learn from each other, so people are constantly improving their skills while experimenting with new ideas on air,” Raider said, “That mix of creativity, mentorship, and independence allows WSUM to produce programming that’s authentic to the students and different from traditional commercial radio.”

While the students work to produce the highest quality of content, Director of Radio Kelsey Brannan helps to oversee their work. Brannan has worked at WSUM since 2021, but her involvement in WSUM dates to 2010, when she was an undergraduate student at UW–Madison.

“Every generation at WSUM stands on the shoulders of the generation that came before it,” Brannan said, “And the heart and soul of WSUM has remained the same.”

With over 200 student members, WSUM has grown into more than just a radio station; it’s a community and a place for students to thrive in fields they’re interested in.

“[The students] know that they’re putting out the best content and they’re serving our listeners and community with something they’re not hearing anywhere else. And it feels really special to finally be recognized for that,” Brannan said.

FACULTY

Warm Welcome

Recent Stanford University PhD graduate Angela Lee will join the SJMC faculty in Fall 2026 as an assistant professor and teach courses in media psychology and digital wellbeing.

Interview by Kara Rheingans



Photo: Courtesy of Angela Lee

This fall, Angela Lee will join the School of Journalism and Mass Communication (SJMC) as an assistant professor. Her research explores how people’s beliefs about emerging media, such as social media, algorithms and AI, influence their behaviors. We chatted with Lee about her research and what brought her to the SJMC.

What attracted you to UW–Madison and the SJMC?

UW–Madison has one of the strongest research communities in the world, and I have long read, cited and admired the work produced by the SJMC and other departments. I particularly appreciate the emphasis UW–Madison has on fostering community – within its departments, across disciplines, and with the broader Wisconsin community – to do impactful work that advances theory and helps real, everyday people.

How did you get into your field of research?

I grew up chronically online in a community where many of my friends, classmates, and teammates experienced mental health challenges that went largely undiagnosed and untreated. In the absence of formal resources, many of us experienced both great benefits from the online communities we were a part of, as well as serious harms from what we encountered online. These experiences led me to become interested in understanding the heterogeneous effects of emerging media on psychological well-being. Understanding when, why, and for whom people’s media use enhances or harms their well-being can help us design interventions that help people live healthier lives by maximizing the benefits and reducing harms. Overall, my research program aims to help people make more informed decisions about how to navigate the complex, fascinating, and sometimes dangerous world that is the Internet.

What’s something interesting from your research that will make us sound smarter at parties?

Ask your friends to guess what percent of social media users post toxic comments online. Usually, people go high: the average American thinks that almost 50% of people online have posted toxic comments at least once. In reality, it’s way fewer. When you look at all the comments on Reddit, only 3% of active users have ever posted something toxic. The key is that this small group posts a lot – they’re responsible for 33% of all the content on Reddit and take up disproportionate space online. So if you are scrolling and see a lot of toxic comments and feel like the internet is full of terrible people, remember: it’s not most people. It’s just a very tiny, very loud minority.



Photo: Andy Manis

FACULTY

“Once a Badger, Always a Badger”

Distinguished Teaching Faculty Debra Pierce retires after 20 years

By Hannah Lindow

After 20 years, Distinguished Teaching Faculty III Debra Pierce is retiring from the UW–Madison School of Journalism and Mass Communication.

When Pierce joined the SJMC in 2006, she brought with her over 20 years of industry experience. Since then, she has stood as a pillar of change and expertise in digital communication, strategy, public relations and campaign management.

“Deb has set herself apart through her deep dedication to innovation in her teaching,” said SJMC Director Kathleen Bartzen Culver. “Whether it was leading us to develop the university’s first course in digital

media for strategic communication back in the day or helping set the course for our new class on AI in strategic communication, she has been at the head of the pack.”

Pierce’s background in the agency world inspired her work in the classroom. She brought in real Wisconsin-based businesses for her students to work with, creating campaigns, strategic plans, and most importantly, connections.

“I am thrilled to have had the opportunity that SJMC afforded me to be a part of our department’s instruction and the university’s mission of teaching and service in the Wisconsin Idea,” Pierce said. “And through that service to our students, I think I’ve been an instrumental part of helping the students get the real life, hands-on experiences that they need in the classroom.”

One of Pierce’s favorite parts of teaching at the SJMC is fostering relationships and connections with students, even past graduation. She cherishes the full-circle moments of bringing alumni back to the classroom to speak to her students about the world of strategic communication.

“One of the most rewarding parts of my entire career has been helping the students that I’ve mentored and coached succeed to get where they want to get in their career or personal life,” Pierce said.



Day of the Badger 2026: By the Numbers

\$79,979
raised in **1,848**
minutes

180
gifts given to the
SJMC

\$42,000
match from 22 generous
current and former BOV
members, including

Angie Dallman	Andy Katz
Ben Deutsch	Kim Kelleher
Scott Farrell	Rory Leyden
Dan Baumann	Anne Martino
Herman Baumann	Beth McGrath
Laura Brenner	Lee Newman
Betsy Brown (Wyatt)	Lance Pillersdorf
Mary Conway	Phil Rosenthal
Shoshana Dichter	George Stanley
Justin Dini	Ann Wessing
David Grossman	Dave Zweifel

One SJMC



Photo: Andy Manis

FACULTY

Awarding Excellence

Professor Dhavan Shah receives highest research honor from AEJMC

By Jackson Baker

The Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication selected Dhavan Shah, McLeod Professor of Communication Research, as the recipient of the 2026 Paul J. Deutschmann Award for Excellence in Research. The award recognizes those who have established influential and substantial research records in mass communication.

Shah received the Deutschmann Award after over 30 years of advancing political and health communication and computational social science research.

“AEJMC has been one of my intellectual homes for much of my career, so receiving the Paul J. Deutschmann Award is both humbling and deeply gratifying,” Shah said.

Shah’s research focuses on how communication can help people make better decisions, feel more supported and participate more fully in the world. He extended this work to examine the role of health communication in enhancing the quality of life for people managing chronic illnesses.

Shah began studying communication as an undergraduate at UW–Madison with guidance from renowned SJMC faculty members, including the late Jack McLeod, Ivan Preston, Sharon Dunwoody and James Baughman. Those early experiences motivated him to dive deeper into the impact of communication on politics and health. Now, decades later, Shah will receive the Deutschmann Award as a professor at his alma mater and one

of the most respected researchers in his field.

“I also see it as recognition of many students, collaborators, mentors and colleagues who have shaped this work. Much of my career has been built around collaboration and team science,” Shah said. “The award is a recognition of all of this collective work.”

Some of Shah’s recent research examined the potential and limitations of Large Language Models to simulate human collective behavior.

Today he is continuing his work exploring the impacts of emerging technologies on mass communication.

“I hope my work helps show how central communication is to political and health systems,” Shah said. “New tools like machine learning, computer vision and AI are powerful, but they matter most when connected to enduring questions about meaning, influence, inequality, incivility and public life.”

“I hope my work helps show how central communication is to political and health systems.”

COMEDY WITH HEART

Meet six SJMC alumni who are building bridges through comedy and entertainment despite a world determined to build walls

By Hannah Lindow



It's a long way from a J202 final pitch presentation in Vilas Hall to the mic on stage at a stand-up comedy club. But for these School of Journalism and Mass Communication alumni, storytelling and connection bridge the distance.

In an increasingly fractured world, comedy today feels like a sanctuary where people can laugh together, recognize themselves in one another, and forget about darkness and division for just a minute.

These alumni use laughter to find human connection, shaping culture in writers' rooms, on stage, and through their phone screens. While they work in different roles, they're united by their ability to find the strings that tie us at the center of their work.

They say their time in the SJMC taught them not only how to write, but also how to connect. And connection is the bridge between humor and humanity.

Here's where they are bringing the laughter and how they brought Madison with them.

Laugh, Then Listen

Charlie Berens (BA'10) took his Midwest charm and brought it nationwide. While at the SJMC, Berens witnessed the early rise of social media, and the idea that news and comedy could intertwine.

By 2017, Berens was selling out theaters across the Midwest as a stand-up comedian. However, he realized he wanted to use his talent of connecting with people to make a difference in the world, beyond simply making them laugh. Outside of his performances, he's served as an ambassador for Feeding America Eastern Wisconsin and has led an advocacy push across Wisconsin to raise awareness about the energy and water consumption of AI data centers.

"There's a lot of division in the world today, but there are issues we really do agree on," Berens said. "And finding those issues and giving people real tangible things that they could do so it's not just doom and gloom."

Throughout his career, Berens has established himself as a communicator, advocate and comedian.

"Once you can laugh, you can listen," Berens said.



Photo: Courtesy of Charlie Berens



Photo: Courtesy of Justin Mozer

Going Viral, Staying Human

Although Justin Mozer (BA'12) always enjoyed comedy, he never expected to work in the entertainment industry. That changed when a new opportunity introduced him to the rapidly evolving world of digital media.

In the 2010s, The Laugh Factory was an internet sensation, famous for its videos of comedians. Throughout his time there, Mozer helped to reimagine the company as a digital-first media brand and developing new ways to collaborate with comedians online.

Today, Mozer works for another internet sensation, TikTok, where he works on the development of sports, entertainment, comedy and music media.

Despite working across different industries throughout his career, Mozer said understanding people and creating relatable content remains the foundation of everything he does.

"When you get down to it, [comedy] is really about 'What's the human experience? What can people relate to?'" Mozer said.

Lights, Camera, Humanity

Before becoming an Oscar-nominated screenwriter, **Phil Johnston (BA'94)** spent the early years of his career in broadcast journalism. Reporting placed him face-to-face with people during some of the most emotional and vulnerable moments of their lives.

"Something I learned at Madison about covering breaking news, for instance, that if there's a house fire, obviously the best pictures are of the flames," Johnston said. "But the story is when you turn around and see the people who are affected by it."

After graduating from film school, Johnston went on to write and co-write films, including "Cedar Rapids," "Wreck-It Ralph," "Zootopia" and "Ralph Breaks the Internet," the last of which earned him an Academy Award nomination. His career in journalism never left him. It just transformed into a deeper understanding of humanity.

"Whenever I'm writing a screenplay, I interrogate the characters in my mind, or I write down a series of questions that I would have asked as a journalist," Johnston said. "All those kinds of things that just give you insight into the human condition."



Photo: Courtesy of Phil Johnston

Behind the Laughs

Kate Manegold (BA'10) didn't expect to end up in the entertainment industry. While at the SJMC, she explored roles with magazines, newspapers, and as a public relations intern. Storytelling and the ability to work with other people carried Manegold through her undergraduate years and straight to her professional career.

"I remember learning so much from those group projects," Manegold said. "I'm always so grateful for the experience of being able to work well with other people."

Today, Manegold works on social strategy for Netflix's comedy division, Netflix Is A Joke, developing content and managing talent like Bert Kreischer and Shaquille O'Neal, for various shows. She prides herself on her curiosity, adaptability and her ability to work with others, all skills she said stemmed from the SJMC.

"You don't have to be a specialist," Manegold said. "You just have to really be willing to learn and understand different communities."



Photo: Courtesy of Kate Manegold

Laughing through the Headlines

Brittany Radocha's (BA'11) interest in Jon Stewart's unique blend of politics and satire was first sparked in an introductory journalism course with Professor Hernando Rojas. While studying abroad, "The Daily Show" became a way to stay connected to home. This connection shaped not just what she watched, but the kind of work she hoped to do.

After graduating from the SJMC, Radocha landed a position as a production intern with "The Daily Show." She has since become a two-time Emmy-award-winning producer. Her day moves quickly and Radocha credits the SJMC for preparing her to manage tight deadlines, collaborate under pressure and be ready for anything. "We start everyday with a blank sheet of paper," Radocha said. "And by the end of the day we have a show to put out to the world."

By using comedy to deliver its message, "The Daily Show" offers viewers a different way to process the news.

"When the world looks dark, we can all sit in a room, and we can find some light in it together," Radocha said.



Photo: Courtesy of Brittany Radocha



Photo: Courtesy of Josh Burstein

Punchlines with Purpose

Long before **Josh Burstein (BA'08)** stepped onto the stage, his passion was in politics, working on former President Barack Obama's campaign and later for the Democratic National Convention.

To release the daily political tension, Burstein joined an improv class. He soon realized that the skills he was developing weren't exclusive to the stage.

"As a comedian, especially, you want to speak truth to power, sure, but I think it's number one connecting with audiences that are different than you and making them think about stuff," Burstein said.

Today, Burstein has combined his passions, using his comedy platform for grassroots storytelling and working for the Democratic Party. His studio, Green Screen Productions, uses comedies to offer hope and unity on tough political issues. For Burstein, comedy is a way to create understanding, spark curiosity and lead conversations with empathy rather than division.

"If you love Wisconsin, Wisconsin loves you back," Burstein said.

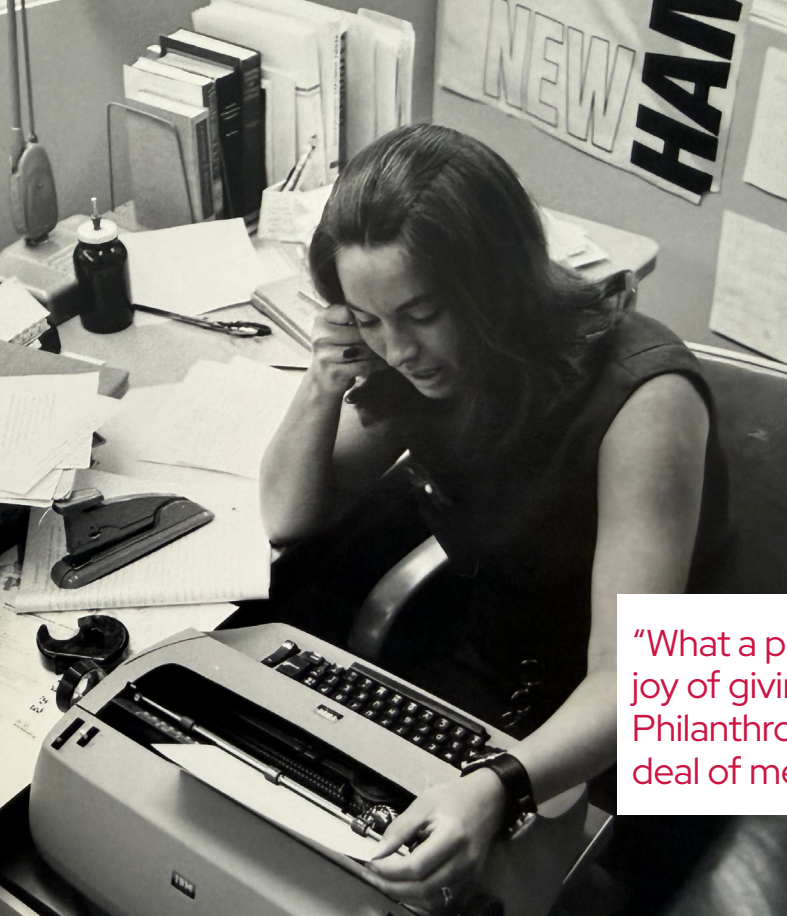


Photo: Courtesy of Sharon Stark

“What a pleasure to have the joy of giving while I’m alive. Philanthropy adds a great deal of meaning to my life.”

ALUMNI

Funding the Future

Sharon Stark establishes \$1 million investigative journalism professorship

By Kara Rheingans

After supporting investigative reporting interns at the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel for more than 20 years, long-time friend of the School of Journalism and Mass Communication, Sharon Stark is expanding her impact on journalism education.

This spring, Stark donated \$1 million to establish the Sharon Stark Professorship in support of investigative journalism education. Inspired by the works of dogged reporters like Nellie Bly, Carol Leonnig, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, she hopes her gift can inspire change far beyond the classroom.

“Truth triumphs because of investigative journalists. Investigative journalism and democracy are very much interlinked,” Stark said. “Democracy is dependent on strong journalism and holding power to account.”

The professorship funds an instructor who will help students gain critical skills that newsrooms need now.

Stark’s gift emphasizes people who have relevant professional experience or conduct applied research related to investigative work. “These are tough budget times in higher education. The SJMC is not alone in facing these challenges, but supporters like Sharon have a direct and immediate impact,” said Kathleen Bartzen Culver, Director of the SJMC. “This gift allows us to teach classes that wouldn’t otherwise be taught and give students advanced skills from top journalists.”

Originally envisioned as an estate gift, Stark believed that the world could use more investigative journalism immediately, so she moved forward with the professorship

last fall. “Years ago, I would look at donor walls and say to myself ‘someday I want to be one of those people.’ I assumed my giving would be as legacy gifts,” Stark said. “What

a pleasure to have the joy of giving while I’m alive. Philanthropy adds a great deal of meaning to my life.”

Alum and international investigative journalist and author Jacob Kushner (BA’10) will teach three courses in Spring 2027 as the first Stark Professor. Kushner’s work has appeared in dozens of publications, including The New York Times, The Atlantic, The New Yorker, Harper’s National Geographic, WIRED and more.

“It’s a real honor to be chosen as the first Sharon Stark Professor,” Kushner said. “Sharon has been supporting investigative journalism in Wisconsin since I was a student here myself. She visited my investigative journalism class with Professor Deb Blum, and she helped make our investigations possible.”

Stark credits her ability to fund philanthropy to her late husband Peter Livingston’s mother, Magdalena Friedman. An immigrant from Hungary, Friedman was a careful spender but had the opportunity to invest in shares of Manhattan real estate. Rather than be paid by the developers he represented, her second husband, a real estate attorney, often took shares in their buildings. Friedman eventually bought her own shares, which were later passed down to Livingston. This enabled him and Stark to make lasting impacts on causes for which they care deeply.

“It’s fun and a privilege to be a philanthropist. And, an honor to make a gift that Peter’s mom would have loved,” Stark said. “I can see the joy on her face knowing that because of her, I can endow an investigative journalism professor and help train the next generation of tough-minded reporters.”



Photo: Courtesy of the Pogorzelskis

ALUMNI

A Lasting Legacy

Steve and Brenda Pogorzelski establish \$1 million professorship in honor of Professor Kathleen Bartzen Culver

By Kara Rheingans

School of Journalism and Mass Communication alum Steve Pogorzelski (BA’83) credits much of his career success to the professional skills he gained and the supportive professors he met here and always hoped to give back to his alma mater in some way. This fall, he and his wife, Brenda, decided to do that by donating \$1 million to establish a professorship to honor the student-first legacy of Professor Kathleen Bartzen Culver.

“I wouldn’t be in a position to support the school in this way without the lessons that I learned while there,” Pogorzelski said. “Katy has inspired and motivated her students in ways few educators ever do. That’s why Brenda and I wanted to establish this professorship in Katy’s name. Our desire is that her legacy will live on.”

The Professorship will initially be called the SJMC Mentors Professorship until it is named for Culver five years after her retirement from UW–Madison. The Pogorzelskis allowed Culver to select the name of the professorship prior to her

retirement. She chose the name as a tribute to the many extraordinary teachers and mentors who have shaped generations of journalists, communicators and scholars.

“I am completely blown away by this kindness Steve and Brenda have shown me,” Culver said. “But it’s not only about me. It’s about the outstanding teachers who built the foundation of this school – people like Sharon Dunwoody, Jim Baughman, Jim Hoyt and so many others. Naming it the SJMC Mentors Professorship is my tribute to them and to the heart and soul they’ve poured into this community.”

The Pogorzelskis’ generosity ensures that mentorship, teaching excellence and the Wisconsin spirit continue to thrive at the SJMC for years to come.

“We all know that Katy’s impact on the SJMC will extend well beyond her retirement,” said Evjue Centennial Professor Doug McLeod. “This chaired professorship will certainly add to her tremendous legacy.”



2026 Alumni Award Winners

Distinguished Service Award
For professional contributions in journalism and mass communication.

- Abigail Buckwalter (BA’05)
- Carla Oakley (BA’81)
- Janell M. Wise (BA’06)

Harold L. Nelson Award
For distinguished contributions to journalism and mass communication education.

- Ronald Faber (PhD’79)

Ralph O. Nafziger Award
For distinguished achievement within 10 years of graduation.

- Molly Winding Dewey (BA’15)
- Shannon Malone Mazibuko (BA’16)
- Kynala Phillips (BA’19)

Sharon Dunwoody Early Career Award
For distinguished achievement in teaching and research within 10 years of graduation from the PhD program.

- Catasha Davis (MA’14, PhD’17)
- Rachel Kornfield (PhD’18)



Photo: Jeff Miller/UW-Madison

RESEARCH Bridging AI and Humanity

The new CODE Lab explores how digital exposure shapes human behaviors

By Hannah Lindow

The Computational Observation of Digital Exposure (CODE) Lab is beginning its work studying how digital exposure shapes human attitudes and behaviors. Launched by School of Journalism and Mass Communication Assistant Professor Ross Dahlke, the lab provides researchers with large-scale behavioral data, computational infrastructure, and a collaborative space to study online information environments.

“In information environments increasingly shaped by AI, we want to know: What content are people actually seeing and engaging with? How can we quantify the impacts of the information environment on beliefs, behavior, and well-being? What is the role of AI in shaping media consumption and beliefs?” Dahlke said.

The work in the lab will focus on two primary information domains: the open web and private messaging channels. To study the open web, the lab is developing an ongoing panel of 1,000 study participants who voluntarily download software to track the content they encounter online. To study private messaging, the lab will use technology that allows study participants to voluntarily share messages they receive on encrypted apps like WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger and Telegram, giving researchers their first direct window into what content circulates in these otherwise inaccessible spaces.

“The cutting-edge methods used in the technology industry can be leveraged to study human behavior more broadly,” Dahlke said. “I want to develop a lab where we can use the same types of data and techniques to measure things that are important to society.”

For Dahlke, an SJMC and Political

Science alum (BA’18), the CODE Lab brings his path full circle.

“The faculty and graduate students I learned from as an undergraduate shaped how I think about media exposures and effects, introduced me to computational methods, and ultimately pointed me toward a research career,” Dahlke said. “Coming back to Vilas Hall as a faculty member is a privilege. I want the CODE Lab to give today’s students the same kind of generative, collaborative research environment that the department gave me.”

By tracking content consumption across topics such as AI, health, and politics, the lab will produce data that future researchers, graduate students, and professionals can draw on to answer questions about the effect of media on beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes.

“I’ve had the opportunity to meet so many wonderful graduate students in my time here. And many of them are interested in collaborating,” Dahlke said. “Having a lab where we can gather people, interests, and perspectives in a single space is a powerful thing. Already, the graduate students in the labs have proposed and are starting to work on projects that are going to push forward our understanding of human behavior online and its effects.”



Scan to see more photos.

Top row: (left) Communications Crossroads, March 2026. (center) Democracy in the Balance with Andy Lack, March 2026. (right) BOV Roundtable, October 2025. **Second row:** Director Transition Celebration, May 2026. **Third row:** (left) J202 Final Presentations, December 2025. (right) 2026 James L. Baughman Award winners, April 2026. **Bottom row:** Spring Graduation Celebration, May 2026. (center) Inside True Crime with Rachel Bozich (BA’14), February 2026. (right) Alumni Connect in Milwaukee, November 2025.



**School of Journalism
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J202 QUIZ

It's impossible to forget the quizzes that kicked off each Monday morning J202 lecture. How well do you remember AP style, grammar and current events?

1. What tech company clashed with the Trump administration over whether to allow the U.S. military unrestricted use of its AI technology?
2. Fix this sentence: LOS ANGELES, Calif. – Sinners won best ensemble at the Screen Actors Guild’s 32nd Actor Awards on Sun., shaking up the Oscar race and setting up a showdown in two weeks at the Academy Awards. (3 errors)
3. What does the acronym CRAP stand for when it comes to design principles?
4. Fix this sentence: Coffee lovers—and their doctors—have long wondered whether a jolt of java can effect the heart. New research published Wed. finds that drinking caffeinated coffee did not significantly effect heart health. (4 errors)

1. Anthropoc, which makes Claude
2. LOS ANGELES – “Sinners” won best ensemble at the Screen Actors Guild’s 32nd Actor Awards on Sunday, shaking up the Oscar race and setting up a showdown in two weeks at the Academy Awards.
3. Contrast, Repetition, Alignment, Proximity
4. Coffee lovers – and their doctors – have long wondered whether a jolt of java can affect the heart. New research published Wednesday finds that drinking caffeinated coffee did not significantly affect heart health.

