Students Make a Political Impact with Pilot Fact Lab Class

by Dresden Romero, MFJS Communications & Marketing Manager

Have you ever watched a political ad and wondered about the accuracy of the facts? Students in the pilot Fact Lab class at the Department of Media, Film & Journalism Studies (MFJS) sought and shared the answer to that question as they analyzed and graded Colorado midterm election ads.

Fact Lab was launched in Fall 2014. The interdisciplinary course focused on critical fact-checking of political messaging for the 2014 midterm elections, and covered topics such as messaging, civic and political issues, logic, rhetoric, and image analysis.

Molly Homburger, junior political science major, gained an appreciation for the work that goes into compiling ads. “We looked at the ads with a different perspective – the research, claims, visual effects, colors, and wording,” said Homburger.

The five Fact Lab students found it to be a unique learning opportunity, according to Joe Fries, senior journalism major and political science minor. “I felt fortunate to be involved
as a part of the team. We enhanced our public works, gained experience, and got to know the process of political writing and fact-checking,” said Fries.

Chuck Plunkett, politics editor for The Denver Post, taught the course, and adopted a newsroom-style approach to the classroom. Guest speakers included Colorado Secretary of State Scott Gessler, DU political science professor Seth Masket, and other MFJS faculty. Students reported during Denver Post debates, including the Colorado Senate Debate, Colorado Governor Debate, and the Congressional District 6 Debate.

Plunkett said he was excited to help launch the Fact Lab course, and stressed the importance of fact-checking. “What makes an ad so dangerous and powerful is that it’s difficult to discern if it’s true or not. Political messaging is not to be overlooked, and it’s a hefty responsibility to take a complex subject and provide a thorough analysis,” said Plunkett.

As a part of Fact Lab, students developed critical thinking, research, and writing skills, and presented credible and useful fact checks of 2014 political ads. These analyses were posted on The Spot, Denver Post’s daily political and governmental news blog, and made available to journalists and concerned citizens across Colorado. The retweets and comments proved that students were able to spread awareness, and influence political conversations among politicians and media.

“As college students, you can get caught in the academic bubble. In Fact Lab, we took a real-world approach, tested our ideas and put our work out there,” said Vianes Rodriguez, junior political science major.

Senior journalism and history major, Anna Gauldin, agreed and noted that the course required an increased level of accountability. “Our content was made available to a large audience, with the potential to impact political campaigns. What we’re doing really matters,” said Gauldin.

Plunkett said the pilot class was a success, and he looks forward to the future of Fact Lab. “We’ve already had a remarkable run with several successful ad checks. This is an important endeavor.”

Click here to read more about Fact Lab, or follow @DUFactLab.