

**New York University**  
Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute  
**INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING**  
**Spring 2020**  
Professor: Melanie Sullivan Hicken  
Wednesdays, 7 p.m. -10 p.m. EST  
Zoom Virtual Meeting

**Course Description**

The objective of this course is to help students master basic investigative tools and techniques, as well as how to apply them to everyday reporting and major enterprise pieces. The class explores how to take advantage of the two main sources of information—documents and people—and discusses when and how to use online resources to both enhance a story or provide the foundation for a major project. Going deep is the essence of investigative reporting, which pulls together publicly available information, as well as harder-to-find material, to present the fullest possible picture. Students learn how to locate and mine publicly available information, sift through government, corporate and non-profit enterprise documents, submit Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests, use data reporting tools and much more. The course culminates in a deeply researched investigative story. In addition to navigating Internet mazes and wading through seas of documents, you will interview people by phone, knock on their doors, visit agencies and go see for yourself.

As important as mastering technical skills, you will learn to think critically and skeptically. You will understand how to take apart the irrepressibly sunny press release and carefully worded SEC filing while being able to deconstruct the opaque corporate earnings statement. You will be taught to read between the lines, to see the story within the story, and be able to forge a plan of attack for your own investigations.

In addition to a semester-long investigative reporting project there is a substantial amount of reading. We'll dissect great investigative stories from past and present.

**Learning Objectives**

In this course, students will:

- Master basic investigative tools and techniques and learn how to apply them to everyday reporting and major enterprise pieces
- Find, request, and mine public documents
- Cultivate a source network and understand how to negotiate interviews and relationships with sources

- Understand and use open source investigation tools to find people and information online as well as verify photos and videos
- Analyze and protect data for investigative projects
- Demonstrate awareness of journalism's core ethical values
- Demonstrate critical thinking, independence, and creativity appropriate to the role of journalism in a democratic society
- Work ethically in pursuit of truth, accuracy, fairness, and diverse perspectives

### **Course Structure**

This online course requires that you read texts, watch videos, complete assignments, and engage with materials on your own time, before class. Each chapter of this book corresponds to a week in the semester and contains lesson and assignment pages. The weekly flow will look like this:

1. Complete the week's lesson contained within the ebook
2. Complete the week's writing assignment in Google Docs and submitted in the assignment folder (be sure to give edit access)
3. Live class meeting in Zoom for lecture and discussion

Class sessions will begin with a short lecture or presentation followed by discussion and in-class activities. Each student is expected to engage with the course materials and one another. There is a heavy reading load. Your job will be to read/view/listen to the assigned material, complete brief quizzes and produce a range of writing and research assignments. You will also be expected to participate in class discussion through Slack where you, your fellow students and faculty can share information and ideas, and publish comments.

### **Readings**

**Investigative Reporting ebook:** Each chapter corresponds to a week in the semester and contains lesson and assignment pages. All lessons are contained or linked within this book, which consists of readings, videos, and images. Some weeks you'll take a quiz. Discussions occur in Slack. Your assignments will be written and edited in Google Docs and published on The Click, as appropriate.

### **Course Requirements**

As has been said, "Showing up is 80 percent of life." We meet 14 times over the course of the semester. Students are expected to attend all class meetings over Zoom. If you are ill or have another valid reason you must miss class (death in the family, religious holiday, a massive snowstorm knocks the power out) inform your professor *before* class.

For all of us, paying attention is getting harder. Studies show that our attention span has been shrinking with the plethora of devices at our disposal that offer almost unlimited choice.

Nevertheless, during class is not the time to multitask—text, check email or Facebook, shop for boots on Amazon, swipe left or right on Tinder... you get the gist.

### **Grading & Assignments**

Final grades calculated as follows:

- Discussions\*: 20%
- Writing assignments: 70%, which include the following:
  - Investigative Journalist Case Study
  - Lawsuit article (750 words)
  - Political feature (750 -1,000 words)
  - Final investigative project (around 2,500 words)
- Editorial Professionalism\*\*: 10%

\*Discussions, both written on Slack and in-person during class, will be graded for:

1. Quality: Comments are original, reflective of the week's materials, and respectful of others
2. Creativity: Comments go beyond simply answering the question and attempt to motivate the group by introducing new perspectives and examples to stimulate thought and further discussion

\*\*Editorial Professionalism refers to the quality of your attendance, participation, and etiquette throughout the course.

### **Schedule**

*\*You'll find the reading and assignments in Investigative Reporting ebook.*

<b>Week</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Topic</b>	<b>Major Due Dates</b>
1	January 29	1. How to think like an investigative reporter	
2	February 5	2. Legal and crime reporting	
3	February 12	3. Public records and government regulators	<input type="checkbox"/> Case study due
4	February 19	4. How to find anyone online	<input type="checkbox"/> Lawsuit story draft due <input type="checkbox"/> Idea for final capstone due
5	February 26	5. Investigating website content past and present	

6	March 4	6. How to find sources and get them to talk	<input type="checkbox"/> Reporting plan / pitch for final capstone due
7	March 11	7. Exposing political corruption	
SPRING BREAK	March 16	NO CLASS	
8	March 25	8. Follow the money: Financial filings and corruption	<input type="checkbox"/> Lawsuit story final due
9	April 1	9. Government regulators	<input type="checkbox"/> Final capstone draft due
10	April 8	10. Process: Prepping, writing, and fact checking	
11	April 15	11. Data analysis for investigations	<input type="checkbox"/> Political feature draft due
12	April 22	12. How to expose fake photos and videos	
13	April 29	13. How to protect your data	<input type="checkbox"/> Political feature final due
14	May 6	14. Undercover reporting and other ethical quandries	<input type="checkbox"/> Final capstone due

### **Accommodations**

Students with disabilities that necessitate accommodations should contact and register with New York University's Moses Center for Students with Disabilities (CSD) at 212-998-4980 or [mosecsd@nyu.edu](mailto:mosecsd@nyu.edu). Information about the Moses Center can be found at [www.nyu.edu/csd](http://www.nyu.edu/csd). The Moses Center is located at 726 Broadway on the 2nd floor.

### **Diversity & Inclusion**

The Institute is committed to creating an inclusive learning environment. The Institute embraces a notion of intellectual community enriched and enhanced by diversity along a number of dimensions.