Business Journalism
Investigative Reporting
Professor Mike McIntire

Course Overview

Your objective will be to master basic investigative tools and techniques, as well as how to apply them to everyday reporting and major enterprise pieces. We will explore how to take advantage of the two main sources of information – documents and people – and discuss when and how to use computer data to both enhance a story or provide the foundation for a major project.

Throughout the course, the goal will be to constantly delve beneath the surface. Going deep is the essence of investigative reporting, which pulls together all publicly available information, as well as harder-to-find material, to present the fullest possible picture. Corporations and powerful individuals employ armies of PR experts, lawyers and lobbyists to ensure that only their version of reality prevails, and it is the lonely duty of journalists to dispel this fog of self-interest.

At least as important as mastering the technical skills will be learning to think critically and skeptically. The relentlessly upbeat press release, the carefully worded SEC filing or the late-Friday-afternoon earnings statement each, as a matter of course, should be probed for accuracy and omission. What important development went unsaid? Did the company chairman really resign to “spend more time with his family”?

Classroom activities will include deconstructing investigative stories that you will read ahead of time, forming a plan of attack for hypothetical investigations and discussing real-life scenarios with guest journalists. By the end of the course, you should be able to locate and decipher a company’s bankruptcy petition; find a CEO’s home phone number (even an unlisted one); test a lawsuit’s claim that a medical device is killing people; track down a former employee who has inside knowledge that you need; figure out which business interests are supporting a political candidate (and why); and much more.

Assignments

Major project:

Investigative profile of a company, organization or person. You will draw upon skills and resources learned throughout the course to prepare an in-depth story that pulls together all public information available on your subject, discerns the most compelling elements and presents it in an interesting way. The objective here is not necessarily to expose evidence of wrongdoing or scandal (although that would be great), but to
demonstrate convincingly that you have unearthed whatever there was to find. Before writing it, you will summarize your findings, and an explanation of steps taken and resources used, in a pre-story memo. You and I must agree beforehand on a story topic, and we will discuss in class how best to choose one.

**Short-term assignments (these are examples only):**

Find at least one lawsuit involving a company, go get it and write a story based on the allegations. Report it out further by researching the company and its products or services.

Research the history of a piece of New York City or State legislation affecting business, including visiting a municipal or state archive to trace its origins. Who proposed it and why? Who benefited?

Get a federal tax return for a major nonprofit and write a story off of it. Find out how to determine whether the organization is potentially violating tax laws by paying itself too much, acting as a commercial enterprise or defrauding its supporters.

**Reading materials**

In addition to staying abreast of the daily output of The New York Times, Wall Street Journal and other periodicals, you should familiarize yourself with compilations of prize-winning investigative journalism. A good place to start is the Pulitzer Prizes web site (www.pulitzer.org), which contains full texts of many award-winning projects. We will likely refer to many such stories during the course.

The one book that I ask everyone to read is “The Day the Presses Stopped,” by David Rudenstine, an examination of the Pentagon Papers case and its impact on journalism. We will devote a class later in the semester to discussing this book, and hopefully have the author join us.

In addition, there are numerous books that exemplify some or all of the methods and resources we will be studying, but a few are particularly relevant for any serious investigative journalist:

*The Investigative Reporter’s Handbook*, by Brant Houston, Len Bruzzese and Steve Weinberg (Bedford Books).


*All the President’s Men*, by Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein (Simon & Schuster).

Class Schedule (guest speakers TBA)

Week One
Course overview, including guidelines for major class project and interim assignments, and discussion of the basic steps for backgrounding a company, organization or individual. What to look for and where to find it. Developing an investigative mindset.

Week Two
Going to court: The importance of court files and how to find them.

We will review and deconstruct stories that drew extensively from civil lawsuits or criminal cases (New York Times story on court documents that exposed offshore tax shelters; Hartford Courant series on doctors whose fatal medical errors were inadvertently revealed in civil suits).

Assignment: Find at least one lawsuit involving a company, go get it and write a short story off of it, filling it out with additional information, gathered from elsewhere, that shed light on the company and its product or services. We will spend time in class identifying possible lawsuits.

Week Three
Pounding the legal beat: Contemporary court cases aren’t the only nuggets to be found in the rich vein of reporting material afforded by the American legal system.

We examine other sources, such as law libraries, law reviews and archived cases from the state and federal courts, and learn how to navigate specialized records, including Supreme Court decisions and briefs, case books and citation systems. Possible tour of the law library.

In addition, we will devote class time to work-shopping your ideas for investigative profiles, and discuss methods of organizing and structuring a long-form enterprise story.

Week Four
Following the money: Casting a net for information about the finances of a business or individual.

Using EDGAR to find company financial filings, Nexis for asset and UCC searches, bankruptcy court records, and government ethics filings for public officials. Going deeper by using local land records or unusual legal sources, like US Tax Court and federal inspectors general. Don’t forget family court (We review stories on what Jack

**Week Five**

The human factor: Following the paper trail to someone’s door, and how to cultivate someone who has what you need.

So you’ve got your documents, now how do you take the next step and find the people behind them? We discuss techniques for source hunting, and review stories that made use of human sources behind the documents (Wall Street Journal tobacco series, New York Times story on Staten Island ferry disaster). What works, and what doesn’t, when trying to get someone to cooperate. (We review and deconstruct Hartford Courant stories on fugitive money manager Martin Frankel, who stole $200 million and led federal agents on a global manhunt).

Also, we will work-shop the investigative profile pre-story memos.

**Week Six**

Money and politics: Where Big Business intersects with government.

Corporations and wealthy individuals all want something from federal, state and local governments, and are willing to pay to get it. How to find out what business interests are supporting which candidates, and why.

Assignment: Identify an interesting company, industry or person making large contributions to a New York State gubernatorial candidate, and discern their motives. Write a short story reporting your findings.

**Week Seven**

The regulators: Where to find records and data from government agencies that keep watch over the business world.

For every conceivable line of work, there is a government office that regulates it. We explore where to find hidden troves of information on labor grievances, nuclear plant safety, medical device errors and more. (We review and deconstruct New York Times series that used OSHA records to identify most dangerous factories; Los Angeles Times series on FDA drug approvals).

**Week Eight**

Paper-cuts versus carpal tunnel: The Internet’s great, but some things you just won’t find there.

When going deep on a story, the information trail in cyberspace will only take you so far. We discuss the circumstances that will take you out from behind the desk and
in to some musty records vault, and how to find those out-of-the-way stores of yellowed documents that sometimes yield gold. Such archives are found not just in government depositories but in unexpected locales, including university libraries and private research centers. (We will deconstruct Hartford Courant series on nuclear plant safety).

Assignment: Research either a piece of state or city legislation in New York that requires a search of municipal or state archives not available online, or an historical event that requires a visit to national or university archives.

**Week Nine**

Crunching data: Using computerized information to find a story.

Databases, once the exclusive domain of dedicated geeks, are now a standard tool of any investigative journalist. How to find and use computerized caches of information on businesses and occupations. (We review New York Times series on railroad accidents and Hartford Courant series on medical malpractice).

**Week Ten**

Thinking big: Applying investigative techniques to the ultimate journalism project, writing a nonfiction book.

How does one go about organizing and researching something as daunting as a book? We take apart a recent work of nonfiction that looks at the historically important Pentagon Papers case, “The Day the Presses Stopped,” by David Rudenstine, and figure out where he got his information and how he used it.

Also, we will work-shop drafts of investigative profiles.

**Week Eleven**

Uncharitable charities: When nonprofits are run like for-profits – or worse.

How many millions in charitable donations does, say, the United Way or Save the Children take in, and what do they do with it all? You’re entitled to know, but finding and deciphering the information can be tricky. (We review and discuss New York Daily News series on Hale House and New York Times story on Statue of Liberty fundraising).

Assignment: Find and report on a federal tax return for a major nonprofit, and write a short story.

**Week Twelve**

Pitfalls to avoid: What not to do as an investigative reporter.

Is it acceptable to misrepresent yourself in order to land the big story? When is a so-called “ambush interview” appropriate? How do you win a libel lawsuit (or, better yet, avoid being sued in the first place)? We review journalistic controversies, from Janet
Cooke to the case of Westmoreland v. 60 Minutes. Also, we examine what went wrong in CBS News’ Bush National Guard documents case.

**Week Thirteen**

Review of investigative profiles.