Investigative Reporting

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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 denial from politician or the late-Tuesday-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 an interesting civil suits, or suits, and write a story based on the allegations
  and documents in the court file. Report it out further by researching the parties involved,
  their backgrounds and legal records.

- 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.

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).

*Muckraking! The Journalism That Changed America*, by William Serrin
and Judith Serrin (New Press).

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

*The History of the Standard Oil Company: Briefer Version*, by Ida M.
Tarbell, David M. Chalmers and Mark Chalmers (Dover Publications).
**Class Schedule** (guest speakers TBA)

**Week 1**
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 2**
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 3**
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 Welch’s divorce case revealed about General Electric, and how obscure mortgage documents tripped up former Connecticut Gov. John Rowland).

**Week 4**
Backgrounding businesses: Knowing where to find public documents that explain what’s really going on with a company’s finances.

Who are penny-stock promoters and how do they scam people? Is a company that makes bold pronouncements and has a high-flying stock price necessarily healthy, or even legitimate? We explore how to decipher SEC filings to understand the true circumstances of a public company, and also find out where to get information about privately held businesses.

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 5
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 6
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 presidential candidate and discern their motives. Write a story reporting your findings.

Week 7
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; Times series on railroad safety).

Week 8
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 and New York Times stories on State Senate majority leader).

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 9
Crunching data, Part I: 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 10
Crunching data, Part II

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

Week 11
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 12
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.

Week 13
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 14**

Review of investigative profiles.