

Investigative Reporting 310

Spring 2008

Instructor: Ted Rohrlich

Time: Tuesdays 6:45 p.m. – 10:05 p.m.

Place: ASC 330

COURSE OBJECTIVE:

For you to leave this class with improved interviewing skills, the ability to check public records to help you verify or refute what people tell you, and the experience of conducting a basic journalistic investigation.

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

This class is about learning to report at an advanced level. It will cover basic tools of investigative reporting and some common pitfalls, such as being conned. There will be lectures and discussions in which you will be expected to participate. You will also have projects culminating in your own journalistic investigation.

READINGS/EXPENSES:

Assigned readings will be in the form of handouts or postings on Blackboard. You should expect to spend around \$50 for transportation and fees to copy public records. You are also expected to read at least one major newspaper every day. You may do this on line.

GRADES:

Your course grade will be determined as follows:

Your investigation—50%

Your short-term assignments—40%

Your class participation – 10%

ATTENDANCE: Since we meet only once a week, it is important that you attend each class. If you have to be absent because of illness or a family emergency, please notify me in advance by phone or e-mail and make arrangements to e-mail your assignment or have a friend hand it in or, in exceptional circumstances, ask for permission to turn it in late. In the event of an unexcused absence, late work will not be accepted.

If you do miss class, it is up to you to contact someone in the class (another student, not me) to find out what you missed and what's due next.

PLAGIARISM/ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

Plagiarism is defined as taking ideas or writings from another and passing them off as one's own; in journalism, this includes appropriating the reporting of another without clear attribution. The following is the Annenberg School of Journalism's policy on academic integrity as published in the university catalogue: "Since its founding, the USC School of Journalism has maintained a commitment to the highest standards of ethical conduct and academic excellence. Any student found guilty of plagiarism, fabrication, cheating on examinations, or purchasing papers or other assignments will receive a failing grade in the course and will be dismissed as a major from the School of Journalism. There are no exceptions to the school's policy."

ACADEMIC ACCOMMODATIONS

Any students requesting academic accommodations based on a disability are required to register with Disability Services and Programs (DSP) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from DSP when adequate documentation is filed. Please be sure the letter is delivered to the professor as early in the semester as possible. DSP is open Monday through Friday, 8:30 a.m.-5 p.m. The office is located in the Student Union room 301 and their phone number is (213) 740-0776.

INTERNSHIPS

The value of professional internships as part of the overall educational experience of our students has long been recognized by the School of Journalism. Accordingly, while internships are not required for successful completion of this course, any student enrolled in this course that undertakes and completes an approved, non-paid internship during this semester shall earn academic extra credit herein of an amount equal to one percent of the total available semester points for this course.

INSTRUCTOR'S BIO:

I am an investigative reporter on the California staff of the Los Angeles Times. I have been with The Times for 25 years. Before that, I worked for the Bergen (N.J.) Record, the Richmond (Va.) Times-Dispatch and an alternative weekly, the Richmond Mercury. I also briefly held a number of other jobs, including working as a grip for a television commercial production company, driving a cab and delivering mail. I graduated from The Johns Hopkins University, where I was editor of the student paper. I am married and have two children. My work has received several national honors. This is my ninth semester teaching at USC.

COURSE OUTLINE:

Week One (Jan. 15) -- Overview

What are the principal responsibilities of a journalist? Of an investigative journalist?

What can lurk beneath the surface of a seemingly ordinary event?

Brief introductions to interviewing skills and public records research.

How to form an investigative hypothesis.

Finally, we'll view excerpts from the film "Erin Brockovich," in which a lawyer's assistant uses interviewing skills and public records research to unearth a scandal.

Homework: Form an investigative hypothesis by posing a question about some aspect of life at USC or in your current neighborhood that you are curious about and might want to try to answer in an investigative project. Advance a possible answer to your question. Then explain in 300 words or less how you would go about figuring out if your answer is correct.

Week 2 (Jan. 22) – Interviewing Skills

Guest Lecturer: Marc Cooper of the Nation and LA Weekly will talk about how to conduct a basic journalistic interview.

In class exercise:

Imagine letting a journalist into your life to explore some of your deeper feelings and then to tell your story however he or she sees fit?

Can you imagine trusting someone enough to do that?

Trust is what you're asking for when you ask someone for an interview.

Try it with a classmate you don't know well.

In this exercise, your classmate has just been named Student Journalist of the Year. You have been assigned to do a profile of him or her and you don't want it to be boring. So try to get some revealing information – perhaps by asking about a life-changing incident or an incident that shaped a decision to study journalism.

Homework:

Write an article based on your interview. E-mail the article to me, and to the classmate you wrote about, no later than midnight, Friday, Jan. 25.

Read the article that was written about you, and write down your feelings about it. Focus on how you would feel if your classmate's article were published and came to define your public persona:

Was the article accurate?

Fair?

Was it revealing or was it pabulum?

How did it make you look?

E-mail your thoughts to me and to the classmate who wrote the article by midnight Sunday, Jan 28. Be candid. Try not to worry about hurting your classmate's feelings.

Read two articles by next week's guest, Carla Hall, and come to class prepared to discuss them and ask questions about them.

Week Three (Jan. 29) Interviewing Skills, Part 2

Guest: Los Angeles Times reporter Carla Hall, one of the finest writers and interviewers at the newspaper, will discuss her techniques for getting people to open up about sensitive topics.

We'll also consider various broadcast interviewing techniques.

Homework:

Familiarize yourself with the Guide to Public Records in Los Angeles County compiled by Sue Horton and recently updated by Laura Castaneda, which you will receive via e-mail.

Take your own dip into the world of public records research by going to any restaurant that is at least five blocks from campus and asking to view its most recent public health inspection report, which by law has to be available upon request. Additionally, review the establishment's historical inspection record posted on the county's public health website. Include that information in a one-page article on what you found. The online information will be less detailed than what you will find at the restaurant.
<http://www.lapublichealth.org/rating/>

Week 4 (Feb. 5) Public Records Overview

A wide-ranging demonstration of what kinds of public records are available, on the Web and in government offices.

Followed by a discussion of: What makes a good investigative story? Where can you find examples?

Homework: **Due in part Feb. 12 and in part Feb. 26**--Identify an in-depth, *investigative* article or series of articles that you would aspire to have written and interview the reporter about how he or she got the story idea, gathered the information and wrote the article or series. In a paper of about 1,000 words, explain the story and your reasons for selecting it. Tell how the reporter got the story and any obstacles he or she had to overcome. Your interview with the reporter may be done in person or over the telephone but not via e-mail, although you may use e-mail for follow up questions. Among other places, you may find articles of interest at www.ire.org (particularly contest winners and finalists) and at www.pulitzer.org. **E-mail me no later than Feb. 12 with your first and second story choices and reasons for making them. Once I approve your story selection, you will have until Feb. 26 to conduct your interview and write and turn in your account.**

Week 5 (Feb 12) – Public Records Exercise

In-class exercise intended to show how important records can be in fleshing out a spot news story.

Homework: Take your next dip into the world of public records by going to civil court. Find a case that interests you and that might make a good jumping off point for an investigative project in which USC or a USC trustee, or someone else you're curious about, is being or has been sued. Photocopy the complaint and turn it in. Also, in up to 500 words, summarize the case, state what you would want to investigate further and how you would go about it.

Week 6 -- (Feb 19) Follow the Money

What you can learn from business and real estate records.

Homework: Complete your interview project.

Read articles to be distributed on the criminal justice system, which we'll use to examine high-stakes investigations that are not always well done.

Week Seven (Feb 26) – Criminal Justice System Overview

We'll examine the sketchy quality of some criminal justice investigations and consider questions such as why the innocent plead guilty and why eyewitness testimony is often weak.

Homework: Propose an investigative project of your own. E-mail me your proposal by March 2.

Read the following review by Roger Ebert of the film "The Thin Blue Line," which we will see in class next week as we continue to use the criminal justice system as a way to look at the quality of investigations. Know the basic fact pattern explored by the film by the time you come to class.

One dark night in 1976, a Dallas police officer named Robert Wood was shot dead by someone inside a car he had stopped for a minor traffic violation. The man who was convicted of that murder, a young drifter named Randall Adams, is currently serving the 11th year of a life sentence. The chief witness against him, David Harris, has been sentenced to death for another murder. In the tense last moments of "The Thin Blue Line," Harris confesses to the murder of Wood.

Those moments are the result of a 30-month investigation by Errol Morris, one of America's strangest and most brilliant documentary filmmakers, who sometimes jokes that he is not a "producer-director" but a "detective-director." Morris originally went to Texas to do a documentary on Dr. James Grigson, a Dallas psychiatrist nicknamed "Doctor Death" because in countless capital murder cases over 15 years he has invariably predicted that the defendants deserved the death penalty because they were sociopaths who would certainly kill again. While researching Grigson, Morris interviewed Adams, a young man who had no criminal record until the Wood case.

"Adams told me he was innocent," Morris remembered recently at the Toronto Film Festival, "but everybody in prison tells you they are innocent. It was only after I met David Harris that I began to suspect that the wrong man had been convicted of murder."

Although "The Thin Blue Line" assembles an almost unassailable case for Adams and against Harris, it is not a conventional documentary - not a feature-length version of one of those "60 Minutes" segments in which innocent men are rescued from Death Row. Although he makes documentaries, Morris is much more interested in the spaces between the facts than with the facts themselves. He is fascinated by strange people, by odd word choices and manners of speech, by the way that certain symbols or beliefs can become fetishes with the power to rule human lives.

Morris' first film was "Gates of Heaven" (1978), which I believe is one of the greatest films ever made. Ostensibly a documentary about two pet cemeteries in Northern California and the people who owned them, it is in fact one of the most profound, and funniest, films ever made about such subjects as life and death, success and failure, dreams and disappointments, and the role that pets play in our loneliness. Although "Gates of Heaven" has never failed to fascinate the approximately 50 audiences I have seen it with, it has never reached large numbers of people because of its subject matter; people think they don't want to see a movie about pet cemeteries, and only enthusiastic word-of-mouth has kept the movie alive (it is only recently available on home video).

Morris' next film, about the strange and wonderful people who can be found in and around a small southern town, was called "Vernon, Florida." It played on PBS in 1981. In the years since, although he has worked on several projects, there has been no new Morris film until "The Thin Blue Line." For a time in the early 1980s, he supported himself as a private detective. Then the case of Adams began to obsess him, and the result is a film that takes its viewers back to the events on the night when Wood was shot dead.

Morris has assembled many of the key witnesses in the case, including Adams, who seems passive and defeated about the fate that deposited him in a life sentence for murder, and Harris, who talks wonderingly about the fact that a person's whole life can be changed because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time.

"Is Randall Adams an innocent man?" Morris asks Harris.

"I'm sure he is."

"How can you be sure?"

"Because I'm the one that knows."

Morris' visual style in "The Thin Blue Line" is unlike any conventional documentary approach. Although his interviews are shot straight on, head and shoulders, there is a way his camera has of framing his subjects so that we look at them very carefully, learning as much by what we see as by what we hear.

In addition to the interviews, Morris uses staged reconstructions of the murder of Wood - the car without headlights, the pursuit by the police vehicle, the approach of Wood, the behavior of his fellow officer, even the lazy slow-motion whirl of a drive-in milkshake that flies through the air and falls to earth soon after Wood's bullet-ridden body.

Morris also uses other kinds of images. There are scenes from "Swinging Cheerleaders," the film that Adams and Harris saw together in a drive-in before the murder. (Harris said they saw the last show. Morris has discovered there was no late show on the night in question.) There are also close ups of physical evidence, of places, of clocks visualizing the impossible chronology of some of the testimony. We see family photographs that reconstruct moments in Harris' troubled childhood. We see guns, empty streets, newspaper headlines, all-night food stores.

The use of this footage is repetitive and rhythmic, and underlined by the cold, frightening original music score by Philip Glass. The result is a movie that is documentary and drama, investigation and reverie, a meditation on the fact that Adams was plucked from the center of his life and locked up forever for a crime that no reasonable person could seriously believe he committed.

Week Eight (March 4) – Assessing Credibility

How can you tell if someone is telling the truth?

Can you tell by looking at someone whether he or she is lying?

How can you guard against the temptation to believe someone because what he or she has to say fits nicely into your preconception?

We'll watch and take notes on the "Thin Blue Line," with a focus, for discussion purposes, on whether law enforcement authorities heard what they wanted to hear and believed what was convenient to believe as they "solved" the cold blooded murder of a police officer in Texas in 1976.

Homework: Begin work on your individual investigative projects. From now on, you are required to file brief weekly reports on what you have attempted to do and what you have accomplished each week.

Week Nine (March 11) – Things Are Not Always What They Seem

Guest speaker: Gigi Gordon, attorney and Director of the Post Conviction Assistance Center in Los Angeles will discuss some of her cases, including wrongful convictions she's helped reverse, and her theory that a cover up may have short-circuited the investigation of Los Angeles' biggest police scandal in recent years.

Homework: Read the Pulitzer Prize winning series, "The Shipbreakers," by next week's guest, Los Angeles Times investigative reporter Gary Cohn and prepare written questions for him.

Work on your own investigation and file your weekly progress report.

Week Ten (March 18) Spring Break

Week Eleven (March 25) Persistence-- Following Investigative Leads, Wherever They Lead

Investigative reporter Gary Cohn explains how he and colleague Will Englund won the 1998 Pulitzer Prize for investigative reporting, while both worked for the Baltimore Sun. Their project—on what happens to discarded ships and the men who help scrap them—began when Englund noticed and became curious about the giant aircraft carrier, Coral Sea, lying partially dismantled beside a dock in Baltimore's harbor. As Atlantic magazine correspondent William Langewiesche later reported: "Englund looked into the situation and discovered that the Coral Sea was a waterfront fiasco of bankruptcy, lawsuits, worker injuries, toxic spills, and outright criminality. Of particular interest to Baltimore, where thousands of shipyard workers had been disabled by asbestos, was evidence of wholesale exposure once again to that dangerous dust. The U.S. Navy, which still owned the

hull, was guilty, it seemed, at least of poor oversight. Englund's first report ran as a front-page story in April of 1996. The Sun's chief editor, John Carroll, then decided to go after the subject in full. He brought in his star investigative reporter, Gary Cohn, a quick-witted man who had the sort of street smarts that could complement Englund's more cerebral style.”

What he did, Cohn will tell you in his own modest way, was nothing you couldn't.

Homework: Continue working on your investigative project and file a weekly report on your progress.

Week Twelve – April 1 --Individual Meetings On Progress of Your Investigations

Homework: Continue working on your investigation and file a weekly report on your progress.
Read Chapter 1 of “When the Press Fails”

Week Thirteen – April 8 – When the Press Fails: Investigating Matters of National Security

Case study of how the New York Times, and most of the rest of the American news media, reported inadequately on the validity of U.S. government pronouncements in the run-up to the Iraq War.

What were the institutional reasons for the failures?

Homework: Continue working on your investigative project and file a weekly report on your progress.

Week Fourteen– April 15 – Common Pitfalls and Ethical Problems

As a reporter, there are temptations to pull punches to keep sources talking with you and to enjoy the comforts of pack journalism rather than striking out on your own.

Steps can you take as a journalist to avoid these.

In-class discussion of a variety of common ethical problems.

Homework: Continue working on your investigative project and file a rough draft of your story or a detailed memo on what you've found by April 22.

Week Fifteen -- April 22 – When Numbers Tell a Story Best

Los Angeles Times staff writer Doug Smith, who heads the paper's data analysis unit, will be our guest, talking about the kinds of stories in which computer-generated numbers best tell what is going on.

Week Sixteen– April 29 – Individual Meetings on your investigative projects to go over your rough drafts or detailed memos.

Exam Week – Date TBA: Turn in your final projects.

