

Journalism 310 – Investigative Reporting

Monday 6:45 p.m. to 10:05 p.m.

ASC 236

Syllabus – Fall 2006

Instructor: Gary Cohn

Goals

The goal of this course is to inspire you and teach you the practical skills and ethical principles that will allow you to become a responsible investigative reporter.

The focus of the class will be on learning the fundamentals of investigative journalism: how to choose a subject for investigation; how to identify human sources and persuade them to talk with you on the record; how to conduct an interview; how to use documents, and how to organize large amounts of material and present it in a fair and compelling way.

This class is intended to give you a strong foundation of reporting and writing skills that should allow you to do more interesting stories than most other journalists do. While the focus will be on learning practical skills, you should also develop a better understanding of the principles of the First Amendment and the role of an investigative journalist in our society.

We will also spend some time learning about the history and traditions of investigative reporting – from the early muckrakers through Woodward and Bernstein to modern day investigative journalists.

Outcomes

By the end of the course you should achieve the following:

- * Understanding of in-depth and investigative journalism and the role of an investigative reporter.
- * Ability to generate story ideas for investigative and in-depth stories.
- * Ability to identify and develop human sources.
- * Ability to conduct in-depth interviews.
- * Ability to identify and use documents and databases - both electronic and paper.
- * Understanding of, and ability to use, the federal Freedom of Information Act and

state open records and meetings laws.

- * Ability to organize large amounts of material.
- * Ability to write and present in-depth material in a compelling way.
- * Ability to plan for photos and graphics to illustrate in-depth stories.
- * Ability to work in collaboration with other journalists, as part of a team reporting effort.
- * Sensitivity to diversity issues in reporting and writing in-depth and investigative stories.
- * Commitment to accuracy and fair play. Understanding of ethical issues involved in investigative reporting.

Materials and required reading

Books:

Highly Recommended: The Investigative Reporter's Handbook: A Guide to Documents, Databases and Techniques, 4th Edition by Brant Houston, Len Bruzzese and Steve Weinberg. You may substitute an earlier edition, which is available in paperback.

Required Reading: I will hand out required reading material during class. Much of this material will be investigative stories/case studies. You will be expected to read this material, and bring in written questions about it.

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 email and make arrangements to email your assignment or have a friend hand it in.

Deadlines: You must hand in assignments by deadline. Late work will not be accepted.

Plagiarism

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 catalog: "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 this policy."

Academic Accommodations

Any student requesting academic accommodations based on 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.

Grading criteria: Your work will be evaluated according to its publishable quality.

The criteria are as follows:

- * A = Excellent work of publishable quality. Factors include quality of ideas, reporting, writing, originality and creativity, overall content, organization and adherence to AP style.
- * B = Good work. Publishable with minor changes.
- * C = Average work that requires substantial changes, including additional reporting, significant rewriting and correction of numerous style errors.
- * D = Poor. Work has serious flaws in terms of writing and reporting.
- * F = Unacceptable for these reasons: late (missed deadline), inaccurate, unfair, incomprehensible, factual errors or misspelled names. Plagiarism automatically results in an F.

Assignments

There will be seven outside assignments, designed to teach you interviewing skills, the use of court records and other public records, journalism ethics and other journalism skills. Some of these assignments will require going to court houses and locations in the Los Angeles area where public records are available.

There will also be a take-home final examination.

All of your papers should be sent to me by email at gary.cohn@latimes.com

Grading Percentages

The seven outside assignments will be worth a total of 50 percent of your grade.

A take-home final will be worth 40 percent of your grade. The take-home final will be designed to test and reinforce the reporting, writing, interviewing and analytical skills covered by the course. The take-home final also will cover the assigned readings and guest speakers.

Class participation – Class participation will be worth a total of 10 percent of your grade. You will be expected to regularly participate in class discussions and ask questions of our guest speakers.

A brief note about class participation: One of the most important things that reporters do is ask lots of questions. In this class, you will be expected to develop

this skill by asking questions and challenging each other and me.

CLASS SCHEDULE (Subject to Change)

INTRODUCTION

Week 1

Monday August 21

Course introduction and goals. What it means to be an investigative reporter: a noble

profession, one that can be used for good; the passion of an investigative reporter; the importance of gathering facts, information, and the pursuit of the truth. The importance of a clear, fair and persuasive presentation.

Information gathering: interviewing and public records. Thinking like a reporter. The many different ways of gathering information.

Where do ideas for investigative stories come from? What makes a good investigative story?

Ethics and standards: Review and discussion of ethics, stressing the school of journalism's commitment to academic excellence and ethical behavior.

Introduction to interviewing, followed by In-class interviewing exercise: Pivotal Moment exercise, from Roy Peter Clark, Poynter Institute

Resources used include:

---- The Big Chill: investigative reporting in the current media environment. Edited by Marylyn Greenwald and Joseph Bernt. Forward by Gene Roberts.

---- The Investigative Reporter's Handbook: A Guide to Documents, Databases and Techniques, Fourth Edition, Brant Houston, Len Bruzzese, Steve Weinberg.

----- Eric Nalder's IRE tip sheet on interviewing.

---- Write a 500 to 750 word autobiography, telling me something about yourself, your interests and goals. You should email this to me no later than 4 p.m. on Monday August 28. The email should be sent to gary.cohn@latimes.com

---- Read Shipbreakers by Gary Cohn and Will Englund, and email me a list of at least six questions about the reporting and writing of the stories. Please also bring a copy of your questions to class.

Part 1 – The Fundamentals and Traditions of Investigative Reporting; The practical and ethical considerations in dealing with human sources; Interviewing techniques; Observation and immersion journalism;

Week 2 Monday August 28

Case study: The Shipbreakers by Gary Cohn and Will Englund, a three part series that documented the dangers to workers and the environment when old warships are dismantled. We'll go through everything from how the reporters got the story idea to the reporting and writing of the stories, as well as talk about the impact it had. The series, published in the Baltimore Sun, won the 1998 Pulitzer Prize for investigative reporting.

Discussion about the fundamentals of investigative reporting, and how Shipbreakers used the different types of investigative techniques: everything from the use of records obtained under the Freedom of Information Act to court and other public records to interviewing techniques to reporting overseas.

First outside assignment: Suggest three investigative stories. Explain why you picked each story, how you would go about reporting each story and why you believe each of these stories would make a compelling and important story. One of the investigative stories should involve USC or campus-wide topics; a second should focus on the neighborhood or town where you grew up, and a third should focus on the neighborhood you live in while going to USC. Please explain your reasoning and proposed reporting techniques in detail. As always, please email this assignment to me at gary.cohn@latimes.com by 4 p.m. on Monday Sept. 11.

Assignment: Watch the movie All the President's Men and/ read the book and be prepared to discuss in detail the reporting techniques used by the reporters.

Week 3 Monday Sept. 4 – Labor Day – No Class

Week 4 Fundamentals of Investigative Reporting Monday Sept. 11

Investigative reporting fundamentals (continued), stressing interviewing techniques. Also an overview of the history and traditions and ethical principles behind investigative reporting. For part of the class, we will discuss the investigative reporting of Woodward and Bernstein that revealed widespread

corruption in the Nixon White House and helped lead to the resignation of Richard Nixon.

Second outside assignment: Select in-depth story (one that you would aspire to write), and interview the reporter about how he or she got the story idea, gathered the information, and wrote the article. This must be an investigative article or series (including sports), but not an editorial or a column. Cite your reasons for selecting the article. In your interview and in your paper, stress how the reporter came up with the story idea and how he gathered the information; public records used; interviewing techniques, the writing process, also discuss any obstacles that came up and how the reporter overcame those obstacles. The interview must be done in person or on the telephone (not by email, though you may use email for follow-up questions. Due Oct. 2.

Assignment: Read articles by LA Times reporters Gary Cohn and by Carla Hall, next week's guest speaker. Also read the column by former LA Times editor John Carroll on the newspaper's decision to publish controversial articles about Arnold Schwarzenegger and women.

Bring in a list of questions, paying particular attention to issues of getting people to talk about sensitive subjects and to the ethical issues involved in the reporting and writing of the stories.

Week 5

Monday Sept. 18

Interviewing; sensitive subjects.

Carla Hall, a LA Times reporter and formerly a Washington Post reporter, will discuss how to get people to talk on the record about sensitive topics. Among other stories, Carla will discuss the reporting, writing and decision-making that went into the LA Times' controversial story about Arnold Schwarzenegger and women. We will also discuss the pros and cons of publishing this story.

Assignment: Read the introduction to Miles Corwin's book, as well as several articles to be handed out. Corwin, an author and former LA Times journalist, will be next week's guest speaker. Bring in a list of questions about the reporting and writing process for next week's guest speakers, two of the project's authors.

Week 6

Monday Sept. 25

Immersion journalism and narrative writing.

Guest speaker: Miles Corwin, author and former LA Times reporter, will discuss

Immersion journalism and narrative writing.

Assignment: Read articles by LA Times reporter Andrew Blankstein, next week's guest speaker.

Part 2 – The use of public records in investigative reporting. During this part of the class schedule, we will be learning how to identify and use court and police records, business and corporate records, non-profit tax returns. We'll also be learning how to use the federal Freedom of Information Act and state open records laws. We may also have a session dealing with computer assisted reporting.

Week 7

Monday Oct. 2

The use of police and court records in investigative reporting. LA Times reporter Andrew Blankstein, an accomplished police reporter, will discuss how he used police and court records as well as his sources in several high-profile investigations involving Hollywood. Among others, Blankstein will talk about his recent stories involving private investigator Anthony Pellicano, Mel Gibson, Robert Blake and Michael Jackson.

Class presentations on reporter assignments.

Third outside assignment: Use of Court Records -- Go to the state courthouse downtown and identify a court case in which USC is the plaintiff or defendant that would make the basis for a good investigative story. Pull the court file and write a one or two page summary, explaining why you chose this case and summarizing some of the leads contained in the court files. Explain how you would use the case as a starting point, and what other steps you would take to complete this investigative story. Be sure to include the case number and case and be specific when quoting or paraphrasing from court documents. This question is designed to test your skill at identifying and using court records, and your creativity at spotting and pursuing investigative stories. One or two pages. Due Oct. 9

Week 8

Monday Oct. 9

The use of public records in investigative reporting, focusing on criminal justice and court records.

Guest speaker: Ted Rohrlich, LA Times reporter, discusses the criminal justice system, court records and sources and his Pulitzer-finalist series “And Justice for Some: Solving Murders in L.A. County.”

Fourth outside assignment: Court records (2): To be assigned. Due Oct. 16

Week 9
Monday Oct. 16

Public records – SEC business records .

Fifth outside assignment: Financial disclosure and campaign records. To be assigned. Due Oct. 23.

Week 10
Monday Oct. 23

Police and investigative reporting. Pulling an investigative story together, from the initial tip, through creative reporting and use of sources, through the use of public documents.

Case Study: LA Times reporters Scott Glover and Matt Lait will discuss how they got the explosive story about a high-ranking Los Angeles police official who helped to launder profits in his son’s cocaine ring.

Week 11
Monday Oct. 30

Computer-assisted reporting.

Sixth outside assignment: A hands-on computer assisted reporting assignment. To be assigned. Due Monday Nov. 6.

Part 3 – Putting it all together. How to organize large amounts of material and tell it in a compelling way. Also, more on the ethics of investigative reporting.

Week 12

Monday Nov. 6

Investigative reporting and narrative writing. Guest speaker: Los Angeles Times reporter Kurt Streeter. Streeter will talk about finding, reporting and writing the untold and uncommon story. He'll discuss the reporting strategy he calls the "fine art of hanging out," to get great detail. And he'll discuss how to turn all that information into a compelling story. Kurt will detail the reporting and writing of his recent series, "The Girl," an example of combining in-depth reporting and interviewing and narrative into a compelling series.

Also tips on forging one's way in the newsroom, from the perspective of a young reporter.

Week 13 --

Monday Nov. 13

Investigative reporting, fairness, accuracy and ethics. We'll be discussing several case studies in class. Also discussing the use of unnamed sources.

Seventh outside assignment: To be determined.

Week 14 – Monday Nov. 20

Anatomy of an investigative story:

Possible guest speakers: Los Angeles Times reporters Tracy Weber and Charles Ornstein, discussing their Pulitzer Prize winning investigation of King/Drew Hospital and their groundbreaking investigative reporting on problems in organ transplant programs.

Week 15 --

Monday Nov. 27

Final class. Review of the material covered during the class. I'll also be handing out your take-home final., which will be due on Monday Dec. 11

Final

Monday Dec. 11 -- Take Home Final Due

