

# **Investigative Reporting 310**

## **FALL 2006**

Instructor: Ted Rohrlich  
Time: Tuesdays 6:45 – 10:05 p.m.  
Place: Annenberg 225

### **COURSE OBJECTIVE:**

For you to leave this class with enough confidence to ask anyone just about anything and with the know-how to check a wide variety of public records to help you verify or refute what they say.

### **COURSE DESCRIPTION:**

The class is about reporting at an advanced level. It will cover the basic tools of investigative reporting – interviewing people and mining public records. It will also cover the pitfalls, such as being conned. There will be lectures and discussions in which you will be expected to participate. Many of the lectures and discussions will be led by guests who are accomplished journalists, specializing in a variety of fields. You will have small projects throughout the semester. You will also be expected to conceptualize and execute your own investigative project, which will take the place of a final exam. It can focus on just about anything you are journalistically curious about, on campus or off.

### **READINGS/EXPENSES:**

Assigned readings will be in the form of handouts. There are no required texts. But you should expect to spend \$25 to \$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:

Class Participation –10%  
Other Assignments—90% (Longer-term assignments will be given relatively greater weight than shorter-term assignments. For example, a three-week assignment will be worth three times as much as a one-week assignment.)

No Midterm or Final

### **ATTENDANCE:**

If you expect to miss class due to an understandable obligation such as attending to a family emergency, a medical problem, or a religious holiday, you will be excused if you contact me beforehand (either send me an e-mail or give me a call). Tardiness is unacceptable. **Three unexcused absences will result in an automatic “F” in the course.**

If you 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.

### **INSTRUCTOR’S BIO:**

I am an investigative reporter on the California staff of the Los Angeles Times. That means you won’t see my name in the paper very often. The projects I do tend to be complex and often take months—sometimes years. I have been with The Times for 24 years. Before that, I worked for the Bergen (N.J.) Record, the Richmond (Va.) Times-Dispatch and an alternative weekly, the Richmond Mercury. I have also had 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, with a B.A. in social sciences. I am married and have two children—one a young adult working in the film industry, the other a high school student. My work has received several national honors. An expose of police and prosecutors using jailhouse informants to produce phony murder confessions won the American Bar Association’s Silver Gavel Award. A study of inequities in murder prosecutions was a Finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for Public Service and won the Investigative Reporters and Editors Medal and the Society of Professional Journalists’ Non-Deadline Award. I was also a member of a team that shared the Pulitzer Prize for Spot News for coverage of the Los Angeles riots. This is my sixth semester teaching at USC.

### **PLAGIARISM:**

Plagiarism is defined as taking ideas or writings from another and passing them off as one’s own. The following is the 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 a disability is required to register with Disability Services and Programs (DSP) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from DSP. Please be sure the letter is delivered to me as early in the semester as possible. DSP is located in STU 301 and is open 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday. The phone number for DSP is 213-740-0776.

## **COURSE OUTLINE: Subject to change.**

### **Week One (Aug. 22) -- Course Overview and Dealing with People, Part 1**

What do we mean when we say “investigative reporting?”

Lecture and demonstration.

How do you get someone to trust you enough to open up?

Interview your teacher.

Homework: Read handouts of articles by next week’s guest, entertainment reporter Mary McNamara, cited by the editors of the Los Angeles Times last year as the paper’s finest writer, and come to class with five questions for her, which you will also turn in to me, focused on how she gets people to open up.

:

### **Week Two (Aug. 29) – Dealing with People, Part 2**

Lecture and discussion led by Mary McNamara on how she defies the publicist-driven conventions that result in most entertainment journalists settling for Hollywood pabulum and gets celebrities such as Dustin Hoffman and friends of Mel Gibson to be candid with her.

In class exercise:

Imagine letting a journalist such as Mary McNamara into your life for more than just a few minutes, to explore some of your deeper feelings and to tell your story however 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 in interview.

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

In this exercise, you will ask your classmate to tell you about an incident that shaped his or her life.

Homework:

Write an article based on your interview of a classmate. E-mail the article to me and to the classmate you wrote about by midnight, Thursday, Aug. 31.

Read the article that was written about you, and write down your feelings about it. Come to class prepared to discuss how would you like it if your classmate's account of you was published and came to define your public persona: Was it accurate? Was it interesting? Was it fair? Was it revealing or was it pabulum?

Read handouts of articles by next week's guest, Los Angeles Times journalist Erika Hayasaki, who has specialized in getting teenagers to open up to her on controversial topics such as why they drop out of school. Come to class with five questions for her about her reporting and interviewing techniques, which you will also turn in to me.

### **Week Three (Sept. 5)—Dealing with People, Part 3**

Discussion on interviewing techniques led by Erika Hayasaki.

Candid discussion on how it felt to be an interview subject.

Homework: Due Sept. 12: Read handout of the classic, psychologically oriented case study of the relationship between a journalist and source--"The Journalist and the Murderer" by Janet Malcolm--and write answers to these questions: How did the journalist Joe McGinniss ingratiate himself with the murderer, Jeffrey MacDonald? Were McGinniss' methods morally defensible? If so, why? If not, why? Also, what does Malcolm mean when she says that what journalists do is morally indefensible? Do you agree? Why or why not? Come to next week's class prepared to discuss and defend your thoughtful answers.

### **Week Four (Sept. 12) – Dealing with People, Part 4**

Discussion on questions raised by "The Journalist and the Murderer."  
When you get people to open up and trust you with their secrets, what is your responsibility to them?

Discussion: What makes a good investigative story? What makes a great one? Where can you find examples?

Combining interviewing skills with determination and a willingness to work hard to right wrongs:

Excerpts from and discussion of the film "Erin Brockovich," in which a lawyer's assistant uses classic investigative techniques to unearth a scandal.

Homework: **Due in part Sept. 19 and in part Oct. 3**--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](http://www.ire.org) (particularly contest winners and finalists) and at [www.pulitzer.org](http://www.pulitzer.org). **E-mail me no later than Sept. 19 with your story selection and reasons for making it. You have until Oct. 3 to conduct your interview and write your account.**

Homework: **Due Sept. 19.** Read handouts on the work of next week's guest, Los Angeles Times investigative reporter Terry McDermott, author of "Perfect Soldiers," a book that was the product of three years of reporting on the men who carried out the Sept. 11 attacks against the United States. Come to class prepared with five questions you'd like to ask him about how he did his reporting and/or what he learned, which you will also turn into me.

### **Week Five (Sept. 19) – Master Class**

Guest speaker: Terry McDermott on conducting a complex and dangerous investigation into the men responsible for 9/11.

The Washington Post had this to say about his book, "Perfect Soldiers:"  
"McDermott has talked to everyone -- everyone who will talk, that is -- and read everything, the result of which is what may well be, for now at least, the definitive book on the 19 men who brought such devastation and terror to this country..."

The New York Times said:

"...Glimpses [McDermott provides] into the hijackers' pre-9/11 lives not only underscore just how ordinary many of these men were, but also suggest, as Mr. McDermott writes, that it is 'likely there are a great many more men just like them' out there in the world. It ominously suggests how widely the idea of jihad has taken hold among middle class citizens in the Middle East, and it suggests that Al Qaeda has found willing recruits among Muslims who came from 'apolitical and unexceptional backgrounds.' Indeed, 'Perfect Soldiers' replaces the caricatures of outsize 'evil geniuses' and 'wild-eyed fanatics' with portraits of the 9/11 plotters as surpassingly mundane people, people who might easily be our neighbors or airplane seatmates."

Class discussion on the journalists you have selected to interview and the articles they have written.

Homework: Arrange an interview with the journalist you have chosen.

Homework: Read handouts on the New York Times coverage of the run up to the Iraq war.

### **Week Six (Sept. 26) Getting Conned**

Case study and discussion of how the New York Times, and most of the American press, was suckered into reporting that Iraq was home to weapons of mass destruction and was involved in the planning of 9/11.

What steps can you take as a journalist to make sure that does not happen to you?

Homework: Finish your journalist interview project. The story on your interview with an investigative journalist is due at next week's class.

### **Week Seven (Oct. 3) Assessing Credibility**

How can you assess credibility?

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 or helps you achieve your goal?

Case study: We'll watch and take notes on the masterful nonfiction film, "The Thin Blue Line," with a focus, for discussion purposes, on understanding 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.

Here is Roger Ebert's review of the film:

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.

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

**Week Eight – Oct. 10 – Master Class: You Can Do It**

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 do..

**Homework: Pick a topic you’d like to investigate yourself, prepare a brief written pitch for your idea and prepare to discuss it next week in class.**

### **Week Nine – Oct. 17 – Public Records, Part 1**

Class discussion on your investigative story proposals.

Lecture: An overview of public records: A wide-ranging demonstration of what’s available on the Web and a more detailed introduction to various specialized records, including how to look up and analyze real estate records, appellate court records, Securities and Exchange Commission filings as well as how to make Freedom of Information Act and California Public Records Act requests.

Homework: Obtain a copy of a search warrant affidavit. Write 250 to 500 words describing the investigation that went into the officer’s statement of probable cause, which he or she used to convince a judge that there was a good reason to authorize a search. Assess the strengths and weaknesses of the information presented.

### **Week Ten – Oct. 24 – Public Records, Part 2**

Class discussion on your search warrants.

Class exercise intended to show how to use other records to flesh out a spot news story.

Homework: Go to civil court. Find a case that interests you—that is either related to your project or that might make a good jumping off point for an investigative

project in which USC or a USC trustee is being or has been sued. Summarize the case and explain why it might make a good jumping off point and how you would go about reporting further on it in a paper of 250 to 500 words. Come to class prepared to share your thoughts.

### **Week Eleven – Oct. 31 – Individual Discussions on your projects and civil court experiences.**

Homework: Read handouts about the leaders of the Getty Museum abusing their institution's nonprofit status to benefit themselves and their friends. Learn how the Getty obtained and displays stolen art. Prepare at least five questions for the co-author of these articles, Los Angeles Times investigative reporter Jason Felch, who will be next week's guest.

### **Week Twelve—Nov. 7-- Investigating a Nonprofit**

Guest Speaker Jason Felch, Finalist for last year's Pulitzer Prize for investigative reporting, talks about investigating nonprofits in general and the Getty in particular.

Homework: Analyze the tax return of a non-profit you would be interested in investigating. These include charities, foundations and some universities. They are available at [www.guidestar.org](http://www.guidestar.org). Suggest an investigation you would like to pursue and explain what steps you would take, including who you would interview and what other records you would seek. Use your own judgment as to length

Read the "Altered Oceans" series in the Los Angeles Times, a landmark in environmental reporting that examines the state of the world's waters, and prepare five questions on how it was done for next week's guest, its principal author, Kenneth Weiss.

### **Week Thirteen—Nov. 14 – Environmental Investigations**

Guest speaker Kenneth Weiss, an environmental reporter for the Los Angeles Times, tells how to think really big on a story. Weiss set out to assess the health of the world's oceans and used a combination of print reporting and multi-media reporting on the Web to do a masterful job.

Homework: Read handouts of articles from the series "And Justice for Some," a Finalist for the 1996 Pulitzer Prize for Public Service, and the 1999 article "Why the Innocent Plead Guilty?" and come to class prepared to ask the author—your teacher—five questions about them.

### **Week Fourteen – Nov. 21 – Thinking Small, for Spot Investigations on TV, and Big, for Print Investigations of Criminal Justice**

View and discuss tape of short-form investigations provided by NBC4 investigative reporter and anchor Ana Garcia.

Your teacher discusses his series, “And Justice for Some,” which examines inequities in murder investigations and prosecutions in Los Angeles and his article, “Why the Innocent Plead Guilty?” which explores frailties of the criminal justice system as a whole.

**Week Fifteen – Nov. 28 – Individual Meetings to Discuss Your Final Project**

**Date To be Determined: Turn in your final project**

