

Journalism 310 – Investigative Reporting

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

ASC 236

Syllabus – Fall 2007

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.

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.

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 five or six 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 courthouses and locations in the Los Angeles area where public records are available.

You will also be required to propose, report and write one in-depth investigative story.

There will also be a take-home final examination.

All of your papers should be sent to me by email at gary.cohn@usc.edu by 6 p.m. on the date due.

Grading Percentages

The outside assignments will be worth a total of 30 percent of your grade.

The investigative story will be worth 30 percent of your grade. As part of this assignment, you will be expected to hand in story memos and a rough draft at different points in the semester (to be announced) and to be prepared to discuss your story, your progress and any obstacles during class sessions.

A take-home final will be worth 30 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 10 percent of your grade. You will be expected to regularly participate in class discussions and ask questions of me and 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 27

Course introduction and goals. What is 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 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.

Assignment: Read articles by LA Times reporters Gary Cohn and by Carla Hall, next class 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.

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. Please think about this carefully, one of these ideas can be developed as your semester-long investigative project.

As always, please email this assignment to me at garycohn@usc.edu

Week 2 Monday Sept. 3 – No Class; Labor Day

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 3 – Monday Sept. 10

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.

---- 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.

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 Sept. 24

Week 4 – Monday Sept. 17

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.

Week 5 – Monday Sept. 24

Investigative and in-depth reporting: Immersion journalism. How to get great stories through immersion journalism. How to tell them through narrative writing. And the ethics and reporting dilemmas involved.

Third outside assignment: Public records. Go to a restaurant and ask to see the most recent public inspection report, which you are entitled to under state law. Then check past records on the same restaurant at www.lapublichealth.org/ratings/

Then write up a memo on your findings, based on your visit to the restaurant, your inspection of the public record and your online search of past records. Due Oct. 1

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. We'll also be learning how to organize material in investigative projects. And we'll be discussing the ethics of investigative reporting, the use and misuse of anonymous sources and learning how to assess credibility of sources.

Week 6

Monday Oct. 1

Introduction to public records. Using the federal Freedom of Information Act and state open records laws in investigative reporting. (Among other things, I'll be showing you how to request your own FBI file). The use of online databases. We may meet in ASC 229, a computer lab.

Fourth 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. 8.

Assignment: Read stories by Ted Rohrlich "And Justice for Some: Solving Murders in L.A. County."

Week 7 – Monday Oct. 8

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."

Assignment: Fifth outside assignment (Search warrant assignment from criminal courts): To be assigned. Due Oct. 15.

Assignment: Pick a topic for your investigative project, prepare a written pitch to be discussed in individual meetings on Monday Oct. 15.

Week 8

Monday Oct. 15

One on one meetings to discuss your story proposals.

Week 9

Monday Oct. 22

Investigating business and not-for-profit corporations. We'll learn how to use several key databases, including the Securities and Exchange Commission database on corporate records. And we'll learn how to find and use public records pertaining to nonprofit corporations, including charities, foundations, and others.

We will meet in a computer lab for this class.

Week 10 – Monday Oct. 29

Investigative listening and defying conventional wisdom. Guest speaker: journalist and USC professor Marc Cooper

Assignment: Continue working on your investigative projects.

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Week 11

Monday Nov. 5

Assessing Credibility. Investigative reporting and ethics.

As part of today's lesson, we'll be discussing several case studies involving investigative reporting and ethics. We will also see and discuss the film "The Thin Blue Line" or the Frontline Documentary on the failure of most of the media to be skeptical enough of the administration's claim of weapons of mass destruction in the buildup to the Iraq War.

Assignment: Your rough draft is due next week by email to garycohn@usc.edu.

Please send it to me no later than 6 p.m. on Nov. 12.

Week 12

Monday Nov. 12

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 13

Monday Nov. 19

Computer-assisted reporting/investigative reporting. We may meet in a computer lab for this class.

I'll be handing back your rough drafts with suggestions. You will then have two weeks to rewrite and revise your draft. Your investigative project will be due on Monday Dec. 3, the final regular class period

Assignment: Read Battalion 316 by Gary Cohn and Ginger Thompson, a four-part series that documented how a CIA-trained Honduran army unit kidnapped, tortured and executed hundreds of suspected subversives during the 1980s, with U.S. government knowledge and complicity

Week 14

Monday Nov. 26 -How to report investigative stories from overseas. We'll be using Battalion 316 to discuss the reporting process overseas.

Assignment: Your final project is due on Monday Dec. 3.

Week 15 --

Monday Dec 3

Review of class. How to find a job that will enable you to continue learning and give you job satisfaction. Where to look for jobs as an investigative reporter.

Your investigative paper will be due on this date.

I'll also be handing out your take-home final, which will be due on Monday Dec. 17

Final

Monday Dec. 17 -- Take Home Final Due

INSTRUCTOR'S BIO

Gary Cohn, the winner of a Pulitzer Prize for investigative reporting, is a reporter with Bloomberg News Service and an adjunct professor at the University of Southern California's Annenberg School of Journalism.

A reporter for more than two decades, Cohn has worked for the Los Angeles Times, Baltimore Sun, the Philadelphia Inquirer, the Lexington (Ky.) Herald-Leader, the Wall Street Journal and for columnist Jack Anderson in Washington. Cohn has also served for two years as Atwood Professor of Journalism at the University of Alaska at Anchorage.

Many of Cohn's stories have exposed wrongdoing, raised important public policy issues and resulted in significant reforms. He won the 1998 investigative reporting Pulitzer for a series of articles in the Baltimore Sun that documented the dangers to workers and the environment when old warships are dismantled. Cohn has won numerous other national reporting awards, including an IRE Medal, a George Polk Award, and two Selden Ring Awards for investigative reporting, Sigma Delta Chi's first prize for investigative reporting and two Overseas Press Club Awards.

He also was a Pulitzer finalist in 1996 for a series of stories that documented how a CIA-trained Honduran army unit kidnapped, tortured and Executed hundreds of suspected subversives during the 1980s, with U.S. Government knowledge and complicity, and a Pulitzer finalist in 2002 for a series that suggested that university research on new drug therapies is being tainted by relationships with profit seeking drug companies.

Cohn was born in Brooklyn, N.Y. He earned his bachelor's degree in Psychology and Political Science at the State University of New York at Buffalo. He completed the first year of law school at the University of California at Berkeley, took a year's leave of absence to work as a reporter, and decided he liked journalism too much to ever go back.