**JOUR 539: Introduction to Investigative**

**Reporting**

**2 Units**

**Fall 2018 – Thursdays – 6-8 p.m.**

**Section:** 21564D

**Location:** ANN 408

**Instructor: Marc J. Ambinder**

**Office:** Media Center / ANN Lobby

**Office Hours:** TBD/By Appointment

**Contact Info:** ambinder@usc.edu , (202) 491-4304

**I. Course Description**

This course will be an overview of investigative reporting. You’ll learn about its history, why it’s important and how to do it. Some of that learning will be in the form of lectures, but much of it will be hands on. You will learn to overcome obstacles by overcoming obstacles while out in the field reporting. You’ll spend time in the courthouse pulling search warrants and trolling for other public documents that may yield investigative stories. You’ll learn to write public records requests. You’ll learn how to find databases online that you can use to produce stories of your own. Guests, including Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative journalists, will explain their best stories (and worst mistakes)!

Students in previous classes have had assignments result in stories in the Daily Trojan and, on one occasion, in the Los Angeles Times. Those are the kinds of stories we want you to find and publish in the Annenberg Media Center. You will be required to complete several assignments over the course. You may write stories based on public records, including search warrants, civil court files, health records and government databases. [Details of the assignments will vary and depend upon student interest.] There also will be an in-class final. I consider enthusiasm and curiosity assets. Please use them to participate fully!

**II. Overall Learning Objectives and Assessment**

This course is intended to give you a taste of investigative journalism. Unlike some reporting that is centered on press releases and press conferences, you’ll learn that investigative reporting is about finding stories people don’t want you to find and telling stories people don’t want you to tell. Whether it’s shining a light in a dark alley that was the scene of a police beating or giving voice to the impoverished tenants of an abusive slumlord, it’s reporting that serves a greater good. If you have the instinct to be a digger, we’ll give you the tools. If you’re a watchdog at heart, this course should inspire--and unleash—that inner guardian. By the end of this course, you should know how to find, report and write investigative stories at a beginning level.

**Course Outcomes:**

* You will have a solid understanding of what investigative reporting is and how it differs from other types of reporting.
* You will learn how to access and analyze public records that will help you build a strong foundation for your stories.
* You will learn how to spot stories that other reporter miss by asking questions that other reporters don’t ask.
* You will learn how to identify potential sources and how to make them actual sources.
* You will learn how to manage those relationships, especially as they pertain to investigative reporting.
* You will learn techniques for getting reluctant sources and subjects to be interviewed.
* You will learn how to look for, access and analyze the ever-growing amount of information on the Internet. You will learn to see the Internet for its incredible potential for investigative reporting, as well as for its considerable limitations and hazards.
* You will be exposed to the basics of computer assisted reporting and learn how to spot potential data driven stories.
* You will learn to be persistent, to think creatively, and how to get around the obstacles between you and the story you’re pursuing. You will learn that the best stories are typically surrounded by such obstacles.
* You will learn how to conduct yourself in an ethical manner and to approach your stories with a goal of being hard hitting, but always fair. What if this story were being written about me, you’ll learn to ask yourself. Would I think it was fair?
* You will learn to unleash the power of your investigative reporting by writing compelling stories that make the best use of all the information in your notebook, as opposed to merely dumping its full contents in front of the reader
* You may find a story or area of interest that could be developed into a Capstone or Thesis project.

**III. Description of Assignments**

There will be several homework assignments that highlight different elements of investigative reporting. They will focus on helping you find information, exploit that information, generate leads and figure out the best ways to approach sensitive sources.

Assignment 1: Perform an investigative scrub on your instructor.

Assignment 2: Create and submit a FOIA / CPRA request, and follow it through the process

Assignment 3: Pull search warrants and court documents in Los Angeles County

Assignment 4: Produce a memo on a restaurant with health violations

Assignment 5: Conduct an investigatory operational security review for a sensitive story

Assignment 6: Develop an investigative pitch/plan for a major story

**\*\* These might change.**

Additionally, class participation is an important part of your grade. Lastly, there will be a final exam that will draw from the course readings, lectures and assignments.

**IV. Grading**

**a. Breakdown of Grade**

| Assignment | Points | % of Grade  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Homework Assignments | Out of 40 | 50 |
| Investigative Pitch | Out of 10 | 10 |
| Class Participation | Out of 10 | 20 |
| Final | 100 (10) | 20 |
| **TOTAL** | **600 (60)** | **100%** |

**b. Grading Scale**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| 95% to 100%: A | 80% to 83%: B- | 67% to 69%: D+ |
| 90% to 94%: A- | 77% to 79%: C+ | 64% to 66%: D |
| 87% to 89%: B+ | 74% to 76%: C | 60% to 63%: D- |
| 84% to 86%: B | 70% to 73%: C- | 0% to 59%: F |

**c. Grading Standards**

All assignments will be edited on a professional basis. Each will be returned with written comments and explanations of any editing. Our style guide will be “The Associated Press Stylebook and Libel Manual.”

Your copy, whether in the form of a story or memo, should not contain any errors in spelling, style, grammar and facts. There should not be any omissions, either. In fact, any misspelled proper noun (even if it’s due to a typographical error) or an inaccuracy will result in an automatic “F” on that assignment. Any factual error also will result in an automatic “F” on the assignment. Accuracy is the first law of journalism. Professional journalists are expected to get their facts right, to spell and punctuate correctly, and to respect grammar and syntax. In case of doubt, check your facts and consult the AP Stylebook or a dictionary. It only takes a minute or two to avoid mistakes. The story you produce as part of the search warrant assignment and the memo you write based on your interview with an investigative reporter must be accompanied by a complete list of sources. These should include titles, phone numbers and email addresses for anyone quoted. Web sites must have URLs. Printed sources must have bibliographical information. We may randomly fact-check your work during the semester by using this source lists, calling your sources to thank them for their help and requesting feedback. Stories that are not accompanied by source lists will receive an F. Stories with partial source lists will be graded down.

**Traditional grades and grade point averages are assigned as follows:**

“A” assignments are accurate, clear, and comprehensive and require only minor editing.

“B” assignments require more than minor editing, and have a few style or minor spelling errors or an error of omission.

“C” assignments need considerable editing or rewriting and/or have many minor spelling and style errors.

“D” assignments require excessive rewriting; have numerous minor spelling and style errors, and should not have been submitted.

“F” assignments have at least one proper name misspelled, and/or one factual error.

Furthermore, your grade will be lowered for: Excessive AP Style, punctuation, and minor spelling errors; lack of clarity, organization; too many omissions

**V. Assignment Submission Policy**

All assignments must be uploaded onto Blackboard. They should be typed in 12-point Times New Roman, double-spaced. On the top left-hand corner of the first page, write:

Your name

Journalism 539

Page number

Word count:

Date assignment is due

Title of assignment: e.g. search warrant story, restaurant memo.

**VI. Required Readings and Supplementary Materials**

“Investigative Journalism: Proven Strategies for Reporting the Story” by William C. Gaines, First Edition, 2007.

“The Associated Press Stylebook and Briefing on Media Law,” edited by Darrell Christian, Sally Jacobsen and David Minthorn, 2013.

Dictionary: The following online dictionary will be the official reference for in-class assignments, homework, midterms, and finals: Merriam-Webster: www.m-w.com.

**News Consumption/ Other Resources**

As aspiring investigative journalists, it is imperative that you become consumers of good watchdog/accountability stories. You must follow the news and be familiar with what is going on around the world, the country, throughout Los Angeles and in your neighborhood. You should read news stories thoroughly every day, listening to radio news, and watching television and Web newscasts and ask yourself this: Is there a deeper more important story here. Please read at least one major daily newspaper or its website, as well as local and weekly news websites. Please check Blackboard regularly for any articles, messages, etc. In addition, the following websites may be useful to you when conducting research, or if you’re looking for investigative journalism tips: News University at www.newsu.org, ProPublica’s MuckReads, Poynter Institute at www.poynter.org, Investigative Reporters and Editors at www.ire.com and IRE’s ExtraExtra blog and Pulitzer Prize winning stories at [www.pulitzer.org](http://www.pulitzer.org).

**VII. Laptop Policy**

All undergraduate and graduate Annenberg majors and minors are required to have a PC or Apple laptop that can be used in Annenberg classes. Please refer to the [**Annenberg Virtual Commons**](http://vc.uscannenberg.org/) for more information. To connect to USC’s Secure Wireless network, please visit USC’s [Information Technology Services](http://itservices.usc.edu/wireless/support/) website.

**VIII. Add/Drop Dates for Session 001 (15 weeks: 8/20/18 – 11/30/18)**

**Friday, September 7:** Last day to register and add classes for Session 001

**Friday, September 7:** Last day to drop a class without a mark of “W,” except for Monday-only classes, and receive a refund for Session 001

**Tuesday, September 11**: Last day to drop a Monday-only class without a mark of “W” and receive a refund for Session 001

**Friday, October 5:** Last day to drop a course without a mark of “W” on the transcript for Session 001. [Please drop any course by the end of week three (or the 20 percent mark of the session) to avoid tuition charges.]

**Friday, October 5:** Last day to change pass/no pass to letter grade for Session 001. [All major and minor courses must be taken for a letter grade.]

**Friday, November 9:** Last day to drop a class with a mark of “W” for Session 001

**IX. Course Schedule: A Weekly Breakdown***Important note to students: Be advised that this syllabus is subject to change - and probably will change - based on the progress of the class, news events, and/or guest speaker availability. CONSULT THE INSTRUCTOR IF YOU’VE GOT DOUBTS..*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Topics/Daily Activities | Readings and Homework | Deliverable/Due Dates |
| Week 1 8/23 | **Introduction and course overview**: Who we are, who you are and why we’re here.Lecture: What it means to be an investigative reporter: Fairness, balance, accuracy and beyond (persistence, resourcefulness, refusing to take no for an answer). Evaluating stories tips. (Student exercise).  | [**“A Case of Doubt.”**](http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-lisker22may22-b%2C0%2C7724040.story)“Investigative Journalism,” Gaines, Chapters 1 & 2.**HOMEWORK**: **ASSIGNMENT** Due week 2. Perform an investigatory scrub on your instructor. Begin to think about a FOIA or CPRA request you might want to start. |  |
| Week 28/30 | **JOINT LECTURE/EXERCISE****The Hunt for Public records (and those that aren’t) Part I**: Lecture: They are the bedrock of investigative reporting. How do you find them, acquire them and analyze them to make your stories solid and compelling? Introduction to FOIA | Gaines Chapter 8.**HOMEWORK**: Draft a FOIA or a CPRA for a subject that you’re passionate about. DUE: Week 4 | Investigatory Scrub Due |
| Week 39/6 | **Operational Security Module 1****The Hunt for Public records (and those that aren’t) Part II.** Lecture: The Search Warrant Goldmine and other great documents.View clip from Erin Brockovich. | Watch “See It Now” broadcast on the Army/McCarthy hearingsTBD: |  |
| Week 4 9/13 | **The Hunt for Public records (and those that aren’t) Part III.** GUEST TBD: | Read **Dying for Relief**. | **Initial FOIA/ CPRA Requests Due to Blackboard / Sent In** |
| Week 5 9/20 | **The Pitch: How to develop an investigative story.****How to pull court records.** Lecture: How to write a public records request, state and federal.Case study: Puerto Rico death records.Case study: Southern California coroners’ reports for Oxycontin investigation.  | **HOMEWORK:** **TBD** |  |
| Week 69/27 | I**nvestigating Breaking News Events**. Lecture: How you can set yourself apart on breaking news stories by knowing how to dig and where. Case study: Las Vegas Shooting story. | Listen to NPR series on interviewing.The New Yorker’s [**Trial by Fire**](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2009/09/07/090907fa_fact_grann?currentPage=all), by David Grann. |  |
| Week 710/4 | **The Art of the Investigative Interview**Lecture: It’s one thing to ask the quarterback who just threw the game winning touchdown how he feels about the victory or the movie star who just won a Golden Globe about the film they were in. It’s quite another to interview the subject of an investigative story about the things you’ve been dredging up about them for the past weeks or months. How do you convince them to talk, even if they probably shouldn’t? How do you keep the interview from ending prematurely? How do you make sure you get what came for, especially if you may only get one chance?  | **Homework: TBD** |  |
| Week 810/11 | **Finding and Working Sources**: View clip from The Insider | Gaines, Chapter 4, 7.View " [**Quid Pro Quo**](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/expose/expose_2007/episode218/watch.html)," episode 218 of the PBS series EXPOSETBD |  |
| Week 910/18 | **Operational Security for journalists and their sources**  | Gaines, Chapter 12[**Understanding Financial Statements**](http://businessjournalism.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Understanding-Financial-Statements-2012.pdf)**.****READ ProPublica**Begin OPSEC assignment: Due Week 11 |  |
| Week 1010/25 | **GUEST: Isaac Aarnsdorf, ProPublica****How to Perform a Scrub Part of a Business/Charity**: Lecture: How to investigate businesses and non-profit organizations. | Computer assisted reporting handout.View “[**Crisis Management**](file:///C%3A%5CDocuments%20and%20Settings%5Cmlait%5CLocal%20Settings%5CTemporary%20Internet%20Files%5CContent.Outlook%5CXAK4KGLM%5CCrisis%20Management),” episode 207 of the PBS series EXPOSE. |  |
| Week 1111/1 | **A Primer on Computer Assisted Reporting Part 1**: Lecture: There’s nothing like going through a big thick stack of juicy documents. Well, except for the fact that, if there are too many of them, you lose track of what’s in them. You fail to see patterns. You lose sight of your own story. That’s where computers come in. We give you a primer on some of the tools that are available, tips on how to spot potential stories that lend themselves to this kind of approach, plus some hands-on classroom experience working with actual data that resulted in stories.In-class exercises with police shooting databases. Online research at [**http://data.ca.gov/**](http://data.ca.gov/)60 Minutes clip based on computer assisted story.View " [**Quid Pro Quo**](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/expose/expose_2007/episode218/watch.html)," episode 218 of the PBS series EXPOSE | Begin Investigative Pitch Assignment: Due Week 15 |  |
| Week 1211/8 | **Investigative Case Study: Breakdown of a top law enforcement official.****Guest: ROZ HELDERMAN, Washington Post**  Lecture: How do you take an enticing tip and turn it into a story? How do you take one piece of information and leverage that for more? Interactive class exercise. | Read <https://www.forbes.com/sites/danalexander/2018/08/06/new-details-about-wilbur-rosss-businesses-point-to-pattern-of-grifting/>And <https://www.propublica.org/article/ike-perlmutter-bruce-moskowitz-marc-sherman-shadow-rulers-of-the-va> | Pitch update. |
| Week 1311/15 | **Investigative Case Study: Outside speakers at the VA.** Guest Speaker Isaac Aarnsdorf, ProPublica |  |  |
| Week 1411/22 | No class: Thanksgiving break |  | [**Thanksgiving Recess:** Wednesday, November 21, to Sunday, November 25] |
| Week 1511/29 | **Hard hitting, yeah, but also fair, ethical and accurate.** Lecture: Class overviews. Investigative reporting is hard work. You want to push the envelope so your stories will have impact. At the same time, it is imperative that you conduct yourself in an ethical manner at all times; that you present your findings in a fair way; and that you do don’t make any mistakes in the process. It isn’t easy. And there’s no precise formula. But, we’ll provide you with some strategies for striking that balance.Core survey, instructor evaluation, and self-evaluation. Tie up all loose ends/questions. |  | Investigative Pitch Assignment DUE |
| FINAL EXAMS12/6, 7-9 p.m. | **Final Exam**Short essay questions. |  |  |

**X. Policies and Procedures**

**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 1 percent of the total available semester points for this course. To receive instructor approval, a student must request an internship letter from the Annenberg Career Development Office and bring it to the instructor to sign by the end of the third week of classes. The student must submit the signed letter to the media organization, along with the evaluation form provided by the Career Development Office. The form should be filled out by the intern supervisor and returned to the instructor at the end of the semester. No credit will be given if an evaluation form is not turned into the instructor by the last day of class. Note: The internship must by unpaid and can only be applied to one journalism class.

**Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems**

**a. Academic Conduct**

*Plagiarism*

Presenting someone else’s ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words - is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in *SCampus* in Section 11, *Behavior Violating University Standards* (<https://policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b/>). Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in *SCampus* and university policies on scientific misconduct (<http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct/>).

*USC School of Journalism Policy on Academic Integrity*

The following is the USC Annenberg School of Journalism’s policy on academic integrity and repeated in the syllabus for every course in the school:

“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 plagiarizing, fabricating, cheating on examinations, and/or purchasing papers or other assignments faces sanctions ranging from an ‘F’ on the assignment to dismissal from the School of Journalism. All academic integrity violations will be reported to the office of Student Judicial Affairs & Community Standards (SJACS), as per university policy, as well as journalism school administrators.”

In addition, it is assumed that the work you submit for this course is work you have produced entirely by yourself, and has not been previously produced by you for submission in another course or Learning Lab, without approval of the instructor.

**b. Support Systems**

*Student Counseling Services (SCS) – (213) 740-7711 – 24/7 on call*

Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention. engemannshc.usc.edu/counseling

*National Suicide Prevention Lifeline – 1 (800) 273-8255*

Provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org

*Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Services (RSVP) – (213) 740-4900 – 24/7 on call*

Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender-based harm. engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp

*Sexual Assault Resource Center*

For more information about how to get help or help a survivor, rights, reporting options, and additional resources, visit the website: sarc.usc.edu

*Office of Equity and Diversity (OED)/Title IX Compliance – (213) 740-5086*

Works with faculty, staff, visitors, applicants, and students around issues of protected class. equity.usc.edu

*Bias Assessment Response and Support*

Incidents of bias, hate crimes and microaggressions need to be reported allowing for appropriate investigation and response. studentaffairs.usc.edu/bias-assessment-response-support

*The Office of Disability Services and Programs*

Provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange relevant accommodations. dsp.usc.edu

*Student Support and Advocacy – (213) 821-4710*

Assists students and families in resolving complex issues adversely affecting their success as a student EX: personal, financial, and academic. studentaffairs.usc.edu/ssa

*Diversity at USC*

Information on events, programs and training, the Diversity Task Force (including representatives for each school), chronology, participation, and various resources for students. diversity.usc.edu

*USC Emergency Information*

Provides safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible. emergency.usc.edu

*USC Department of Public Safety – UPC: (213) 740-4321 – HSC: (323) 442-1000 – 24-hour emergency or to report a crime.* Provides overall safety to USC community. dps.usc.edu

**XI. About Your Instructors**

Marc Ambinder is an award-winning reporter and writer based in Los Angeles. He is a contributing editor at the Atlantic, where he served as politics editor. He was also the chief political consultant for CBS News and a White House correspondent for National Journal. He has written several books about national security.