Investigative Reporting – Spring 2015
J 339 F / J 395 30 (08035)
(07765, 08035)

Classes: T-TH 3:30 p.m. to 5 p.m., CMA 4.152
Lab: T-TH 5 p.m. to 6:30 p.m., CMA 4.152

Instructor: Ed Timms, Visiting Professional Fellow
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Office Hours: T-TH 2:15 p.m. to 3:15 p.m. or by appointment

Course Description

This class is based upon a “teaching hospital” model. You will learn essential investigative reporting skills: finding a good story, critical thinking, interviewing techniques, source development through traditional means and social media, obtaining documents and data analysis. And you will be putting them to use immediately.

You will learn how to organize and write longer stories, and how to produce basic multimedia elements such as interactive graphs or maps. The goal is for each student to produce a story that can be published in Reporting Texas, the School of Journalism’s online news website, and by a professional news organization.

The emphasis will be on producing stories that make a difference. Your job is to help the disenfranchised and the underserved, to expose questionable practices, previously unreported trends and wrongdoing.

Students individually will produce an investigative story and also work collaboratively on a group project. Group projects have been published in a major newspaper in previous years, but that only can occur if the work rises to that level.

We also will be exploring key issues for investigative reporters and editors in today’s work environment: ethics, legal decisions that directly impact investigative reporting, electronic surveillance and hacking.

Depending on the progress on story assignments, outside speakers may be available to share their investigative reporting experiences with the class.

Objectives

The primary goal is for students to acquire the necessary skills to produce high-impact investigative stories while conducting themselves ethically and professionally.

You will learn how to:

➢ Identify a good topic for an investigative story.
Write an effective story proposal and pitch your story.
Develop essential investigative reporting skills.
Think critically and ethically.
Produce accurate and fair stories.
Work collaboratively.
Produce multimedia elements.
Use labor- and time-saving techniques.
Use social media as a reporting tool and to increase the impact of your work.
Develop organizational skills that are critical when working on a long-term project.

Course Structure

Individual Assignment:
Each reporter must complete an investigative story. The story should contain roughly 1,250 to 1,700 words, although exceptions can be made for slightly shorter or longer stories with prior approval. At least five sources you interviewed must be quoted in the story and you must interview at least 10 sources. The story must contain original data analysis or documents that have not been the basis of a previous news story. Every story must be accompanied by at least two photos with cutlines and two multimedia elements (interactive graphics or maps, a short video, audio, a slide show, etc.).

Reporters must come up with a story idea and at least one alternate idea. We’ll discuss the ideas and agree on one. The story idea can be modified or changed with my approval if the reporting or data analysis suggests that a change in course is needed.

Group Project:
Reporters also will work together on a group project. This is expected to be a high-impact, data-driven project. The resulting story or stories will be based on original data analysis, documents obtained by the students and interviews. The project will include photos, “heat” maps and other graphics.

News Meetings:
Reporters will provide updates on their work at least once a week in a “news meeting” format. We will discuss story ideas, plan, problem-solve and critique work on individual stories and the group project. To be successful in this class, you will need to make steady progress throughout the semester and participate. A last-minute frenzy won’t work on an investigative story.

Reporting Log and updates:
Reporters will be expected keep individual logs that document their progress on individual assignments and the group project. The log must document a good effort at reporting, researching and writing your stories. It also must show progress every week.

The logs will be spot-checked weekly. Logs should show day-by-day who was called for interviews, the number of interviews conducted, web sites visited, open records requests that were filed, the amount of time spent on specific research, etc.

Here’s a hypothetical example:


Jan. 27: Spent two hours going through immigration-related DPS records obtained through open records request.
Jan. 28: Filed an open records request with Texas Department of Criminal Justice for database identifying inmates who are not U.S. citizens.

Jan. 29: Began rough draft of story, wrote for about 1.5 hours.

The log also should include links and copies of spreadsheets or documents that will be a part of the individual story and the group project. This saves you time and effort when the stories are being fact-checked. We’ll create individual folders for each story and the group project on Google Docs.

Labs:

Lab sessions mostly will be devoted to hands-on work. That is so you have the time to make steady progress on your assignments. Reporters can use this time to conduct interviews and data analysis from the classroom, research and to write their stories. Working outside the classroom on research or interviews during lab time may be an option, but only with my prior approval on a case-by-case basis. Students will be expected to provide specifics on who they will interview or which records they will review.

Grades

Grades will be based on each student’s individual investigative story, contributions to the group project, class participation and the reporting log. “Plus” and “minus” grades may be awarded.

Grading Metrics:

Final grades will be determined based on this ratio:

- Individual Story 30 percent
- Group Project Contribution 30 percent
- Reporting Log 10 percent
- Class Participation 30 percent

Individual Story Grades:

- **“A”** – Story is well-reported, sourced and researched. Story is fair. No more than minor editing is needed. All names, titles and quotations are correct. Photos and multimedia are included. All deadlines are met.
- **“B”** – Story needs major editing or some additional reporting (not both) but is completed. Photos or multimedia are included. Most deadlines are met.
- **“C”** – Story needs major editing and a lot of additional reporting. Most deadline are met.
- **“D”** – Some effort at writing or reporting the story was made. Deadlines were not met.
- **“F”** – Little or no effort at writing or reporting the story.

Group Project Grades:

- **“A”** – Reporter has a leading role in reporting, writing, data analysis and multimedia (at least two of these). The reporter’s work is fair and accurate. All deadlines are met.
- **“B”** – Reporter makes a significant contribution in reporting, writing, data analysis and multimedia (at least two of these). The reporter’s work is mostly fair and accurate. Most deadlines are met.
- **“C”** – Reporter makes some contribution to reporting, writing, data analysis and multimedia for the project (at least two of these). Most deadlines are met.
- **“D”** – Reporter makes some effort to contribute.
- **“F”** – Little or no effort is made.
Class Participation:
Students are expected to ask questions, offer opinions and intellectually challenge their colleagues. Curiosity, creativity interaction and the willingness to ask questions are fundamental to journalism. We also will have exercises from time to time that will gauge your investigative reporting skills.

Laptops and Cell Phones: Class participation is critical. Your input counts, and you need to pay attention to what your colleagues say. You can’t do that if you’re texting or surfing the web.

Attendance
Being present for classroom instruction is key to your success. Attending all classes is recommended. Strongly consider dropping the class if you have three unexcused absences. I expect you to be considerate of your colleagues and not disrupt their studies – so please be on time.

Textbooks
No textbook is required for this course. The Investigative Reporter’s Handbook, 5th Edition is a recommended resource. Students also will be asked to join Investigative Reporters and Editors. The annual cost for a student membership is $25, which gives you access to very useful tip sheets on a variety of subjects that will be discussed in class, databases and other resources. A discount on the handbook also is available to members.

Here’s the link: http://www.ire.org/membership/

Course Flags

Independent Inquiry:
This class may be counted toward the independent flag requirement. Independent Inquiry courses are designed to engage you in the process of inquiry over the course of a semester, providing you with the opportunity for independent investigation of a question, problem, or project related to your major. You should therefore expect a substantial portion of your grade to come from the independent investigation and presentation of your own work.

Writing:
This class may be counted toward the writing flag requirement. Writing Flag courses are designed to give students experience with writing in an academic discipline. In this class, you can expect to write regularly during the semester, complete substantial writing projects, and receive feedback from your instructor to help you improve your writing. You will also have the opportunity to revise one or more assignments, and to read and discuss your peers’ work. You should therefore expect a substantial portion of your grade to come from your written work.

Scholastic Ethics

Plagiarism is unacceptable. That means you cannot include someone else’s work in your stories without attribution. It is still plagiarism even if you change a few words or rearrange them. You cannot lift material from Wikipedia without attributing it. (Just to be clear, Wikipedia isn’t an acceptable source
of information for your stories under any circumstances – whether your attribute it or not.) Fabricating quotes or information in your stories is unacceptable. Do not lie to get an extension on a deadline or to get an absence excused. Do not submit work that you have done for another class as original work in mine.

Such behavior can have severe consequences at UT and in your professional life. Violating UT’s policies on academic dishonesty can lead to disciplinary action. You could fail a course or even be dismissed from the university.

Here’s a link to the Dean of Students website on Academic Integrity: http://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/sjs/acint_student.php .
And here’s a UT site with some very useful information about plagiarism: http://www.lib.utexas.edu/services/instruction/learningmodules/plagiarism/.

Course Schedule*

(*Subject to change and likely will change. Topics will be adjusted according to the needs to the students, the progress made on story assignments, field trip opportunities and to accommodate the schedules of working journalists who may be invited to speak. Deadlines also may be adjusted if necessary.)

Jan. 20
Class: Introductions. Review of syllabus. What do you think investigative journalism should be? What makes an investigative story?
Lab: Discussion of group project. Begin research on individual story ideas.

Jan. 22
Class: Investigative story ideas: where to look?
Lab: Attend storytelling panel discussion, 5th floor of the Belo Center.

Jan. 27
Class: Local and state government: the gift that keeps on giving.
Lab: Reporting, researching stories and data analysis.

Jan. 29
Class: Starter kit for backgrounding: the Pinocchios among us.
Lab: Students will make short presentations on their story ideas. PRELIMINARY BUDGET LINES FOR INDIVIDUAL STORIES are due Feb. 5. -will be made.

Feb. 3
Class: Open records requests and the law
Lab: Budget meeting on group project. Discussion of key concepts and stories.

Feb. 5
Class: By the numbers: data-driven investigations
Lab: PRELIMINARY BUDGET LINES FOR INDIVIDUAL STORIES ARE DUE. Reporting, researching stories and data analysis. Hands-on work with data if time permits.
Feb. 10
Class: It’s a crime: investigative reporting and the criminal justice system.
Lab: Reporting, researching stories and data analysis.

Feb. 12
Class: Tentative speaker: Terri Langford, award-winning investigative reporter for the Texas Tribune. The UT alum was named Texas Reporter of the Year in 2011 for her report on health care abuses.
Lab: Reporting, researching stories and data analysis. Also, writing and organizing an investigative story. ROUGH NARRATIVE OF YOUR STORY IS DUE (DOESN’T NEED QUOTES OR STATS).

Feb. 17
Class: Investigative reporting close to home: investigations into skullduggery on campus.
Lab: Budget meeting – progress reports on individual stories and group project.

Feb. 19
Class: Class failures: education and investigative reporting.
Lab: Reporting, researching stories and data analysis.

Feb. 24
Class: Asking the hard questions, empathy and street psychology: interviewing techniques for investigative reporting.
Lab: Reporting, researching stories and data analysis.

Feb. 26
Class: A quick and dirty guide to the courts.
Lab: Reporting, researching stories and data analysis.

March 3
Class: Unholier than thou: nonprofits and religious institutions gone wrong.
Lab: Budget meeting. FINALIZED BUDGET LINES FOR INDIVIDUAL STORIES ARE DUE. Discuss options for graphics and photos for individual stories and group project.

March 5
Class: Visualizing the story: multimedia and investigative reporting.
Lab: Reporting, researching stories and data analysis.

March 10
Class: Investigative reporting and ethics.
Lab: Reporting, researching stories and data analysis.

March 12
Class: Tentative speaker: Ken Martin, founder and editor of the Austin Bulldog, a nonprofit investigative site. Ken is responsible for many groundbreaking on government wrongdoing and political shenanigans.
Lab: FIRST DRAFT OF GROUP PROJECT STORIES ARE DUE. We will focus on getting the story into shape for the rest of the semester – editing, filling in gaps in the reporting, etc. sources if necessary

March 16-20 Spring Break
March 24
Class: Social media: How to find sources and spread the word.
Lab: Reporting, researching stories and data analysis.

March 27
Class: Census data and investigative reporting.
Lab: **FIRST DRAFT OF INDIVIDUAL STORIES ARE DUE.** We will focus on editing and filling in reporting gaps for the rest of the semester.

March 31
Class: Feeding at the trough: elected officials, public money and campaign financing.
Lab: Budget meeting to discuss progress on individual stories and group project. Reporting, researching stories and data analysis.

April 2
Class: Tentative speaker: Dallas Morning News Investigative reporter Jim Drew. His work on Ohio’s “Coingate” scandal was a finalist for the 2006 Pulitzer Prize for public service.
Lab: Continue work on group project.

April 7
Class: Getting it right: bulletproofing your story.
Lab: Reporting, researching stories and data analysis. **WE WILL BEGIN OFFERING COMPLETED INDIVIDUAL STORIES TO REPORTING TEXAS AND OTHER PUBLICATIONS. ALL ASSIGNMENTS FOR GROUP PROJECT SHOULD BE COMPLETED BY THIS DATE.**

April 9
Class: When minutes and hours count: breaking news and investigative reporting.
Lab: Reporting, researching stories and data analysis.

April 14
Class: Is it safe? Protecting your sources, your email, your records and your project.
Lab: Reporting, researching stories and data analysis.

April 16
Class: Diversity and investigative reporting.
Lab: Reporting, researching stories and data analysis.

April 21
Class: Business records.
Lab: Reporting, researching stories and data analysis.

April 23
Class: Bad medicine: investigative reporting and health care
Lab: Reporting, researching stories and data analysis.

April 27
Class: Environmental reporting.
Lab: Reporting, researching stories and data analysis.

April 29
Class: How to produce outstanding investigative reporting while covering a beat.
Lab: Reporting, researching stories and data analysis.

May 5
Class: The future of investigative reporting.
Lab: Reporting, researching stories and data analysis.

May 7 (Last Day of Class)
Class: Investigating job opportunities and career advice. Course Instructor Survey.
Lab: Investigating restaurants. What’s best to eat on the last day of class?

Students with Disabilities

Please notify me if you may require a modification or adaptation to accommodate a disability-related need. The University of Texas at Austin provides appropriate academic accommodations for qualified students with disabilities upon request. Students with disabilities may request appropriate academic accommodations from the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement, Services for Students with Disabilities at 471-6259 (voice) or 232-2937 (video phone) or http://www.utexas.edu/diversity/ddce/ssd.

Religious Policy

State law requires institutions of higher education to excuse students from attending classes and other required activities to observe a religious holy day. According to UT policy, students must notify me of their pending absence at least fourteen days prior to the date of observance of a religious holy day. If you must miss a class, an examination, a work assignment, or a project in order to observe a religious holy day, I will give you an opportunity to complete the missed work within a reasonable time after the absence.

Useful Resources for Students

➢ Sanger Learning and Career Center: http://lifelearning.utexas.edu/
➢ Undergraduate Writing Center: http://uwc.utexas.edu/
➢ Counseling & Mental Health Center: http://cmhc.utexas.edu/
➢ Career Exploration Center: http://www.utexas.edu/student/careercenter/
➢ Student Emergency Services: http://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/emergency/

Emergency Evacuation Policy

Occupants of buildings on the UT Austin campus are required to evacuate and assemble outside when a fire alarm is activated or an announcement is made. Please be aware of the following policies regarding evacuation: Familiarize yourself with all exit doors of the classroom and the building. Remember that the nearest exit door may not be the one you used when you entered the building.
If you require assistance to evacuate, inform me in writing during the first week of class. In the event of an evacuation, follow my instructions or those of class instructors. Do not re-enter a building unless you’re given instructions by the Austin Fire Department, the UT Austin Police Department, or the Fire Prevention Services office.

**Q drop Policy**

Texas law limits the number of course drops for academic reasons to six. Senate Bill 1231 says: “Beginning with the fall 2007 academic term, an institution of higher education may not permit an undergraduate student a total of more than six dropped courses, including any course a transfer student has dropped at another institution of higher education, unless the student shows good cause for dropping more than that number.”