**Princeton University JRN 445: Investigative Journalism**

To be taught fall 2016 by**Joe Stephens**, Ferris Professor in Residence and investigative projects reporter for *The Washington Post*.

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**Catalog description**

This course will reveal how investigative reporters use sophisticated reporting and researching techniques to produce in-depth articles that captivate readers and improve society, and how to obtain and analyze obscure documents and develop human sources. We will explore the document-based approach of the best reporters and the role of watchdog journalism in our society. Students will meet with some of the nation's most successful investigative journalists, and will head out in the field to see famous reporters in action.

**Requirements/Grading:**

Class/Precept Participation - 30%

Papers – 70%

**Focus of the course**

Students will discover how top investigative journalists root out corruption in public and private institutions. They will learn how to produce compelling, in-depth news pieces that bring positive change to society. They also will explore how the critical thinking skills used by the best investigative reporters, and the research strategies that they employ, can be used to advantage in other fields and in everyday life. Students will discuss current events with some of the most successful and innovative investigative reporters in the nation.

Students will examine the history and evolution of investigative reporting and discuss ethics. The course will explore the opportunities and challenges posed as accountability reporting moves beyond traditional media companies into new models of journalism that encompass the nonprofit world, crowd-sourcing, and social networking. Students will have weekly writing assignments in which they will express their views about investigative journalism and try their hand at investigative reporting and writing techniques. Many classes will include a visit by an award-winning journalist who will share his or her favorite reporting techniques. The speakers also will share tales of their in-the-field experiences, from Capitol Hill to war zones around the world.

**Readings**

\* *The Investigative Reporter’s Handbook* (5th edition) by Brant Houston and Investigative Reporters and Editors, Inc. (Bedford St. Martins, 2009).

\* *All the President's Men*, by Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein (Simon & Schuster; 2d edition, 1994).

\*At least two daily newspapers or their web sites, such as *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*.

\* At least one web-based investigative site, such as ProPublica.org or publicintegrity.org

\* During the semester, the professor will distribute additional required reading. Much of the material will be copies of recent investigative projects. In other cases, students will be given copies of raw public documents and be asked to determine what is newsworthy in the material, and what additional reporting could be done to confirm the information and turn it into a compelling news article. Some additional readings and assignments will be on breaking current events, and some readings will be tailored to individual students.

**Course requirements**

Students will have regular writing assignments and will produce one major report whose preparation will span the length of the course. The assignments will teach interviewing techniques; how to analyze court documents and other public records; the fundamentals of ethics; and how to write for clarity and impact. Students will be given updates on their major project throughout the course.

**Project**

Students will research and write a major investigative report. With advice and consent from the professor, students will choose a topic early in the course. The project will be broken into two parts – an early draft that details the student’s strategy for finding information, and the final project report, which will reflect all the techniques that the student has learned during the seminar. As part of the project, students will submit the name of a public figure they plan to background. Students also will interview and write a profile of a leading investigative reporter.

One of the most challenging parts of the class will be choosing a topic for investigation.

Basic questions that should be considered include: Why is this subject important? Will it serve to expose injustice, right a wrong, or surface important and previously unknown facts? Fully reported, does the material lend itself to an investigative storytelling format? Can you reasonably conclude reporting and writing on this topic by the end of the semester? I encourage you to begin reporting and writing on the project early; you ultimately may be analyzing hundreds of documents and interviewing dozens of people.

The final project report should exclude personal opinions while drawing a conclusion based on facts ascertained through reporting. It should contain material from both documents and interviews. It will be written in the third person -- no first person narratives. Length should be roughly 2,000 words. The final report will be accompanied by a list of each person interviewed and each document, web site and electronic record consulted in the course of the investigation. An essentially complete draft of the final project report will be due on the last day of class.

Students in past semesters have described completion of their investigative project as one of the signature accomplishments of their time at Princeton.

**Weekly memos**

Students will submit a double-spaced memo of about two pages in length (about 500 words) many weeks summarizing his or her work. The memos will vary, as directed by the professor. But the memos generally should include commentary on the student's weekly readings and on presentations by guest speakers; a list of documents and data analyzed during the week's research; and the progress made or difficulties encountered on the student's long-term project (interviews conducted, written sources reviewed, etc.) You may think of the memo as your weekly diary of the course.

**Deadlines**

All assignments are to be emailed to js5@princeton.edu by 5 p.m. the day before class. Use Word software and a 12-point font, double-spaced format, and make sure the paper itself has your name at the top. Deadlines are essential and absolute in journalism, and by necessity enforced to the minute. Consequently, any late assignment **will be docked a minimum of at least one letter grade,**with further markdowns for continued delays. Extensions will be granted for reasonable excuses but you must ask for and obtain approval well before the deadline. If you find yourself facing a choice between submitting imperfect work on time, or submitting perfected work late, ***always*** err on the side of submitting on time

**Accuracy**

As we will discuss in class, accuracy and trustworthiness are the bedrock of journalism. As such, all papers must be painstakingly fact-checked. Any factual error will result in a lowered grade.

**Attendance**

Attendance is required and will be a part of the final grade. Absences must be

and specifically excused in advance. The press of work for another course is not an acceptable reason for absence or missing a deadline.

**Class discussion**

This is a seminar. Vigorous and wide-ranging discussion will be expected in class and will directly affect final grades. Students are encouraged to bring reporting and writing problems to the full class for brainstorming on ways to obtain and powerfully convey information. An occasional quiz on readings will affect class participation grades. To facilitate discussion, **mobile phones and email may not be used during class.**

**Office conferences**

Students will meet with me once every two weeks to discuss progress on their short- and long-term assignments. Sign up on WASS the week before. If you are going to have to miss an office appointment or be late, please let me know.

**Academic integrity**

This course follows Princeton University policies on plagiarism, stated in *Rights, Rules, Responsibilities* and discussed at greater length in *Academic Integrity at Princeton*. Suspicions of plagiarism will be reported to the Committee on Discipline and may have serious consequences.

**Summary** **of major assignments:**

-- Profile of an investigative reporter, preferably one with experience relevant to the topic of your semester project. Due Oct. 4. About 1,000 words.

-- Detailed report providing fact-checking of statements by a public figure, preferably an elected politician or someone else related to the topic of your semester project. Due Oct. 18. About 1,000 words.

-- Formalized pitch memo for your major project. Due Nov. 8. About 1,000 words.

-- Essentially complete, fully polished draft of your semester project. About 2,000 words. Due Dec. 13.

-- Final semester project. About 2.000 words. Due Jan. 16.

**Grading details**

Class Participation, quizzes and related assignments - 30%

Periodic papers - 30%

Semester project - 40%

**Course plan**

*This is only an approximate plan for the seminar*. Topics and readings will change depending on speaker availability, developing news events and class interests.

***“ News is what somebody somewhere wants to suppress; all***

***the rest is advertising."***

**--Lord Northcliffe**

**Week One – Sept. 14**

**What is Investigative Journalism?**

**Course overview and goals.**

What is investigative reporting? How does it differ from other forms of journalism? What role does the investigative reporter play in society? Models of investigative journalism -- document-driven reporting versus source-driven reporting. The groundbreaking work of Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein. How to think like an investigative reporter. How reporters choose a topic. Using the “harm-versus-impact” rating system for story ideas, and the “minimum-story versus maximum-story” test. Also, basics of backgrounding an individual or government official.

**Week Two – Sept. 21**

**Documents, the Lifeblood of an Investigation**

The importance of documents to an investigation. How to locate documents. Developing a document-centric approach while researching articles. Writing a Freedom of Information Act request. How to make documents come alive in an article. Using the Internet and the "hidden web" to find documents. Triangulating mundane documents to bring out their investigative power. The hidden power of the lowly timeline.

**Week Three – Sept. 28**

**Human Sources and Their Development**

What is a source? Why do whistleblowers talk? How do you find and develop a source? The risky first approach. Filibustering on the phone. How to work from the outside-in while researching an organization. What is a reporting tripwire? How do sources manipulate journalists? The door-step approach versus the cold call. The vouching system. When to grant and not grant anonymity. Building in plausible deniability to protect a confidential source. Protecting sources from depositions and lie detector tests. How to orchestrate a source-guided Freedom of Information Act request.

**Week Four – Oct. 5**

**Investigating Politics**

How reporters use documents and sources to find political corruption. Students will learn how to read campaign finance records, personal financial disclosures, lobbying disclosure records and legislation. We will learn how to track official acts, and determine where there might be links.

**Week Five – Oct. 12**

**Breaking into major corporations and nonprofit organizations**

Piercing the veil to see what actually happens inside charitable organizations and corporations, both public and private. How to analyze non-profit tax returns and U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission reports. Fact-checking corporate claims.

**Week Six – Oct. 19**

**International Investigations**

In an increasingly globalized society, multi-country investigations become more important each year. But trans-border investigations are exponentially more difficult than local investigations. How do reporters deal with difficulties presented by language and cultural differences? What is a fixer? Dealing with autocratic regimes. Verifying facts in a closed society. Problems presented by ethnocentrism. The promise and peril of embedding with troops.

**Week Seven – Oct. 26**

**The Judicial System, and Triangulation**

Students will learn how to triangulate documents to bring out their full power.

Students will also brainstorm as a group on each other's semester projects

**FALL RECESS – No class on Nov. 2**

*Nov. 8 – Election Day*

**Week Eight – Nov. 9**

In this class, we’ll continue discussion of our reporting projects in progress, how to conduct international investigations, strategies for interviewing, and techniques for analyzing documents.

**Week Nine – Nov. 16**

**Project brainstorming session and potential field trip recap**

 We will brainstorm as a group on ways to report, research and write our individual semester projects.  Come prepared to describe your project, discuss and offer strategic advice to your fellow investigators.

**THANKSGIVING RECESS**– No class on Nov. 23

**Week Ten – Nov. 30**

**Organizing and Writing the Major Project**

How to plan, organize and write an investigative project.

**Week Eleven – Dec. 7**

**Ethics and accuracy**

The importance of ethics in journalism. The role of the ombudsman. The importance of fact checking.

**Week Twelve – Dec. 14**

**The Payoff**

Each student gives a 10-minute oral presentation of their final investigative project, including findings, difficulties overcome and lessons learned.

**FINAL PAPER – due Monday, January 16.**

 \* Resubmit final project with any final additions or corrections, based on the professor's comments.