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JRNL 414.01: Investigations

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Journalism 414 Investigative Reporting

Meets Tuesdays and Thursdays, 9:40 a.m. – 11 a.m., in DAH 361

Instructor

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Office Hours

Monday and Wednesday, 10 a.m. to 12 p.m.
And by Appointment

Course Description

The role of journalism is to inform the public on the issues and events that affect them. However, as reporters, we are often swamped by the news cycle, caught responding to events of varying significance and unable to step back and dig for the important and difficult stories that need to be told. As a result, many of us fail in our obligation to the public. Economic collapse shocks our business reporters. Our national security reporters are dismayed to learn of NSA surveillance.

In this course, we will focus on how to find, develop and publish stories that do not necessarily come out of the news cycle. Investigative reporting means bringing to light stories that the people involved would prefer to keep hidden. We will learn the methods of reporting and writing the investigative story for print, online and television. We will delve deep into some of the best investigative pieces and deconstruct these stories in order to learn how they were built. Students will learn how to make and use sources, how to acquire and use data and documents. Most importantly, they will learn how to dig. They will sharpen their watchdog reporting skills and launch their own investigations. Success will be gauged by your ability to produce stories that expose corruption and abuses of power.

A Note on Expectations

Journalists often bristle when they are described as stenographers who simply broadcast the words of people in power. Yet it's clear that media suffers the plague of reporters who do little to verify the truth of what they write. There are many causes of this plague, but the main cause is laziness. Doing good journalism, particularly of the investigative type, takes time and effort. The writer Elizabeth Wurtzel puts it well:

"It's not that hard to be a lawyer. Any fool can be a lawyer. It's really hard to be a writer. You have to be born with incredible amounts of talent. Then you have to work hard. Then you have to be able to handle tons of rejection and not mind it and just keep pushing away

at it. You have to show up at people's doors. You can't just e-mail and text message people. You have to bang their doors down. You have to be interesting. You have to be fucking phenomenal to get a book published and then sell the book. When people think their writing career is not working out, it's not working out because it's so damn hard. It's not harder now than it was 20 years ago. It's just as hard. It was always hard."

This class will be hard. Writing an investigative piece is far more difficult than covering a city council meeting or writing a quick news piece on a murder. With that in mind, please consider the time, effort and motivation required to do well in this class, and in this career.

Learning Outcomes

Successful students will emerge from Journalism 414 with:

- Experience finding, developing and writing the investigative story
- Understanding of the history and watchdog role of investigative journalism
- Experience holding public figures, intuitions, businesses and organizations accountable
- Improved reporting and writing skills
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- Experience filing public records requests
- Experience reporting away from the news cycle to uncover important stories
- Experience working sources for data, documents and insider information
- Experience mining databases for story ideas

Course Policies

This course requires significant time spent reporting off-campus. It requires excellent time management skills.

Classroom discussion is an essential part of this course. Attendance and active classic participation are essential to your grade. That means completing assigned reading and other homework before class. You are also expected to read and think like an investigative reporter. If you are adequately conversant on the news, we'll enjoy excellent discussion. As for the participation grade, you'll lose 5 percentage points for every unexcused absence.

A note on paying attention in the Internet age. Active participation requires your complete attention. Traveling in the online world, unless you are actively working on a story, will harm our discussion and hinder your grade.

All writing for this class must be original. As stated in the University of Montana Student Conduct Code, you may not submit for this course any assignment that you have submitted or will submit for another class or publication unless you receive prior approval from me. To do so without permission will result in an F for the assignment and could result in an F for the course. You may not recycle pieces previously written for publication. You must be able to identify the sources of all information you use. Upon request, you must

provide story notes and contact information for all sources. Published stories will win the reporter 100 percent on the assignment.

Rules of integrity. Cheating will not be tolerated. All students must practice academic honesty. Academic misconduct is subject to an academic penalty by the course instructor and/or a disciplinary sanction by the University. All students need to be familiar with the Student Conduct Code.

Plagiarism. Submitted work must be entirely original; you may not copy or borrow phrasing or sentence structure, unless you attribute clearly. If you are uncertain about what is or is not appropriate, ask me. Submitting the work of someone else as your own is a serious violation of journalistic ethics and the University of Montana Student Conduct Code. An act of plagiarism will result in an F for the course and possible disciplinary sanction by the university.

Collaborative efforts. Discussing stories among colleagues often helps you generate better story ideas, work through reporting challenges and improve your reporting and writing. Feel free to discuss your ideas and writing and seek feedback from other people. But the reporting and writing for this class must be your own.

Texts

- The Investigative Reporter's Handbook. Brant Houston and Steve Weinberg
- The AP Stylebook. No older than 2009. Online versions not acceptable. Use it!

Grading

- Assignments and quizzes: 80 percent
- Participation: 20 percent

Deadlines

Journalism is deadline-driven. A late assignment is a failed assignment. In rare instances involving documentable extenuating circumstances, such as hospitalization, I may grant an extension or, in the case of breaking news, make an alternative assignment.

Accommodation for Students with Disabilities

This course is accessible to otherwise qualified students with disabilities. To request reasonable program modifications, please consult with the instructor. [Disability Services for Students](http://life.umt.edu/dss) (<http://life.umt.edu/dss>) will assist in the accommodation process.