

## **JOU 4123: Investigative Reporting, Class No. 15861, Section 3G06**

Spring semester 2020, University of Florida  
Thursdays 3p to 4:55p, Rinker Hall 0110

### Description:

Students will learn methods and protocols used by investigative journalists and employ them to produce a significant investigative reporting project on a topic of public interest, subject to pre-approval by the instructors, that would be ready-to-publish by the end of the semester (roughly 12 weeks, allowing for syllabus week and spring break). Reporting may require a review of previously published news stories about the topic, extensive interviews with human sources, obtaining and reviewing volumes of public or private records and obtaining and analyzing data. You may elect to work with a partner in the class to complete your project, subject to approval by the instructors, and the reporting project may involve working with other UF students elsewhere in the College of Journalism & Communications specializing in other platforms, such as broadcast journalism or data visualization, also subject to approval by instructors. The class meets weekly, but students will be expected to report independently as time permits throughout the week. This is an intense course; our expectations are high. This is not a course in which you procrastinate and file the final project after an all-nighter. Worthwhile investigative reporting takes time and unfolds slowly as you put together pieces of a puzzle over weeks of sustained effort. This class requires substantial reporting, research and writing effort weekly. If you don't think you have the time to put into the class, it's best to sign up for it when you do.

### Attendance:

Requirements for class attendance and make-up exams, assignments, and other work in this course are consistent with university policies that can be found at <https://catalog.ufl.edu/ugrad/current/regulations/info/attendance.aspx>. An acceptable absence means you did not expect it due to a serious family crisis that has called you home, you became very sick — contagious or requiring a doctor visit, or you cleared it with instructors in advance and is truly a can't-miss opportunity. It is not acceptable to say you were tired or had a late deadline the previous night. We will persevere together past the semester's challenges and fatigue. More than one unacceptable absence will result in a loss of 10 percent of your course grade.

### Office hours:

Office hours for Prof. Bridis will be 10a to 2p Thursdays in Weimer 2066C. \*Please\* make an appointment in advance, whenever possible, to avoid waiting on the bench outside his office (appointments take priority). He is also generally available by appointment on other days or evenings. His email is [tbridis@ufl.edu](mailto:tbridis@ufl.edu). Office hours for Prof. Magoc are 9 to 9:30 at his desk near the western wall of windows in the INC. We will generally respond within 24 hours to email inquiries during weekdays or within 48 hours during weekends.

Grading:

<b>Assignment</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Points</b>
Attendance & Participation	10	100
Weekly memos (8)	20	200
Professional interview	20	200
Peer fact-checking	10	100
Final story	40	400

Attendance and participation: Your on-time presence is essential each time we meet, as is your engaged participation. Please note the acceptable and unacceptable absence criteria above. One unacceptable absence will result in a loss of 5 percent of your course grade; two or more will result in a loss of 10 percent of your course grade.

Weekly memos (eight of them): At least 300 words each, these are due at 6 p.m. Wednesday. They keep your instructors informed about story progress to elicit guidance. Memos should include a summary of reporting completed the previous seven days with detailed notes and quotes from interviews, human sources contacted (be specific — names, titles, phone numbers), documents reviewed, Internet sites visited and data analyzed. Include reporting roadblocks and reporting goals for the week ahead.

Professional interview: You will contact and interview, in person or by phone or by video conference, a professional investigative reporter working at a medium- to large-size news organization, subject to pre-approval by the instructors, and write and submit a 1,500-word essay about the conversation. The instructors may provide names and contact information for prominent journalists if you need help finding a willing volunteer. The essay must include at least: a concise summary of the reporter's most significant work and specific challenges overcome to complete that reporting; a description of the reporter's daily or weekly workflow; description or advice about how the reporter formulates project ideas; discussion of specific interview techniques with reluctant human sources; description about other, everyday or routine reporting challenges the reporter faces and how to overcome them. Although the essay will be not be due until later in the semester, it will be advantageous to begin earlier to accommodate the professional schedules of your selected journalists and your other reporting obligations for this course.

Peer fact-checking: This will be the linchpin to our story bulletproofing process. You will verify every fact in a colleague's story after its first draft has been submitted. Fact errors found before publication are what we seek. Fact errors found post-publication can be devastating and lessen the public trust in investigative journalism. For this reason, any fact errors discovered after publication of your colleague's story results in a failure of this assignment and thus a letter grade deduction in the grade you earn this semester.

Final story: You will complete by the end of the semester a ready-to-publish investigative reporting project on a significant topic that is subject to pre-approval by the instructors, either a print/online or broadcast version or a mix of platforms. Your audience will be dictated by the subject of your project, and the instructors as necessary will work to have it published outside north-central Florida if appropriate. The project will necessarily require you to research and read previously published news

stories by other news organizations on the subject, and it will almost certainly involve extensive interviews with human sources, obtaining and reviewing volumes of public or private records and obtaining and analyzing data whenever appropriate. You must be mindful of the time constraints of the semester so that you can finish on time, so we will strike a balance between a proposal that is too narrow in scope versus one that may be too ambitious. Ideally, a project will involve elements of accountability: to right a wrong, reveal injustice, or surface previously unknown facts. Consider writing about organizations or institutions that are subject to official regulation, or write about the lack or failure of formal regulation, or about underserved or powerless populations and the particular difficulties they face that may surprise readers. The instructors may provide project ideas for students who need help. For reporting projects that are particularly ambitious, subject to approval by the instructors, you may elect to work with a partner in the class to complete your project. If you are unable to complete your project before the end of the semester, you will have the option of writing a report of at least 2,500 words describing in detail your efforts, why your project failed and in hindsight what you should have done differently to be successful. Exercising this option will automatically reduce the points available to be awarded for your final story from 400 points to a maximum of 300 points.

#### Grading scale:

A = 90-100  
B = 80-89  
C = 70-79  
D = 60-69  
F = 59 or below

#### Class requirements:

We will use our computers and online services each week in the classroom, so students must come to class with a laptop and make sure it has an adequate charge. There are outlets for charging but not enough for everyone to use each class. Please use them only for classroom assignments. We will take breaks during classes for you to check messages, emails or social media accounts.

#### Grading policies:

<https://catalog.ufl.edu/UGRD/academic-regulations/grades-grading-policies/>

#### Accommodating students with disabilities:

Students with disabilities requesting accommodations should first register with the Disability Resource Center (352-392-8565, [www.dso.ufl.edu/drc/](http://www.dso.ufl.edu/drc/)) by providing appropriate documentation. Once registered, students will receive an accommodation letter which must be presented to the instructor when requesting accommodation. Students with disabilities should follow this procedure as early as possible in the semester.

#### Textbooks:

There are no required textbooks for this course. We encourage you to consider a \$25 annual student membership in Investigative Reporters & Editors and explore its website, especially its tip sheets and related resources. The 2020 IRE national conference is June 18-21 in Washington, and if you're interested in attending please let us know asap so we can work with you on logistics and try to find

money in CJC to help cover your costs. It's a fantastic learning and networking opportunity. We also encourage you to subscribe to IRE's free "Local Matters" weekly email newsletter:

[https://visitor.r20.constantcontact.com/manage/optin?v=001jNS004Ui3007md-9Ryd0WOKdq14U-VfK9aIRH18MLku7VRyaaHESUptkwHw-8FO3X8Dhpw6\\_U4bO-hrpYrlzmYZy\\_m-F01qUfYYiFg0mDpo%3D](https://visitor.r20.constantcontact.com/manage/optin?v=001jNS004Ui3007md-9Ryd0WOKdq14U-VfK9aIRH18MLku7VRyaaHESUptkwHw-8FO3X8Dhpw6_U4bO-hrpYrlzmYZy_m-F01qUfYYiFg0mDpo%3D).

You should also follow or add to a list the @FOIAFeed account on Twitter, run by the Freedom of the Press Foundation. Several times every day, it highlights notable investigative journalism from around the globe. Two textbooks are also highly recommended: "The Manual to Online Public Records: The Researcher's Tool to Online Resources of Public Records and Public Information," by Michael L Sankey and Cynthia Hetherington, and "The Associated Press Guide to News Writing: The Resource for Professional Journalists," by Rene J. Cappon.

#### Course evaluation:

Students are expected to provide feedback on the quality of instruction in this course by completing online evaluations at <https://evaluations.ufl.edu>. Evaluations are typically open during the last two or three weeks of the semester. Summary results of these assessments are available to students at <https://evaluations.ufl.edu/results/>.

#### Honesty policy:

UF students are bound by The Honor Pledge which states, "We, the members of the University of Florida community, pledge to hold ourselves and our peers to the highest standards of honor and integrity by abiding by the Honor Code. On all work submitted for credit by students at the University of Florida, the following pledge is either required or implied: 'On my honor, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid in doing this assignment.' The Honor Code (<https://sccr.dso.ufl.edu/process/student-conduct-code/>) specifies a number of behaviors that are in violation of this code and the possible sanctions. Furthermore, you are obligated to report any condition that facilitates academic misconduct to appropriate personnel.

Contact information for the Counseling and Wellness Center:

<http://www.counseling.ufl.edu/cwc/Default.aspx>, 352-392-1575; and the University Police Department: 392-1111 or 911 for emergencies.

#### Weekly schedule (subject to adjustments, which I will announce):

Jan. 9, Week One:

Course, instructors and class introductions

Overview of the class, grading, office hours, expectations

Jan. 16, Week Two:

Developing investigation ideas and pitches: where to look, who to ask, how to focus on a target

Submit prospective investigative project ideas

Jan. 23, Week Three:

Open records requests and the Freedom of Information Act: legal review, tips, best practices

Submit prospective investigative project ideas

Jan. 30, Week Four:

Deadline to obtain final approval from instructors for your investigative project.

Sequencing your reporting: When to talk to who, in what order? Working concentric circles to identify prospective sources who might be able to help or have information you need, and how to find them. Using clips, lawsuits, phone directories, social media and more to find sources. The value of talking to former employees. When to break glass without giving the subjects of your investigation ammunition to use against you? How long to wait for fair comment?

First weekly memo is due by 6 p.m. on Feb. 5

Feb. 6, Week Five:

Interviews: Scripting your questions, how to talk to reluctant sources, the value of door knocks, using anonymous sources, the value and pitfalls of speaking "off the record" with someone, evaluating the credibility of sources

Second weekly memo is due on Feb. 12

Feb. 13, Week Six:

Investigative best practices: timelines, indexed notebooks, transcribed interviews, write-as-you-go. Knowing when to write and when to keep reporting. Building an investigation episodically, the value of producing multiple hits to create buzz and momentum.

Third weekly memo is due on Feb. 19

Feb. 20, Week Seven:

Writing for impact: voice, art of the nut graf, narrative leads, characters, active language

Fourth weekly memo is due on Feb. 26

Feb. 27, Week Eight:

Data: how to interview data, how not to let numbers overpower your narrative

Professional interview assignment is due before class starts

Fifth weekly memo is due before March 4

March 5, Week Nine:

Spring Break (no class)

March 12, Week 10:

Protecting sources: Keeping confidential sources safe and how to survive a leaks investigation

Sixth weekly memo is due on March 18

March 19, Week 11:

Red-team editing: aggressive fact-checking prior to publication

Seventh weekly memo is due on March 25

March 26, Week 12:

Avoiding hoaxes: Learning from the mistakes of victims

Eighth, final weekly memo is due on April 1

April 2, Week 13:

Anticipating pushback prior to publication and developing your defenses proactively

Final project due

April 9, Week 14:

Organizing a publishing or broadcast plan and promoting your investigation most effectively

Deadline to edit a classmate's project

April 16, Week 15:

Final project edits, wrap-up

#### About your instructor:

Ted Bridis ("BRY-dis") was editor of the Pulitzer-winning investigative team for The Associated Press in Washington for 11 years before coming to the University of Florida. He is a founding editor of *Fresh Take Florida*, a news service covering state government by UF student reporters. He is also administrator of the new \$25,000 Collier Prize for State Government Accountability awarded each spring at the White House Correspondents' Association dinner in Washington. In addition to teaching, he works as a consulting editor with journalists internationally for Freelance Investigative Reporters and Editors, a project of Investigative Reporters & Editors Inc. Bridis was the first journalist to identify Hillary Clinton's personal email server and trace it to her home's basement. His team of AP reporters also was first to reveal the illegal foreign lobbying activities of Donald Trump's presidential campaign chairman, who was subsequently fired, indicted and imprisoned. He was AP's editor on the series on child-immigrant detentions that was a finalist for the 2019 Pulitzer. His team won the 2018 AP Media Editors deadline reporting award for coverage of Hurricane Harvey and its aftermath, and was a finalist for the 2017 IRE award for investigations triggered by breaking news. Bridis led efforts that won the \$10,000 Eugene S. Pulliam First Amendment Awards in 2014 and 2011, and he won the 2014 Shadid Award for Journalism Ethics and 2014 SPJ Ethics in Journalism Award. His team won the Pulitzer & Goldsmith prizes for investigative reporting in 2012 on NYPD intelligence programs. He is one of six AP journalists whose phone records the Justice Department seized in 2013 as part of a criminal leaks case involving a major terrorism investigation, which led to stronger press protections under new federal regulations. He was one of AP's seven analysts since 2004 responsible for calling winners in national elections, and his call in 2016 allowed AP to be the first new organization to project Donald Trump winning the presidency. Bridis previously covered technology, hackers, national security and the Justice Department for the AP in Washington, where he had worked since 1998. He spent two years at the Wall Street Journal, where he covered technology policy and computer and national security. He witnessed Flight 77 crash into the

Pentagon and was first to report it to his editors; the Journal subsequently won the 2002 Pulitzer for Breaking News Reporting for its 9/11 coverage. He returned to AP to head coverage of the 9/11 terrorism investigations. He has a journalism degree from the University of Missouri.

Ethan Magoc is the breaking news editor in the Innovation News Center, home to WUFT News, and a founding editor of *Fresh Take Florida*. He worked for two years at the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette as a social media editor, and before that spent a summer at Arizona State University as a News21 fellow reporting on the voting rights battle during the lead-up to the 2012 election. He also reported for the Erie Times-News while in college and worked as an online editor at WUFT after receiving his master's degree from UF. Ethan is the creator of WUFT's The Point, a daily morning newsletter covering local and state news of interest to public media supporters in Florida.