

PUR4243: Investigations for Social Change

Instructor: Steve Horn
Thursdays from 10:40-11:30 AM ET on Zoom
Office Location: Instructor is in San Diego, CA
Contact Info: shorn@ufl.edu, 262-705-5856 for texting
or Canvas to message
Virtual Office Hours: Flexible, By Appointment

Required Texts

All readings, videos, or other materials to review pre-class will be provided on Canvas and no textbook purchase is required. All assigned readings or multimedia engagements (watching or listening) in the syllabus should occur before the class for which they are listed. Be prepared to participate and bring ideas to class for class discussion based on the assignments.

Course Overview and Objectives

Are you the type of person who likes to do deep dives on topics, unearth hard-to-find facts, and communicate them in creative ways to spur social change? Are you a critical thinker with an interest in exploring ways to do investigative work across issues areas or within an issue area you hold dear?

If any of that resonates, you're in the right place! Welcome to Investigations for Social Change, where you'll learn the basics of what researchers, communicators, and others in a variety of organizations do, and what it takes to break into the field.

As traditional news outlets shrink and disappear, media relations work by public interest communicators is increasingly important — and challenging — requiring new ways of thinking about breaking into and affecting mass discourse. Public interest organizations, labor unions, political campaigns, research consulting firms, and academic centers are increasingly tasked with doing the work that well-staffed newsrooms once did, in some cases even becoming quasi-newsrooms themselves in an age of ever-changing media dynamics and mass newsroom attrition. That's where public interest communications-oriented investigative work arises.

The purpose of this class is to define the niche of investigations within public interest communications and the opportunities to make a difference doing such research therein, convey an understanding for how research can bolster issue-based campaigns, present ethical issues that arise in practice, learn from experts doing this work, gain basic skills on how to perform a public interest communications-oriented investigation, and get a hands-on primer by doing a small project in this tradition. This course will also introduce students to potential career trajectories into and within this field, understanding it as a viable pathway within the public interest communications sector.

Like anything in life, you will get out of what you put into this class, so be thoughtful and engaged with the assignments and experiences presented.

By the time it is over, you should walk away with a basic framework of what investigative research means within public interest communications, different issue areas in which doing this work can be useful within public interest communications campaigns, examples and definitions of ethical issues within investigations for social change, basic investigative research skills, some contacts in the field to expand your network, and a completed project transferable from virtual classroom into the workforce that can go into your professional portfolio.

Upon completing this course, students will:

- **Describe** what investigative work servicing public interest communications is and **generate** a mental map of how to do that work in multiple contexts.
- **Identify** and **interpret** examples of how investigations for social change play out in various issue advocacy campaigns within public interest communications.
- **Carry out** entry-level written and verbal discussion on concepts and frameworks within investigations for social change within public interest communications.
- **Critically assess** options in ethically challenging investigative research for social change situations.
- **Differentiate** between fact-based empirical investigative work and baseless claims branded as such, particularly in the age of generative AI.
- **Develop** a basic menu of skills and pathways to complete public interest communications-oriented investigative research work
- **Standardize** pathways for gaining and maintaining skills in this area on a continuing basis, well after the class ends.
- **Execute** a basic focused investigative research project within the public interest communications campaign realm.
- **Represent** investigative findings for a public interest communications campaign in both written and verbal form in a way befitting an entry-level workplace performer.
- **Consider** how to land a job in one of the pathways covered and plant the seeds for future prospective employment pathways in the field.
- **Examine** what it's like to work in the investigations for social change field by meeting professionals doing that work, in turn developing a professional network.

Key Course Policies

Late or Missed Work:

Students are expected to meet given deadlines. Late assignments will automatically lose a half letter grade for each day assignments are late (e.g., A to an A-, B to a B-, etc.). Some consideration, however, might be given (at the discretion of the instructor) if there are extenuating circumstances such as prolonged hospitalization, family, or personal issues, or extended individual sickness. However, you need to notify me before missing the deadline and produce a mutually agreed upon alternative deadline.

Attendance:

Success in this course is premised upon regular class participation and group

discussion. Active engagement and presence will ensure getting the most you can out of the class and achieving the objectives laid out above. You are responsible for notifying me in advance of the cause of your absence and, if it is due to illness, provide a note from your medical provider. **There is also an in-class camera-on policy, to ensure more robust participation and a collaborative classroom atmosphere.** For further information on attendance policy, please see [here](#).

Use of AI Policy and Guidance:

As an investigations professional, I have an eye for plagiarism and use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools, so be aware of that if inclined to take shortcuts and be transparent if you utilize these tools to spur your work. **Also be mindful that this course is meant to prepare you for specific professional experiences, so if you think the conduct in question might get you fired from a job, do not do it in this class either.** These policies are in place to help you prepare yourself for the future, not be punitive.

Students Requiring Accommodations:

Students with disabilities who experience learning barriers and would like to request academic accommodations should connect with the disability Resource Center. [Click here to get started with the Disability Resource Center](#). It is important for students to share their accommodation letter with their instructor and discuss their access needs, as early as possible in the semester.

Course Evaluation:

Students are expected to provide feedback on the quality of instruction in this course by completing online evaluations [here](#). Evaluations are typically open during the last two or three weeks of the semester, but students will be given specific times when they are open. Summary results of these assessments are available to students [here](#).

Grading and Assignments

I will be fair and impartial in grading assignments and participation in this course, meaning each of you will be graded on the same criteria for the same work. Refer to the rubrics posted on Canvas for both written assignments and class participation to guide expectations for work quality. **Grades are earned, just like performance evaluations in the workplace, and they are not gifts. If you come prepared for discussion and put thought and effort into assignments, you are bound for success not only in this course but for career at-large.** So, put your best foot forward because it will pay off.

Grades will be posted on Canvas, and it is your responsibility to check your progress throughout the semester. I am always available via email or during office hours if you have questions as you're doing the work. I am here to help you succeed. Consider the instructor-student relationship to be collaborative, rather than paternalistic.

The grading criteria for the class is as follows:

Weekly Attendance and Active Participation: 35%

Attendance, active participation, and **an on-camera presence** are mandatory in this course and will ensure more active engagement with the reading and material taught. Students will be expected to participate in various interactive exercises, be fully engaged, and ideally on camera within the Zoom virtual classroom. Attendance and active participation will be graded as follows:

- 0 – didn't attend class that day/unexcused absence
- 1– attended class but no participation
- 2– attended class with active participation and demonstrated average engagement and baseline comprehension of the materials assigned
- 3– attended class with active participation and demonstrated excellent engagement and baseline comprehension of the materials assigned

Each absence after the drop/add period will result in a grade reduction. You are responsible for notifying the professor in advance of the cause of your absence when possible and, if it is due to illness, provide a note from your medical provider.

Individual Weekly Written Responses: 35%

Each week before class — based on assigned materials — students will receive question prompts from the instructor and will be asked to respond to them. The purpose of these questions is to ensure further thought and engagement with the topics taught, while also giving a chance to allow for well-articulated written comprehension to shine through. Taken together, written responses combined with in-class discussion will mirror a workplace setting in the public interest communications sector, in which a competent employee is expected to both come to meetings with ideas and contribute them toward campaign strategy while also being expected to present cogent ideas and arguments into written form heading into those meetings. The written responses will be graded each week as follows:

- 0 – didn't complete assignment
- 1 – completed assignment, but showed poor baseline comprehension of the questions posed
- 2 – completed assignment and showed average baseline comprehension of the questions posed
- 3 – completed assignment and showed excellent baseline comprehension of the questions posed

Individual Investigative Research Assignment: 30%

This individual assignment will make sure you can put theory and the big ideas introduced throughout the course into practice at an entry-level, working with the instructor to design and conduct a small and narrowly focused investigative research project within a thematic topic covered throughout the course. This will require consultation with the instructor to produce a topic based on the student's interest area and that consultation will also be graded based on the thought put into the process as a piece of the overall final grade. This should come from thematic areas the course has covered or will cover, though there is wiggle room on that if discussed with and agreed upon by the instructor.

The student is expected to be proactive about touching base with the instructor as the research project is carried out for troubleshooting and iterative ideation to ensure a high-quality product yielding research that informs a communications-oriented campaign. Mandatory check-in dates are also built into the final project schedule, ensuring the project stays on track.

The final investigative research product produced should be written as a two- to four-page research memorandum. The professor will provide examples students can use as a template and/or from which they can draw format-based inspiration. There will be three mandatory interim check-in meetings scheduled between the student and the instructor before the final memorandum is handed in to ensure the ability to give helpful feedback and allow for troubleshooting, conveying, and assisting on investigative research methods, etc.

Lastly, students will present their project findings to the class during the second to last week and last week of the course, creating a slide deck to make the findings visually accessible to classmates. Each student will be assigned a date/time at random for their respective presentation dates if they opt against picking one of the two designated presentation dates.

Students should be ready to field questions from classmates and/or the instructor on presentation day, mirroring what might take place among colleagues or a supervisor in the workplace when research presentations occur. Vice versa, students attending these presentations will still be graded on their active participation, meaning listening intently to the presentations and asking questions after them. The written memorandum is due at 11:59 ET the night before the student's scheduled presentation date.

This written version of this assignment will be graded as follows:

- **0** – didn't complete assignment
- **1** – completed assignment, but did not perform investigative research that would be actionable in a strategic communications campaign due to materially significant factual or structural project errors not corrected after multiple rounds of instructor feedback
- **2** – completed assignment and did investigative research that would be actionable in a strategic communications campaign, responsive to multiple rounds of instructor feedback built into the process, though in need of some additional iteration or fact-checking to smooth out to be of actionable intelligence quality within a strategic communications campaign setting
- **3** – completed assignment and did investigative research that would be actionable in a strategic communications campaign, responsive to multiple rounds of instructor feedback built into the process, ready to go and act upon within a strategic communications campaign setting
- **4** – completed assignment and did investigative research that would be actionable in a strategic communications campaign, responsive to multiple rounds of instructor feedback built into the process, ready to go and act upon within a

strategic communications campaign setting.

- **5** – completed assignment and did investigative research that would be actionable in a strategic communications campaign, responsive to multiple rounds of instructor feedback built into the process, ready to go and act upon within a strategic communications campaign setting. Additionally, the student ideated further research concepts while doing this round of research that could be actionable in the future and/or identified limitations within the investigation's findings — in either case, demonstrating thought leadership and not simply execution within the discipline.

This presentation version of this assignment will be graded as follows:

- **0** – didn't do a presentation
- **1** – completed slide deck presentation, but did not coherently explain the investigation's problem it aimed to solve, the research undertaken, the findings, or how it might inform a communications campaign
- **2** – completed slide deck presentation, adequately explaining the investigation's problem it aimed to solve, the research undertaken, the findings, or how it might inform a communications campaign, though certain sections of the presentation had inadequate explanations and left the presentation lacking clear and actionable takeaways in those respective sections
- **3** – completed slide deck presentation, adequately explaining the investigation's problem it aimed to solve, the research undertaken, the findings, or how it might inform a communications campaign, with the slide deck including adequate explanations and clear explanations throughout it that left the audience with clear and actionable takeaways.
- **4** – completed slide deck presentation, adequately explaining the investigation's problem it aimed to solve, the research undertaken, the findings, or how it might inform a communications campaign, with the slide deck including adequate explanations and clear explanations throughout it that left the audience with clear and actionable takeaways.
- **5** – completed slide deck presentation, adequately explaining the investigation's problem it aimed to solve, the research undertaken, the findings, or how it might inform a communications campaign, with the slide deck including adequate explanations and clear explanations throughout it that left the audience with clear and actionable takeaways and pointed to limitations in the findings too. Further, the presentation was both visually and verbally captivating from start to finish and the presenter answered questions where possible, while also transparently stating when not capable of answering audience questions due to lack of knowledge.

Grading follows current [UF grading policies](#). *The grading scale for the course is as follows:*

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| A | 94.0 – 100% | C | 74.0 – 76.99% |
| A- | 90.0 – 93.99% | C- | 70.0 – 73.99% |
| B+ | 87.0 – 89.99% | D+ | 67.0 – 69.99% |

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| B | 84.0 – 86.99% | D | 64.0 – 66.99% |
| B- | 80.0 – 83.99% | D- | 60.0 – 63.99% |
| C+ | 77.0 – 79.99% | E | below 60% |

Tentative Course Schedule*

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| Week 1 August 21 | -Introduction of Professor and Class Ice Breaker -Instructor Presentation: <i>What Are Investigations for Social Change in Public Interest Communications?</i> -Discussion of Assigned Materials |
| Week 2 August 28 | -Class Ice Breaker -Instructor Presentation: <i>Advocacy Investigative Journalism, Social Change Investigations' Forerunner</i> -Discussion of Assigned Materials |
| Week 3 September 4 | -Class Ice Breaker - <i>Investigations in Political Campaigns (Potential Guest Presenter, TBD)</i> -Discussion of Assigned Materials |
| Week 4 September 11 | -Class Ice Breaker - Instructor Presentation: <i>Ethical Grounding and AI's Emergence</i> -Discussion of Assigned Materials -SEPT. 12: DEADLINE FOR FIRST MEETING WITH INSTRUCTOR TO DISCUSS FINAL INVESTIGATIVE RESEARCH PROJECT |
| Week 5 September 18 | -Class Ice Breaker -Instructor Presentation: <i>Investigations for Climate/Environmental Justice</i> -Discussion of Assigned Materials |
| Week 6 September 25 | -Class Ice Breaker -Instructor Presentation: <i>Investigations for Labor Justice (Guest Presenter; tentatively, Grace Regullano, Global Research Director at The Sunrise Project)</i> -Discussion of Assigned Materials |
| Week 7 October 2 | -Class Ice Breaker -Instructor Presentation: <i>Investigating Campaign Finance, Lobbying, and Money in Politics</i> -Discussion of Assigned Materials Oct. 3: DEADLINE FOR SECOND MEETING WITH INSTRUCTOR TO DISCUSS FINAL INVESTIGATIVE RESEARCH PROJECT |
| Week 8 October 9 | -Class Ice Breaker - Instructor Presentation: <i>Investigations for Corporations, Investors,</i> |

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| | <i>and the Law</i> -Discussion of Assigned Materials |
| Week 9 October 16 | -Class Ice Breaker -Instructor Presentation: <i>Investigations for Democracy/Civil Rights</i> -Discussion of Assigned Materials (<i>Guest Presenter(s), TBD</i>) |
| Week 10 October 23 | -Class Ice Breaker - Instructor Presentation: <i>Open Source Intelligence (OSINT) Tools and Techniques</i> -Discussion of Assigned Materials Oct. 24: DEADLINE FOR THIRD MEETING WITH INSTRUCTOR TO DISCUSS FINAL INVESTIGATIVE RESEARCH PROJECT |
| Week 11 October 30 | -Class Ice Breaker - Instructor Presentation: <i>Library Research Tools and Techniques (Librarian Presenter TBD)</i> |
| Week 12 November 6 | Open Q&A with Professor: <i>Ask Me Anything</i> – Internships, Career Planning, Jobs, Interviews, Networking, etc. |
| Week 13 November 13 | -Student Presentations of Investigative Research Projects FIRST SET OF FINAL RESEARCH MEMORANDA DUE ON NOV. 12 AT 11:59 PM ET |
| Week 14 November 20 | -Student Presentations of Investigative Research Projects SECOND SET OF FINAL RESEARCH MEMORANDA DUE ON NOV. 19 AT 11:59 PM ET |

*While the broad structure of this course will remain, some weeks may shift slightly depending on guest speaker availability and course progress.

Please see here and touch base with any questions or concerns:

<https://go.ufl.edu/syllabuspolicies>