J130: Specialty Reporting: the Good, the Bad and the Ugly of American Business

Instructor: TBA
GSI: TBA
Location: TBA

3 units

COURSE OBJECTIVE
Specialty Reporting provides background and techniques for students interested in developing their journalistic skills at covering a single beat. The course will explore the concepts and methods used by beat journalists to write stories that go deeper than general reporting -- including source development, understanding key issues, debates and institutions, and parsing official documents.

Specialty Reporting will launch with The Good the Bad and the Ugly of American Business. (In subsequent years, at the discretion of the J-School Dean, Specialty Reporting may shift its focus to other news beats.)

Today, the Securities and Exchange Commission and prosecutors try to nab the worst corporate lawbreakers, but there are a host of other financial actors, systems and practices crying out for exposure, including the yawning wage gap between U.S. executives and workers,
the “too-big-to fail” doctrine, the leaky regulatory structure, and the continuing risks posed by financial derivatives. Students will find business reporting fertile territory for their investigative zeal, but need to master a few basics about corporate finance and the economy to engage the beat with confidence and authority.

The prerequisite for this course is *Principles of Journalistic Reporting & Writing*.

**LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

As reporters, you can investigate, report and expose the machinations underlying financial and business inequities. Or you may be interested in writing features on funding angels, creative entrepreneurs, new technologies and funding innovations. Whichever, *The Good the Bad and the Ugly of American Business* offers you a set of basic tools for understanding, researching and reporting. The field is as wide as your imagination. To enrich the class, we host guest speakers from business journalism, finance and industry. We also plan a field trip to a financial news bureau where you’ll network with reporters.

Expectations: Students are assigned to read widely in current business news, familiarize themselves with current economic and corporate trends, and be able to lead class discussions on business news issues on a rotating basis.

Students will propose, report, write and file enterprise business features in class. Just as in professional newsrooms, each class meeting will start with a story conference in which reporters will deliver a crisp, concise oral pitch. Crafting persuasive written and oral pitches are essential skills we build in class. Each student is responsible for writing at least one story per week during the first five weeks of the class, plus a final project -- completing a sophisticated investigative piece, by course’s end.
By the end of the course students should be knowledgeable in evaluating corporate documents, be able to discuss how big financial institutions function, have familiarity with a variety of sources, and generate originally-reported stories that go behind the veil of financial and corporate public relations.

Reading Materials: Our E-Reader: a carefully curated selection of excellent business journalism covering the wide range of stories within this beat, from breaking news and explanatory stories, to investigative stories, management profiles and features. We also may read and discuss excerpts of books about business and the economy by Michael Lewis, Andrew Ross Sorkin and Robert Reich.


Week 2 Documents and paper trails: find a 10K, corporate balance sheet, tax return or annual report pertaining to a company that is or has been subject to a lawsuit and write a story about the company at hand. What do the numbers show? How to find court documents. Story 2 due.

Week 3 Profiles: CEO’s and other worshipped executives have a long and rich history of corner-cutting and shady financial dealings that have led huge companies (and their shareholders) to ruin. Case studies of Enron, Lehman Brothers, Milken, Galleon and others. Write a piece about how evidence in these cases emerged and how it was used against these financial houses and their executives. Story 3 due.
Week 4  Hedge funds, Venture Capitalists: what is it they do and what kind of strategies do they employ? How do they drive so much economic activity and make so much money? What are derivatives? What role did they play in the economic collapse? Write a piece on a hedge fund or manager. Story 4 due.

Week 5  Government vs Big Business: are they allies or competitors and who has the advantage and why? Write a story on how government and big business collaborate and clash. Story 5 due.

Week 6  Finish reporting and writing; Final Projects due

**Suggested Readings**

*The Investigative Reporter’s Handbook*, by Brant Houston, Len Bruzzese and Steve Weinberg  
*Liar’s Poker*, by Michael Lewis  
*Den of Thieves*, by James Stewart  
*The Smartest Guys in the Room*, by Bethany Mclean

We will also plan collaborations as appropriate with the *Daily Cal*.

**Grading:** Students will be graded on the totality of their performance in class including: fulfilling assigned class readings (20%), participation in class discussions (30%), delivering excellent enterprise stories on business and economic trends (30%) – satisfactory final project (20%).

**Academic Dishonesty and Plagiarism**

Students will abide by the Student Code of Conduct [http://students.berkeley.edu/uga/conduct.asp](http://students.berkeley.edu/uga/conduct.asp). There is a zero-
tolerance policy for work that is submitted without proper attribution and that constitutes plagiarism. If students are unsure about the expectations regarding the Student Code of Conduct, please seek advice from the instructor.