On Campus

The Art of the Dig

Learning the nuts and bolts of investigative reporting.

By
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|
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The journalists came from Italy and Estonia, Spain and Finland. They came from Australia and California. Six came from Greece. They all sat in a classroom in Pulitzer Hall on a recent morning, listening to Charles Ornstein, a Pulitzer Prize–winning reporter for ProPublica and an adjunct professor at Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism, give a master class in the use of public records.

The daylong class was part of the Summer Investigative Reporting Course, a three-week, non-credit program in the J-school's Professional Education division. The course trains seasoned reporters, most of them from abroad, in the essentials: how to research individuals and companies, harvest information from social media, navigate legal issues, and more.

Citing his ProPublica series Dollars for Doctors: How Industry Money Reaches Physicians, which began in 2010 as an investigation with his colleague Tracy Weber (who also teaches in the course), Ornstein shared the methods he'd used to compile the publicly searchable Dollars for Docs database, which tracks the money individual doctors receive from pharmaceutical companies.

"The idea is not only to arm reporters from all over the world with the tools that investigative reporters use to do their job, but to teach them how to *think* about investigative reporting," Ornstein says.

Blake Morrison, an investigative editor at Reuters and a recipient of the J-school's John B. Oakes Award for Distinguished Environmental Journalism, has, like Ornstein, taught in the course since its inception in 2012. "It's always eye-opening," Morrison says. "To work with international reporters and understand more about the

challenges they face gives me greater appreciation for the freedoms that we might take for granted in the US: the ability to get government records, or speak freely with people in positions of power.”

Each year, participants bring story ideas in all categories: politics, the arts, sports, human rights, public health, international affairs, immigration, and war and conflict. (Because the journalists are working on sensitive stories, their in-class discussions are off the record.) Usually there is misconduct to be uncovered. “We talk about ‘villains and victims,’” Morrison says. “Those who do wrong and those who suffer as a consequence. In unraveling cases of wrongdoing, it’s important to find out why they occurred in the first place. We try to get to a point where we can figure out who’s behind them, and why that person or entity has been allowed to continue.”

This summer, Morrison’s workshop during the course focused on burden of proof: what evidence must you offer in your stories? “Often, we’re led by our instincts,” he says. “We see things that are suspicious and respond to them. The effort here is to get people to say, ‘Wait. Even though this may appear to me to be true, how do I present a case that is solid and backed by facts?’”

Such questions have metaphysical force in a time of “fake news.”

“The media no longer has a monopoly on news and information,” says Sheila Coronel, director of the Stabile Center for Investigative Journalism, dean of academic affairs, and codirector of the summer course with Ernest Sotomayor, who is dean of student affairs and director of Latin American initiatives. “Millions of people get their news from Facebook or Twitter, where basically anyone can publish. So it becomes even more important to teach the methods of fact-based, evidence-based journalism.”

Coronel worked for the underground press in the Philippines during the rule of Ferdinand Marcos and covered the revolution that toppled him. Later she became founding director of the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism, where her work led to the arrest, in 2001, of Philippine president Joseph Estrada on charges of plundering the country’s coffers. This summer she was back in Manila, reporting on the drug war under president Rodrigo Duterte.

Despite attacks on the press and the harassment of journalists, Coronel sees a surge of interest in the field worldwide. “This is a great time to do investigative reporting,” she says.

Back at Pulitzer Hall, Ornstein, who with Tracy Weber was lead writer on the Pulitzer Prize–winning *Los Angeles Times* series The Troubles at King/Drew, about conditions in a Los Angeles hospital, saw instruction translate quickly into action.

“I’m amazed when people use the tools we teach to come up with stories right on the spot, about issues that are important in their countries,” he says.

Adds Sotomayor, “The most important element for their stories is information, and they get that. They realize that what makes a story viable and what makes it stand on its own is reporting, reporting, reporting.”

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