Class details

JOUR-UA9503002/ENVST-UA9503002 Journalism and Society: Science, Politics & the Environment Fall 2015
Wednesdays 6:15pm–9:15pm
Location to be confirmed.

Instructor Details

Prerequisites

n/a

Class Description

This will be a hands-on course examining the idea of truth and spin in Washington D.C., politics, governance, journalism, science and society. It will be part overview and lecture on topics central to the course and part active reporting and writing. Spin is the Washington art of taking a biased interpretation of an issue or event and making it seem truth-y even when it’s not quite factual. This is a user’s guide for reporters and non-journalists alike. Learn how to spot and dodge the misleading factoid and the incomplete truths, along with the history and reasoning behind manipulation of information. Advice from those who practice spin, those who successfully avoid it and what it’s like to be stuck as a victim of spin. This is also an introduction to journalism class and how it interacts with politics, policy and society. Students will learn to write in journalistic style, which is quite different from academic writing. It is writing shorter and simpler, but with a distinct style. And most importantly, students will learn to write in an objective even-handed not subjective manner. Students will write frequently, often in class and on deadline. To take advantage of the unique Washington location, events and distinct attitude in the city, students will participate in press conferences, attend a national professional conference that is hosted in Washington and go to public hearings on Capitol Hill. Students will then take on reporting roles and write news-style articles. Invited guest speakers are from NASA, NOAA, environmental activist groups, energy lobbyists and Washington media. The course also will simulate the real newsroom atmosphere in that plans may change at a moment’s notice because of breaking news. The news cycle will at times determine what is discussed and worked on during class. There will be at least one class that is not on the syllabus and will be _ or at least seem to
students to be out of the blue. Because this is such a small class, we will tailor much of the lessons to students' interests. In many ways this class will be a broad taste of journalism for the non-journalist and students will learn how to write news. Near the end of the class, the intersection of the media with science, politics and economics on the issue of global warming will be a focal point of this course and how it is all spun. Be warned, this syllabus is a flexible guide that will be changed frequently. Like the news, much of the course of our studies will shift with what’s happening in Washington and the world.

### Desired Outcomes

- Students will learn how to spot and handle spin and understand how and why it is done in Washington.
- Students will learn to write succinctly, strongly, quickly and objectively in journalistic style.
- Students will learn how to get to the essence of truth and ask incisive questions.
- Students will learn the role of reporters in Washington, society, policy, politics and science.

### Assessment Components

Non-final writing assignments will account for 40 percent of grade. In-class participation – asking questions, answering questions, contributing insights – will be graded and will be 25 percent of your final grade. Mid-term exam will be 10 percent. Final writing assignment, due on last day of class, will be 12.5 percent of grade. Final exam will be 12.5 percent.

Writing will consist of news-style stories, with an emphasis on brevity and clarity. Some will be completed in-class. Some will not. The first few stories will be under 400 words. The final assignment will be a more complex science/environment and politics story of about 1,000 words and be 12.5 percent of your overall grade. In addition to the final story and in-class final, there are several writing assignments. The in-class final will be 12.5 percent and it will be written during class in the three-hour exam time period.

Stories will be edited/critiqued by professor or peers in class and then rewritten for a final version. Final grade for each story will be based half on the unedited version and half on the rewritten version. Assignments due for class are due 15 minutes before class starts: 6 p.m. This gives professor time to print them out. Assignments should be written in Microsoft Word (.doc files), so I can edit them and send them back with comments. They should be emailed as attachments and students should NOT put their names on the paper. In all written submissions, spelling and grammar standards will apply and be graded. Students are expected to keep up with
daily news events.

There will be one five-minute oral presentation required. Students will also regularly critique one story from the previous week’s news. Class participation for each session will be graded. Students are expected to be prepared for class, asking questions and participating in discussions.

Failure to submit or fulfill any required course component results in failure of the class.

### Assessment Expectations

**Grade A:** The student makes excellent use of empirical and theoretical material and offers well-structured arguments in his/her work. The student writes comprehensive essays / exam questions and his/her work shows strong evidence of critical thought and extensive reading.

**Grade B:** The candidate shows a good understanding of the problem and has demonstrated the ability to formulate and execute a coherent research strategy.

**Grade C:** The work is acceptable and shows a basic grasp of the research problem. However, the work fails to organize findings coherently and is in need of improvement.

**Grade D:** The work passes because some relevant points are made. However, there may be a problem of poor definition, lack of critical awareness, poor research.

**Grade F:** The work shows that the research problem is not understood; there is little or no critical awareness and the research is clearly negligible.

### Grade conversion

NYU Washington, DC uses the following scale of numerical equivalents to letter grades:

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<th>Score Range</th>
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<tr>
<td>100-94</td>
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<td>93-90</td>
<td>A-</td>
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Attendance Policy

Study abroad at Global Academic Centers is an academically intensive and immersive experience, in which students from a wide range of backgrounds exchange ideas in discussion-based seminars. Learning in such an environment depends on the active participation of all students. And since classes typically meet once or twice a week, even a single absence can cause a student to miss a significant portion of a course. **To ensure the integrity of this academic experience, class attendance at the centers is mandatory, and unexcused absences will affect students' semester grades.** Students are responsible for making up any work missed due to absence. Repeated absences in a course may result in failure. At all Global Academic Centers, unexcused absences will be penalized with a two percent deduction from the student’s final course grade.

To seek an excused absence for medical reasons, students must email or discuss with the Academic Program Coordinator in advance of their missed class. For an excused absence, students must produce a doctor’s note dated with the exact dates of the missed class and/or exam.

Non-medical absences must be discussed with the Academic Program Coordinator prior to the date(s) in question, who will communicate the absence to all relevant faculty members. If faculty members do receive notification, the student has not procured an excused absence.

NYU Washington, DC expects students to arrive to class promptly (both at the beginning and after any breaks), to be attentive, and to remain for the duration of the class. If full class attendance and participation becomes a problem, it is the prerogative of each instructor to apply the rule for unexcused absences, which may include a two percent deduction from the student’s final course grade.

Students are responsible for making up any work missed due to absence. This means they should initiate email and/or office hour discussions to discuss any missed lectures and assignments and arrange a timeline for submitting missed work.

Please note that for classes involving a field trip or other external visit, transportation difficulties are never grounds for an excused absence. It is the student’s responsibility to arrive at the
announced meeting point in a punctual and timely fashion. Staff members may always be reached by cell phone for advice regarding public transportation.

### Late Submission of Work

1) Written work due in class must be submitted during the class time to the professor.

2) Late work should be emailed to the faculty as soon as it is completed. (If the assignment must be submitted in person, the Academic Program Coordinator can collect on behalf of the faculty between the hours of 9–5, M–F.)

3) Late work will be reduced for a fraction of a letter grade (e.g.,: A to A-, A- to B+, etc.) for every day it is late, including weekends.

4) Written work during the semester that is submitted 5 days after the submission date (including weekends) without an agreed extension fails and is given a zero.

5) Students who arrive to class late for an exam do not have automatic approval to take extra time to complete the exam.

6) Students who miss an exam (including the final) without previously arranged permission will receive a zero on that exam.

7) Assignments due during finals week that are submitted more than 3 days without previously arranged extensions will not be accepted and will receive a zero. Any exceptions or extensions for work during finals week must be discussed with the Site Director.

### Students with Disabilities

Accommodations are available for students with documented disabilities. Please contact the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities at +1-212-998-4980 or see their website (http://www.nyu.edu/life/safety-health-andwellness/students-with-disabilities.html) for further information.

### Plagiarism Policy

As the University's policy on "Academic Integrity for Students at NYU" states: "At NYU, a commitment to excellence, fairness, honesty, and respect within and outside the classroom is essential to maintaining the integrity of our community. By accepting membership in this community, students take responsibility for demonstrating these values in their own conduct and
for recognizing and supporting these values in others." **Students at Global Academic Centers must follow the University and school policies.**

The presentation of another person’s words, ideas, judgment, images, or data as though they were your own, whether intentionally or unintentionally, constitutes an act of plagiarism.

NYU Washington, DC takes plagiarism very seriously; penalties follow and may exceed those set out by your home school. All your written work must be submitted as a hard copy AND in electronic form to the instructor. Your instructor may ask you to sign a declaration of authorship form.

It is also an offense to submit work for assignments from two different courses that is substantially the same (be it oral presentations or written work). If there is an overlap of the subject of your assignment with one that you produced for another course (either in the current or any previous semester), you MUST inform your professor.

For guidelines on academic honesty, clarification of the definition of plagiarism, examples of procedures and sanctions, and resources to support proper citation, please see:

http://www.nyu.edu/about/policies-guidelines-compliance/policies-and-guidelines/academic-integrity-for-students-at-nyu.html

http://gls.nyu.edu/page/gls.academicintegrity

http://cas.nyu.edu/page/academicintegrity


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**Religious Observances**

Students observing a religious holiday during regularly scheduled class time are entitled to miss class without any penalty to their grade. This is for the holiday only and does not include the days of travel that may come before and/or after the holiday.

Students must notify their professor and the Office of Academic Support in writing via email at least one week in advance before being absent for this purpose.

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**Required Text(s)**

**All the President’s Men**, Bernstein and Woodward; Publisher: Simon & Schuster (1974) ISBN: 671-21781-Xh

**Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco**


Supplemental Text(s) (i.e., not required for purchase)

Students will be required to read daily or weekly:

The Washington Post front section and the Tuesday science section.

The Associated Press Big Story website: http://bigstory.ap.org/

Supplementals will be added as news changes/breaks during the 14 week session.


Murrow versus McCarthy: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-YOIueFbG4g


Elizabeth Kolbert, the New Yorker, Annals of Science, Climate of Man part 1, April 25, 2005; http://archives.newyorker.com/?i=2005-04-25#folio=056


Fact Check.org on swift boat ads: http://www.factcheck.org/republican-funded_group_attacks_kerrys_war_record.html


Charles Hanley, The Associated Press, On Endless Ice:  
http://abcnews.go.com/Technology/wireStory?id=14302161


Sen. James Inhofe, A Skeptic’s Guide to Debunking Global Warming Alarmism:  
http://tinyurl.com/ydh2jg

Wesley Pruden, The Washington Times, Not Dead Yet and Cooling:  

Borenstein, The Associated Press, Statisticians Reject Global Cooling:  


Jim Meyers, Newt Unveils Plan for $2.50 gallon gas:  

Borenstein & Jack Gillum, Oil Drilling Does Not Improve Gas Prices  
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/03/21/us-oil-drilling-study_n_1369356.html

Internet Research Guidelines

If you are using someone else’s work, you must note it in the story, not in footnote form. Such as “XXX,” Ms. Smith told The Associated Press in October 2013.

Additional Required Equipment

Bring laptop to every class, unless told otherwise.

Session 1 – Overview - Wednesday, September 2, 2015

Overview. Everything is about story telling. Media, politics, the truth and story telling in Washington and Society. The importance of stories. Stories in journalism. Telling stories. Stories
that inform. Stories that spur to action. Stories that entertain. Stories that spur change. We will discuss the following (this means please be familiar with but you don’t have to read or see them): The Jungle. Silent Spring. Unsafe at Any Speed. All The President’s Men. Drudge Report. Inconvenient Truth. We even discuss Yankee Doodle Dandy.

DUE TODAY: Before our first session, walk in your new neighborhood. Find something strange, unusual, or telling about anything in the nine-block radius around NYU/DC. Before class, email me a one or two sentence description and then be prepared to discuss it in class.

ASSIGNMENTS: For session 2, read at least the first half of All The President’s Men; view Murrow versus McCarthy: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-YOlueFbG4g

In the weeks between session 1 and session 5, attend a committee hearing on Capitol Hill, observe the proceedings and the press table, the interaction, and read any coverage that may have come from it. Then be prepared to make a short five minute oral presentation and also write it up.

Session 2 -- What is Truth? -- Wednesday, September 9, 2015

What is truth? And where do we find it? Reporting. In this class we take what is an entire major (or at the very least an entire course) and figure it out in one three-hour session. How do we know what is true and what is not? What about incomplete truths? Is a partial truth also a partial lie? Is even the concept of truthiness true? Is truth relative? Are your relatives truthful? If your mother says she loves you, should you check it out (old journalism saying)? Who can you trust? How do you trust? And if that’s not enough, what is the meaning of life? Did Washington chop down a cherry tree? Did Columbus sail to prove the world is round? And then turning it to politics: Hamilton, Jefferson and Callendar. Rachel Jackson. Teapot Dome, Warren Harding. Joe McCarthy, Richard Nixon, George W. Bush and John Kerry.

PLUS: Case studies: McCarthy, Nixon and Swift Boating. Fact Checking. Lying, truth-twisting, manipulation in politics past and how media handled the issues

And: A quick start to writing like a reporter. The basics: The 5Ws, the lede, the inverted pyramid. The obituary.

DUE TODAY: First half of All The President’s Men; view Murrow versus McCarthy: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-YOlueFbG4g

ASSIGNMENTS: For session 3. Read chapters 2 and 3, Simplicity and Clutter, of Zinsser. For session 3, write your first draft of the obituary. Send electronically.

Session 3-- Wednesday, September 16, 2015

Writing like a journalist. Keeping it short and simple. Being objective. Hands-on in class lecture
and lots of writing.


Note Session 4 is on unusual date and an outside tour. For that date, bring pen/pencil and notebook, metro pass and wear good walking shoes and appropriate gear for weather outdoors.

For Session 5: Your re-written version of your obituary, read Chapters 6 and 9 Zinsser, “Words” and “The Lead and the Ending.” Also: By session 5 attend a committee hearing on Capitol Hill, observe the proceedings and the press table, the interaction, and read any coverage that may have come from it. Then be prepared to make a short five minute oral presentation and then write it up.

Session 4: Political & Journalism Scandals: SPECIAL DAY/TIME: SUNDAY, Sept. 20, 2015, 1 p.m.

WASHINGTON’S POLITICAL & JOURNALISM SCANDALS: How truth wins out over hypocrisy sometimes in Washington when it is exposed. A walking narrated tour of some of Washington’s scandal and journalism (and sometimes both at once) spots – not all, we only have three hours and will still cover more than three miles walking. It’s a further introduction to Washington with an emphasis on how the story was broken, covered and changed life, policy or politics. Scandals include sex, drugs, money and lying. All that’s missing is the rock and roll. Bring pen/pencil and notebook, metro pass and wear good walking shoes and weather appropriate clothing.

Session 5 – Wednesday, September 23, 2015

Writing fast and editing. Part One: Continuing on writing session, how to write fast. Guest speaker via Skype, CBS Radio’s Peter King on writing quickly. Part wo: We will work on how to edit others copy and your own and how to find news. Class exercise will be editing each others’ work. Also, how to file a Freedom of Information Act request.

DUE TODAY: Your re-written obituary. Class will edit them. You should have been to a Congressional hearing by now. Oral presentations today, write up of your congressional hearing is due Sept. 30, Session 6.

ASSIGNMENTS: For Oct.7, file a Freedom of Information Act request by 6 p.m. and cc instructor.

For Session 7: Review for short mid-term.

By session 8, Chapters 1-5 of Oreskes, view Wigand on 60 Minutes, read ASN on Milloy. If you can view the movie The Insider.

Session 6 – Wednesday, September 30, 2015
Reporting tools: Fact-checking and press conferences; Part one: Jane Elizabeth of American Press Institute on how to fact check. How to find out when someone is telling the truth and how to show when they are not. This is in preparation for GOP presidential debate fact-checking on Oct. 28.
Part two: How press conferences work. How to get questions in. How to ask the right questions. Mastering the following up. Live note-taking. We will also play a recording of a recent NOAA or NASA press conference and write a story in class on deadline.

DUE TODAY: Write ups of congressional hearing.

ASSIGNMENTS: For Oct. 7 (even though class does not meet then): Write news story from the interview, due at 6 p.m. Oct. 7. And file a Freedom of Information Act request by 6 p.m. and cc instructor.

For Session 7: Review for short mid-term.

By session 8, Chapters 1-5 of Oreskes, view Wigand on 60 Minutes, read ASN on Milloy. If you can view the movie The Insider.

Wednesday, October 7, 2015- NO CLASS

Instructor will be out of town. Makeup class on Saturday Oct. 24. But filing Freedom of Information Act and assignment from session 6 are still due today at 6 p.m.

Session 7 – Wednesday, October 14, 2015

Morgan Spurlock: NYU/DC event. Timing to be determined.

Mid-term exam (10 questions, 1 hour) and More Advanced Writing Tricks: How to write quickly. How to write clearly. How to take complicated stuff and make it simple.

Invited guest lecture via Skype: Jay Apt, director of the electricity institute at Carnegie Mellon University and former NASA astronaut who flew on the space shuttle four times and walked in space for nearly 11 hours. He will talk about the dangers (and joys) of space and the dangers of coal-fired power plants.

Begin discussion of final writing project.

ASSIGNMENTS: Due Session 8: One paragraph proposal on what your final paper topic will be.

Due Session 8: Story based on Apt lecture.

Session 8 – Wednesday, October 21, 2015
Case study: Smoking. We’ll discuss the concept of doubt and scientific studies. Understand how putting doubt on trial spawned other spin. Discussion of how constrained scientists are in talking about their findings and how that can be used to twist findings. Also, some more in-class writing and editing.

DUE TODAY: chapters 1-5 of Oreskes and Conway, view 60 minutes Wigand, read ASN on Milloy. One paragraph proposal on what your final paper topic will be.

ASSIGNMENT: Due Session 10: Flush out your topic for final writing project, include potential sources/interviews and potential databases to use.

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**Session 9 – SPECIAL TIME/DATE covering a conference Saturday, October 24, 2015; 10 am to 1 pm**

Finding news in a professional conference and developing sources. We meet at NYU and walk over to the Walter Washington Convention Center. We will attend the Academy of Pediatrics annual convention. We will learn how press behaves in conventions, how to find a story, how to approach people.

ASSIGNMENTS: For Session 10: Write a story based on the convention.

**Session 10 – Wednesday, Oct. 28, 2015**

Guest speaker and Fact-checking GOP debate. We don’t know what time the GOP debate is yet. But it is this evening. When it occurs, we will watch live and find out what is true and not and how to prove it. We will incorporate two earlier sessions in this: Peter King on writing fast and Jane Elizabeth on fact-checking.

Other part: Writing about tougher and (for Halloween) scarier stuff. Science. Environment. How to find experts when you don’t know the topic yourself.

Guest speaker in person. Marshall Shepherd, University of Georgia meteorology professor and host of Weather Channel television show “Weather Geeks” and former president of the American Meteorological Society. How to translate tough science to the masses. What it’s like to be both a scientist and a member of the media. The next day he will be at a day-long climate change event sponsored by the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

DUE TODAY: Story from session 9. Update on progress for final project.

ASSIGNMENTS: For Session 11: Write a story based on the Shepherd interview/lecture.

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**Session 11 – Wednesday, November 4, 2015**
Risk, perceptions and fear and how to put everything in context. From terrorism to nuclear power to natural disasters. Cost benefit analyses and the statistical value of your life. How do the professionals analyze risk? How is risk communicated by politicians and officials. How do the media convey risk? Which is riskier: terrorism or the flu? (Each year more people die of flu than in 40 years of global terrorism. Yet the government spends far more money on terrorism than the flu.) This will be done as a game show.

DUE TODAY: Story on Shepherd lecture.

ASSIGNMENT: For Session 12: First draft, nearly full length, of final project.

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**Session 12 – Wednesday, November 11, 2015**

The spin cycle. How to find out what’s happening when you are hearing different stories about the same thing. How spin includes kernels of truth and heaps of emotion. In-class guest speakers include energy lobbyist and environmental activist/lobbyist who are friends but often lobby same issue on opposite sides of some issues.

Discussion of first drafts of final project.

DUE TODAY: First draft final project.

ASSIGNMENT: For session 13: Re-writes (but not final) of final project.

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**Session 13 – Covering Climate Change _ Wednesday, November 18, 2015**

When the world is changing how to see what’s happening and write about it. Climate change, the upcoming Paris conference, how media will cover it and how it may pertain to your final project. Guest speaker invited: Kalee Kreider, special climate advisor: United Nations Foundation, former press secretary for Al Gore.

Assignment for Nov. 25 at 6 p.m. (no class, but assignment due then nonetheless): Write story based on guest speaker’s lecture.

* Please note that class will not meet next week (November 25) due to the Thanksgiving holiday.

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**Session 14 – Guest Lecture: Covering the President: Wednesday, December 2, 2015**

Covering the president and politics, dos and don’ts and how not to be awed and overwhelmed: Recently retired Associated Press White House correspondent Jim Kuhnhenn, who covered
Washington for a generation, teaches how to cover the president and about covering the most important aspect of campaigns: money. Professor will be in Paris for a climate change conference, but will joining class via Skype and discussing the final, final writing projects and any other questions that remain.

ASSIGNMENTS: For Dec. 9, 6:15 p.m. EDT (via email, no class that day): 350 word story on what guest lecturer taught.

For Dec. 16, final project paper.

**NO CLASS Wednesday, December 9, 2015**

No class this date, but professor available all week via email, Skype for last minute questions. Keep in mind, professor will be a bit busy covering climate conference and 6 hours ahead of Washington time. But please correspond or Skype.

**Session 15 – Wednesday, December 16, 2015**

Final Exam. It will be an in-class writing assignment. Done live. You will get information. You can conduct email interviews. Final project writing assignment will be due at start of class.

**Classroom Etiquette**

With a small class size and the nature of journalism, participation is not just encouraged, it is required. Cell phones off, unless required for work. There will be a break halfway through class.

**Required Co-curricular Activities**

One or two Capitol Hill hearings will be attended on your own time. The Sunday, Sept. 13, walking tour is required. It replaces a regularly scheduled evening class near end of semester. The Saturday Oct. 24 covering a conference (with professor) is also required. It replaces an Oct. 7 class.

**Suggested Co-curricular Activities**

Not at this time, but some may be assigned later in the semester.

**Your Instructor**