Class details

JOUR-UA 9202004 Methods and Practice: Truthiness, Spin, Media & Politics
Spring 2015
Wednesdays, 6:15pm–9:15pm*
Location to be confirmed.

Instructor Details

Seth Borenstein
sb4314@nyu.edu

Office is next door, 1100 13th St. NW; fifth floor, The Associated Press; Washington DC 20005-4051; call ahead.
Meetings by appointment only. Preferred meeting times: 6:30-8 p.m. Thursdays; 9-10 a.m. Mondays.

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 something 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. How to spot and dodge the misleading, the incomplete truth, along with the history and reasoning behind manipulation of facts. Advice from those who practice spin and 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. To take advantage of the unique Washington location and distinct attitude in the city, students will participate in press conferences and go to public hearings on Capitol Hill in reporting roles and then 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 feel 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 _ out of the blue. Because this is such a small class, we will tailor much of the lessons to students’ interests. So this syllabus is a more general guide. 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 only a flexible guide that will be changed frequently. Like the news, much of the course will alter with what’s happening 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 the role of reporters in Washington, society, policy, politics and science. Students will learn how to get to the truth and ask incisive questions. Students will learn to write succinctly, strongly, quickly, objectively and, most importantly, in journalistic style.

Assessment Components

Non-final writing assignments will be 30 percent of grade. Final writing assignment, pre-final exam, will be 20 percent of grade. In-class participation will be graded and will be 20 percent. Mid-term exam will be 10 percent. Final exam will be 20 percent.

Writing will consist of news-style stories, with an emphasis on brevity and clarity. Some will be 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 that will be about 1,000 words and be 20 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 20 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 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 NOT have their name on the paper. In all written submissions, certain standards will apply. Misspelled words result in lowered grades. Grammar will be graded.

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, including role playing, will be graded. Students are expected to be prepared for class and to ask questions and participate in discussions.

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:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Numerical Range</th>
<th>Letter Grade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>100-94</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>93-90</td>
<td>A-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>89-87</td>
<td>B+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>86-84</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>83-80</td>
<td>B-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>79-77</td>
<td>C+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>76-74</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>73-70</td>
<td>C-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>69-67</td>
<td>D+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65-66</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>below 65</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

### 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


Required Text(s)

**All the Presidents Men**, Bernstein and Woodward; Publisher: Simon & Schuster (1974) ISBN: 671-21781-Xh
Supplemental Texts(s) (not required for purchase)

Students will be required to read daily or weekly:
The Washington Post front section and the Tuesday science section.
The Knight Science Journalism Tracker: [http://ksjtracker.mit.edu/](http://ksjtracker.mit.edu/)
Real Climate: [http://www.realclimate.org/](http://www.realclimate.org/)

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


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


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 – Feb. 4, 2015

Overview. 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 change. We will discuss the following (this means please be familiar with but you don’t have to read or see them), Hamilton, Jefferson and Callendar. Rachel Jackson. Teapot Dome, Warren Harding. The Jungle. Murrow and McCarthy. Silent Spring. Unsafe at Any Speed. All The President’s Men (this you do have to read). Drudge Report. Inconvenient Truth. We even discuss Yankee Doodle Dandy.

DUE TODAY: Before 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. Before first session, read the Chicago Tribune flame retardant series: http://media.apps.chicagotribune.com/flames/index.html


Note Session 2 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 3: Read about upcoming Obamacare case in the U.S. Supreme Court here: http://www.npr.org/2014/12/29/373729957/supreme-court-to-hear-case-against-obamacare-in-2015 And be familiar with the Association of Health Care Journalists by checking out their website: http://healthjournalism.org

Before session 4, read at least the first half of All The President’s Men. 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.
Session 2 – SPECIAL DAY AND TIME: SUNDAY, Feb. 8, 2015 at 1 p.m.

WASHINGTON’s POLITICAL & JOURNALISM SCANDALS: A walking narrated tour of some of Washington’s scandal and journalism (and both) 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.

DUE TODAY:

NO CLASS Feb. 11: Instructor at the American Association for the Advancement of Science convention in San Jose, California

Session 3 – SUPREME COURT: Feb. 18, 2015
Obamacare and The Supreme Court: On March 4, another challenge to the Affordable Care Act will be heard before the U.S. Supreme Court. This is a big news event. How do reporters handle the difficulties of covering something as intricate and as important as the health care act? And for that matter how do reporters who specialize in covering health care handle something as arcane as the Supreme Court. In a special event, NYU/DC and our class will host a how-to workshop for Washington-based reporters of the Association of Health Care Journalists. For the first 1.5 hours, the class will convene with the AHCJ in a session where reporters talk about the challenges of covering Obamacare and the upcoming Supreme Court case. This isn’t about right or wrong, but how reporters cover the issue. Reporters will brainstorm and ask questions and so can students. Then after the workshop session finishes, one or two of the reporters will stick around to talk with the class about the challenges. And then the instructor and class will discuss what we just heard.

Advance notice: By Session 5; finish All The President’s Men.
By session 8, read chapters 1-5 of Oreskes and Conway, view 60 minutes Wigand, read ASN on Milloy. If you can view the movie The Insider.

Session 4 – What is truth, Feb. 25, 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 relatives? 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?

PLUS: Case studies: McCarthy, Nixon and Swift Boating and Fact Checking. Lying, truth-twisting, manipulation in politics past and how media handled the issues
And: A quick brief start to writing like a reporter. The basics: The 5Ws, the lede, the inverted pyramid. The obituary.

Before session 4, read at least the first half of All The President’s Men, view Murrow-McCarthy. Before 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.

For session 5, write your first draft of the obituary. Send electronically (see 3rd paragraph, page 2 of syllabus, Assessments, especially bold type on how to submit your paper) by 6 p.m. Mar. 4 (day of next class). In the weeks before 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.

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

Session 5 – MARCH 4, 2015

The Federal Budget: Big, dull looking numbers that at times mean all the world if you know what to look for and often mean nothing. MAY HAVE TO MOVE IF FEDERAL BUDGET IS NOT RELEASED ON SCHEDULE. IF BUDGET NOT RELEASED BY THIS DATE, WE WILL SKIP AHEAD TO SESSION 5: McCarthy, Nixon and Swift Boating.

The president has released his proposed federal spending package for the year that starts Oct. 1, 2016. We will look at how reporters cover it. What to look for, what to listen for. We will likely listen to a press conference on a budget, probably NASA’s. We will dissect an individual budget. Invited guest speaker, Associated Press reporter who covers budgets.

DUE TODAY: You should have been to a Congressional hearing by now. By session 8, read chapters 1-5 of Oreskes and Conway, view 60 minutes Wigand, read ASN on Milloy. If you can view the movie The Insider.

Session 6 – March 11, 2015

Reporting Tools. Interviewing, press conferences and filing of Freedom of Information Act requests. 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. How to file a Freedom of Information Act request.

For Session 7: Review for short mid-term. File a Freedom of Information Act request by 6 p.m. on March 18 and cc your instructor. By session 8, read chapters 1-5 of Oreskes and Conway, view 60 minutes Wigand, read ASN on Milloy. If you can view the movie The Insider.

Session 7 – MARCH 18, 2015

Mid-term exam (10 questions, 1 hour) and More Advanced Writing Tricks: How to write quickly. How to write clearly. In class writing exercise; short article writing with information presented. This will be submitted and graded. Professor and other students will critique the writing samples in class. They then must be
rewritten and submitted for grade following week.

Due today: A copy of your filed Freedom of Information Act request.

### Session 8 – APRIL 1, 2015

**Case study: Smoking.** We’ll discuss the concept of doubt and scientific studies. How the idea of putting doubt on trial spawned other spin. Conservatism of scientists. 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.

### Session 9 – APRIL 8, 2015

**Risk, perceptions and fear.** From terrorism to nuclear power to natural disasters. Cost benefit analyses and the value of your life. How do the professionals analyze risk. How is risk communicated by politicians and officials. How do the media play 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. Guest speaker on risk communication. This will be done as a game show.

### Session 10 – APRIL 15, 2015

**Money.** In honor of tax day today, April 15. We’ll discuss money, taxes and politics. Money and income gap. Wealth and poverty. Covering it all in a fresh way. How money talks but isn’t covered well. Money and its role in Washington. And we’ll discuss final writing project.

There will be a story writing assignment due Apr. 22 out of this session. For session 11 read: 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](http://archives.newyorker.com/?i=2005-04-25#folio=056)


### Session 11 – APRIL 22, 2015

**Climate change, journalism, and science.** Climate scientist guest lecturer. Invited via skype: Michael
Mann, author of The Hockey Stick and The Climate Wars; key figure in “climategate” and litigant. Victim of the spin cycle. Also, invited guest lecturer Kalee Kreider, former press secretary to Al Gore, current senior climate adviser to the United Nations Foundation.

Due today: Writing assignment from Session 11. For Apr. 29, session 12, hand in revised writing assignment from earlier wee Also due today, idea for final writing project (due on May 20).

**Session 12 – APRIL 29, 2015**

The spin cycle. Guest speakers includes energy lobbyist and environmental activist/lobbyist who are friends but often lobby same issue on opposite sides.

DUE Today, revised writing assignment

**Session 13 – MAY 6, 2015**

Space: The final frontier. In conjunction with May 5-7 Human to Mars conference at nearby George Washington University, we will discuss space, Mars, exploration. Likely former astronaut or current NASA official or both will be guest speaker.

And writing tips part 3. Even more advanced writing. Feature writing. Endings. And another writing assignment

**Session 14 – MAY 13, 2015**

Guns, Ethics and putting it all together.
As the gun control debate evolves, we’ll examine how guns, violence and the Second Amendment fit with what we’ve learned. Have gun rights advocates learned from the cigarette and climate battles? Then what about ethics. What can you do with this knowledge? What should you do? What shouldn’t you do? How this all fits in everyday life. What can you do with reporting and writing skills and not be a journalist. What it all means.

Final story due at final exam. Between 800 and 1,000 words.

**Session 15 – FINAL EXAM: MAY 20, 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 end of class.

**Classroom Etiquette**

With a small class size and the nature of journalism, participation is not just encouraged, it is required. Cell phone off, unless required for work. There will be a break halfway through class.
**Required Co-curricular Activities**

Two Capitol Hill hearings will be attended on your own time. One news conference, a teleconference you dial into, will also be required on your own time. The media teleconference is TBA and not scheduled in the syllabus. The Sunday, Feb. 8, walking tour is required. It will replace a regularly scheduled evening class the following week.

**Suggested Co-curricular Activities**

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

**Your Instructor**

Seth Borenstein is a national science writer for The Associated Press, the world's largest news organization, covering issues ranging from climate change to astronomy. He is the winner of numerous journalism awards, including the National Journalism Award for environment reporting in 2007 from the Scripps Foundation and the Outstanding Beat Reporting award from the Society of Environmental Journalists in 2008 and 2004. He was part of an AP Gulf of Mexico oil spill reporting team that won the 2010 George Polk Award for Environment Reporting and a special merit award as part of the 2011 Grantham environment reporting prizes. He was part of a team of finalists for the 2004 Pulitzer Prize for coverage of the Columbia space shuttle disaster. A science and environmental journalist for more than 20 years, covering everything from hurricanes to space shuttle launches, Borenstein has also worked for Knight Ridder Newspapers' Washington Bureau, The Orlando Sentinel, and the Sun-Sentinel in Fort Lauderdale. He is the co-author of three out-of-print books, two on hurricanes and one on popular science. He has flown in zero gravity and once tried out for Florida Marlins (unsuccessfully). Recent stories can be read here: [http://bigstory.ap.org/content/seth-borenstein](http://bigstory.ap.org/content/seth-borenstein) MuckRack bio and past stories of note here: [http://muckrack.com/seth-borenstein](http://muckrack.com/seth-borenstein)