Class details

Methods and Practice: Truthiness, Spin, Media & Politics

Spring 2013; Wednesdays, 6:15-9:15

Room B-203

Instructor Details

Seth Borenstein

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Office is next door, 1100 13th St. NW; fifth floor; 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. 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, the White House Office of Science Technology and Policy, environmental activist groups, energy lobbyists and Washington media. 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.

Desired Outcomes

Students will understand how spin plays out in Washington, what the role of reporters, political operatives, government officials and the public are in the spin cycle. You will learn how not to be spun and maybe how to spin. How to find the truth in a world where it is often hard to find and how to write about it. Students will learn how reporters work, what they are after, how to interact with them. Students will be expected to write a coherent and
publishable story. They will leave this class as stronger writers and have the ability to ask more incisive questions.

Non-final writing assignments will be 20 percent of grade. Final writing assignment, pre-final exam, will be 20 percent of grade. In-class participation will be 20 percent. Mid-term exam will be 20 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 lowest grade will be discarded; the rest will count. The in-class final will be 20 percent.

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.

The following will be adapted for news style story. Facts and style matter.

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

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Numerical Grade</th>
<th>Letter Grade</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>100-94</td>
<td>A</td>
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<tr>
<td>93-90</td>
<td>A-</td>
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<td>89-87</td>
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<td>86-84</td>
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<td>83-80</td>
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<td>79-77</td>
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<td>76-74</td>
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<td>73-70</td>
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<td>69-67</td>
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**Attendance Policy**

Students are permitted one unexcused absence across the course of the semester. To seek an excused absence for medical reasons, students must email or discuss with Lauren 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 Lauren prior to the date(s) in question. Lauren will communicate the absence to all relevant faculty. If you have not received notification from Lauren, the student has not procured an excused absence.

If students have more than one unexcused absence they will be penalized by deducting 50% of the class participation grade (e.g.: If the class participation grade is 20% of the final grade, the final participation grade would be reduced by 50%. 80% → 40%)

If students have more than two unexcused absences they will fail the course. 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.

NYU Washington, DC expects students to arrive to class promptly (both at the beginning and after any breaks) and to remain for the duration of the class. Three late arrivals or earlier departures (10 minutes after the starting time or before the ending time) will be considered one absence.

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, Lauren Sinclair can collect on behalf of the faculty between the hours of 10-6, 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

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

Plagiarism Policy

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


Students will be required to read the following every day and will be responsible for knowing the contents:
The Washington Post front section and the Tuesday science section.
The Associated Press Big Story website: http://bigstory.ap.org/
The Knight Science Journalism Tracker: http://ksjtracker.mit.edu/
Columbia Journalism Review, The Observatory: http://www.cjr.org/the_observatory/
Real Climate: http://www.realclimate.org/

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

Supplemental Texts(s) (not required for purchase)
Sen. McCarthy’s reply: http://www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=1065699n

Swift Boat Veterans For Truth Ads: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=phqOuEhg9yE
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oObCOFilrDc&feature=relmfu

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


Jeffrey Wigand on 60 Minutes: http://www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=7377558n


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


Seth Borenstein and 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

n/a

Additional Required Equipment

Students are expected to bring their laptops to every class.

Session 1

Overview. Media, politics, the truth and story-telling in Washington and Society. The importar 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. Rach 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. At end of session, first in-class writing exercise, not for credit.

Starting with the following week, every class will include one student presenting a critique of one story from the previous week’s news. The student will provide print-out or links to the story, discuss what worked and didn’t. Why it was or wasn’t news, what seemed truthful. What they would do differently. Professor will give an example of this is session 1.

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

In the week between session 1 and session 2, read All The President’s Men. In the two weeks between session 1 and session 3, 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 2, read chapter 1 of Oreskes and Conway:

**Session 2**

**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?

**Session 3**

**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.

By Session 4; finish All The President’s Men; view Murrow-McCarthy. Turn in writing assignment.

**Session 4**

**Case studies: McCarthy, Nixon and Swift Boating.** Lying, truth-twisting, manipulation in politics past and how media handled the issues. Advance notice: By session 6, read chapter 5 of Oreskes and Conway, view 60 minutes Wigand, read ASN on Milloy. If you can view the movie The Insider.

By session 5, visit congressional hearing.

**Session 5**

**The new trend of fact checking.** How it’s done. Why it’s done. What it’s like to be fact checked. Guest speaker: Accountability Editor Jim Drinkard from The Associated Press. Discussion about first writing assignment issues. Oral presentations from students about hill
hearings. Writing, reporting exercise in class.

By session 6, read chapter 5 of Oreskes and Conway, view 60 minutes Wigand, read ASN on Milloy. If you can view the movie The Insider.

For session 6, story from congressional hearing is due.

**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.
For session 7: study for mid-term

**Mid-term and reporting.** In-class mid-term test: ten questions. No lengthy writing.
Rest of class: Reporting techniques. Digging up information. Asking good questions. Press conferences. Will try to dial-in to pre-recorded press conference and then writing assignment for following week will be story from that press conference or another to be found.

**Session 8**
Fears from the left: Vaccines, cell phones and Genetically Modified Organisms. Why are people afraid of vaccines? Do they cause autism? What’s the science? How did the worries get started? Are cell phones safe? What about genetically modified food? How can you tell? What does the science say.
Advance notice. By session 6, read chapter 5 of Oreskes and Conway, view 60 minutes Wigand, read ASN on Milloy. If you can view the movie The Insider.

**Session 9**
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.
Between now and session 13: Go to another Capitol Hill hearing. This time a 500-word article is assigned from that visit.

**Session 10**
The spin cycle. Guest speakers includes energy lobbyist and environmental activist/lobbyist who are friends but often lobby same issue on opposite sides.

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)


Beth Daley, Boston Globe, Global Warming Makes Climate Tough on Friends:
http://www.boston.com/lifestyle/green/articles/2010/05/16/global_warming_debate_makes_climate_tough_on_friends/


Advance notice. Between now and session 13: Go to another Capitol Hill hearing. This time a 500-word article is assigned from that visit.

**Session 11**

**Climate change, journalism, and science.** Climate scientist guest lecturer: Michael Mann, author of The Hockey Stick and The Climate Wars; key figure in “climategate” and litigant. Victim of the spin cycle.

Assignment on the Thursday of the month, at 11 a.m.: NOAA will have its monthly climate webinar, where they summarize previous month’s weather/climate and offer outlook for next three months. Call-in, log-on details to be provided. 500 word story to be written from this, due on Nov. 21.

Advance notice. Between now and Nov. session 14: Go to another Capitol Hill hearing. This time a 500-word article is assigned from that visit.

**Session 12**

**Case study: Deepwater Horizons oil spill and crisis communications.** Lecture about country’s biggest oil spill, the challenges covering it from one of the AP’s Polk Award winning team. Contrasts with guest speaker: the former chief spokesman for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. The two people _ reporter and pr person _ were both long-time sources at odds during the on-going crisis.

Editing of Climate webinar story in-class. Edited stories to be returned by session 14.

For session 14, go to another capitol hill hearing. This time a 500-word article is assigned from that visit.

**Session 13**

questions about reporting, writing. Capitol Hill hearing story is due. In-class re-writes of those.

Final story due on Session 14

Session 14

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 Sunday before final exam. Between 800 and 1,000 words.

Session 15

Final Exam. From lectures and reading.

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
Two Capitol Hill hearings will be attended on your own time. One news conference, a telecon you dial into, will also be required on your own time. The media telecon is TBA and not scheduled in the syllabus.

Suggested Co-curricular Activities
Work may be put in a blog for the NYU DC center.

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).