



Journalism & Society: Truth, Fiction, Media and Politics

JOUR-9503; ENVST-9503 DC1

Fall 2018

Wednesdays 6:15 p.m.-9:15 p.m

Room location: B203

Instructor Information

- Seth Borenstein
- Office: 202-641-9454; Cell: 202-841-4530
- Office is next door, 1100 13th St. NW; fifth floor, The Associated Press; Washington DC 20005
- Meetings by advance appointment only. Preferred meeting times: 6:30-8 p.m. Thursdays; 9-10 a.m. Mondays. For appointment, contact by email.
- Seth.borenstein@nyu.edu; sb4314@nyu.edu

Course Information

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. Also, with the proliferation of fake and bias news sites, this course will be a guide that helps students navigate the minefield misinformation, even from officialdom. 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, simpler and objectively.

Course Overview and Goals

Students will write frequently, often **in** class and **on** deadline. Students will be assigned a 2018 congressional race to follow and write about. To take advantage of the unique Washington location, events and distinct attitude in the city, students will participate in press conferences and go to public hearings on Capitol Hill. This class will have a special emphasis on the Trump administration and on environmental/science issues. 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 seem to be out of the blue. That is planned and on purpose. This class will be a broad taste of journalism for the non-journalist and students will learn how to write news. Be warned, this syllabus is a flexible guide that will be changed frequently like the news. And some of it may change because of guest speaker's changing schedules and breaking news. We may try to fact check some kind of event live if timing works out.

Upon Completion of this Course, students will be able to:

- Students will learn how to spot and handle spin and understand how and why it is done in Washington.
- Students will learn how to get to the essence of truth and ask incisive questions.
- Students will learn how to write in journalistic style about government, science..

Course Requirements

Class Participation

Ask questions, give opinions, challenge instructor and guest speakers. Take part in in-class exercises. Participation is 25 percent of final grade. No cell phone use in class unless specifically told otherwise. Laptops should be brought to class.

Assignment 1 There is a small assignment for the first class, but don't worry it's pretty easy and fun. Before the first class, especially during the first week you are in DC, take a few minutes to walk around the area near the NYU/DC building. Let's say somewhere in a 10-block radius. Observe your surroundings. Use as many of your senses as possible (look, listen, feel, smell and taste). Look for something unusual at least to you. Seek out what is not like where you had been (either home campus or home) and especially something that strikes you as odd. Then by 6 p.m. first day of class (Aug. 29), email me at sb4314@nyu.edu with only one or two sentences about what you found unusual and why. I don't want much, just evidence you found something that to you is out of the ordinary. Then be prepared to talk about it in the first class.

Assignment 2 In the weeks between session 1 and Oct. 17, 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. Try to do it early in the year because the closer we get to

the election, the fewer hearings there are. Let me know when you have attended a hearing (if you can't because of internships and classes let me know and I'll find an alternative for you). You will then discuss in class what you saw and heard for about two minutes.

Grading of Assignments

The grade for this course will be determined according to the following formula:

Assignments/Activities	% of Final Grade
Non-final writing assignments	30%
Participation	25%
Final exam	15%
Final project	15%
Midterm exam	8%
Non-writing other (Fact check, you decide)	7%

Letter Grades

Letter grades for the entire course will be assigned as follows:

Letter Grade	Points	Percent
A	4.00	94-100
A-	3.67	90-93
B+	3.33	87-89
B	3.00	84-86
B-	2.67	80-83
C+	2.33	77-79

Letter Grade	Points	Percent
C	2.00	74-76
C-	1.67	70-73
D+	1.33	67-69
D	1.00	65-66
F	.00	Below 65

Course Schedule: Topics and Assignments (*subject to change with breaking news. Journalism is about adapting to change.*)

Week/Date	Topic	Assignment Due
Session 1 29-Aug-18	Overview. Everything is about story telling. Media, politics, the truth and storytelling 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. All The President's Men. Drudge Report. Inconvenient Truth.	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.
Session 2 5-Sept-18	Writing like a journalist. Keeping it short and simple. Being objective. Hands-on in class lecture and lots of writing. Writing obituaries as a start. Edna Buchanan. The Miller Chop.	For session 2: Read chapters 2 and 3, Simplicity and Clutter, of Zinsser. Read Farenthold Pulitzer-winning stories.
Session 3 12-Sept-18	What is truth? And where do we find it? Reporting. In this class we take	For session 3: Write your obituary, view Murrow versus

Week/Date	Topic	Assignment Due
	<p>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?</p>	<p>McCarthy.</p>
<p>SPECIAL SUNDAY SESSION (3.5) SEPT 22 1-4 pm NYU lobby</p>	<p>Washington political and journalism scandal tour. 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 five 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.</p>	<p>Bring pen/pencil and notebook, metro pass and wear good walking shoes and weather appropriate clothing. For Session 3.5, Sept. 22: Read New York Times: Gary Hart's downfall and Vanity Fair: Shattered Glass.</p>
<p>Session 4 19-Sept-18</p>	<p>Covering The White House. Associated Press reporter Darlene Superville, a NYU alum, has covered all parts of Washington, including the Obama and now Trump White House. She'll talk to us about it with us. Part two: More on writing and especially writing fast.</p>	<p>For Session 4: Read three stories by Darlene Superville: Rewrite and hand in obituary; read Chapters 6 and 9 Zinsser, "Words" and "The Lead and the Ending." Start reading "All The President's Men."</p>
<p>Session 5 26-Sept-18</p>	<p>Interviewing, press conferences and Freedom of Information Act. We will talk about how to interview, participate</p>	<p>Due for session 5: Writing a story based on guest lecturer. Limit 500 words.</p>

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	in press conferences. We may air a press conference and interview each other. Then we'll talk about Freedom of Information Act.	
Session 6 3-Oct-18	Case study: Smoking. Science and how industry and special interests put science on trial, using the concept of doubt, starting with smoking. More in-class writing and editing.	Due for session 6: File Freedom of Information Act, cc instructor. Read first five chapters of Oreskes..
Session 7 10-Oct-18	Election Night preview. AP elections decision editor Stephen Ohlemacher will discuss how AP counts the vote on election night , and a little about covering Congress. and part 2 will be "Fake News." Then we'll turn to the proliferation of fake news, propaganda news. What's wrong with them? Are they a new development? How can we determine what's real and what's not?	Read first nine chapters of All The President's Men.
Session 8 17-Oct-18	Midterm and how to fact check: Midterm: Short only one hour. Open book/computer. Then Fact-checking. Instructor will talk about how to fact check politicians, government. Pay close attention. We will fact check something live somehow if not this session another time. AP is now fact checking more than just government but fake news. Here's the ongoing website: http://tinyurl.com/apfactchecks or: http://apne.ws/2dDX5vg Then	Read the following articles: AP Fact Check, " Trump Won Presidency Lost Popular Vote ," AP Fact Check, " Trumps Distortions – Clinton ," AP Fact Check, " Overstatements in Trump's Economic Speech ," AP Fact Check, " Clinton Email Claims Collapse Under FBI Probe ," AP Fact Check, " Ted Cruz Misstates Science of Climate Change ," AP Fact Check, " Climate Science Most GOP Candidates ."
Session 9 24-Oct-18	Live Fact Checking. We will fact check the Florida Senate or Governor race live from 7 to 8 p.m. (they haven't decided which one is Oct.23 and which is Oct. 24); then we debrief and talk about the upcoming election.	Submit your topic for final writing project, include potential sources/interviews and potential databases to use.

Week/Date	Topic	Assignment Due
Session 10 31-Oct-18	What is risky, really? And course wrap. Presented in a game show format with teams competing to see who is smarter about risk. 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.)	Your story on your election race is due Session 10.
Session 11 7-Nov-18	Post-election day discussion, stories; You Decide; We'll talk about decision making by editors/managers. Why some stories are promoted as more important than others. Then, you will be assigned to play editor for your own website. You will be divided into teams and make your own website concepts and decide what should be put on it and what shouldn't. Grade for in-class performance.	Due Nov. 9 (two days after class). A story on the end result of your election race.
Session 12 14-Nov-18	Make-up no class (for tour). No class this session. Makes up for the earlier Sunday session.	
21-Nov-18	Thanksgiving Break - No Class	
Session 13 28-Nov-18	Dueling Spin Guest speakers includes energy lobbyist and environmental activist/lobbyist who are friends but often lobby same issue on opposite sides. You see same topic discussed in different ways by different sides as they try to convince you of their	Optional: If you want me to read your final project, get it to me by Nov. 30.

Week/Date	Topic	Assignment Due
	argument. Observe how they do it. May even be done jointly with and at a class at George Washington University. Details to come	
Session 14 5-Dec-18	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. Using reporting and writing skills when you are not a journalist. What it all means.	Final project is due Dec. 7 by 11 pm EDT.
Session 15 12-Dec-18	Final Exam. It will be an in-class writing assignment. Done live. You will get information. You can conduct email interviews.	

Course Materials

Required Textbooks & Materials

- **On Writing Well, 30th Anniversary Edition: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction**, Zinsser; Publisher: Harper Perennial (2006) ISBN-13: 978-0060891541
- **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 Smoke to Global Warming**, Oreskes and Conway; Publisher: Bloomsbury Press (2011) ISBN-10: 1608193942; ISBN-13: 978-1608193943]

Optional Textbooks & Materials (may be added as news changes/breaks)

- David Farenthold's [Pulitzer Prize winning coverage](#)
- [The stories](#) of Jeff Horwitz.
- Murrow versus McCarthy [Video](#).
- Gary Hart's [Downfall](#).
- Vanity Fair: [Shattered Glass](#).
- Elizabeth Kolbert, the New Yorker, Annals of Science, [Climate of Man part 1](#), April 25, 2005.

- [Elizabeth Rosenthal](#), New York Times.
- Fact Check.org on [swift boat ads](#).
- Michael Dobbs, Washington Post, on [Swift Boat ads](#).
- Americans for Non Smokers Rights on [Steve Milloy](#).
- AP Fact Check, "[Trump Won Presidency Lost Popular Vote](#)."
- AP Fact Check, "[Trumps Distortion – Clinton](#)."
- AP Fact Check, "[Overstatements in Trump's Economic Speech](#)."
- AP Fact Check, "[Clinton Email Claims Collapse Under FBI Probe](#)."
- AP Fact Check, "[Ted Cruz Misstates Science of Climate Change](#)."
- AP Fact Check, "[Climate Science Most GOP Candidates](#)."
- Seth Borenstein, The Associated Press: [Divided America: Global Warming](#).
- Charles Hanley, The Associated Press, [On Endless Ice](#).
- James Dellingpole, [The Final Nail in Coffin of Anthropogenic Global Warming?](#)
- Borenstein, Raphael Satter, Malcolm Ritter, [The AP: Climategate Science Not Faked, But Not Pretty](#).
- Sen. James Inhofe, [A Skeptic's Guide to Debunking Global Warming Alarmism](#).
- Wesley Pruden, The Washington Times, [Not Dead Yet and Cooling](#).
- Borenstein, The AP, [Statisticians Reject Global Cooling](#).

Resources

- **Access your course materials:** [NYU Classes](#) (nyu.edu/its/classes)
- **Databases, journal articles, and more:** [Bobst Library](#) (library.nyu.edu)
- **Assistance with strengthening your writing:** [NYU Writing Center](#) (nyu.mywconline.com)
- **Obtain 24/7 technology assistance:** [IT Help Desk](#) (nyu.edu/it/servicedesk)

Course Policies

Attendance and Tardiness

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 (for courses that meet once per week; for courses that meet twice per week, it is a one percent reduction per missed class).

To seek an excused absence for medical reasons, students must use the online absence reporting form within 24 hours of their first missed class. Students may be required to produce a doctor's note with that day's date, especially if the student has missed any classes already that semester or if exams/presentations/papers occurred in the missed class.

Non-medical absences must be discussed with the Academic Staff at least 7 days before the missed date(s) in question. If faculty members do not receive notification of an excused

absence, 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 lecturer 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.

Final exams must be taken at their designated times. Final exams may not be taken early, and students should not plan to leave Washington, DC before the end of the finals week.

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 Assignment

- 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.
- 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.

Incomplete Grade Policy

An "incomplete" is a temporary grade that indicates that the student has, for good reason, not completed all of the course work. This grade is not awarded automatically nor is it guaranteed; rather, the student must ask the instructor for a grade of "incomplete," present documented evidence of illness, an emergency, or other compelling circumstances, and clarify the remaining course requirements with the instructor.

In order for a grade of "incomplete" to be registered on the transcript, the student must fill out a form, in collaboration with the course instructor and the academic administration at the site; it should then be submitted to the site's academic office. The submitted form must include a deadline by which the missing work will be completed. This deadline may not be later than the end of the following semester.

Academic Honesty/Plagiarism

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 lecturer. Your lecturer 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:

[NYU Policies and Guidelines on Academic Integrity](#)

[NYU Library Guides](#)

Disability Disclosure Statement

Academic accommodations are available for students with disabilities. Please contact the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities (212-998-4980 or mosescsd@nyu.edu) for further information. Students who are requesting academic accommodations are advised to reach out to the Moses Center as early as possible in the semester for assistance.

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 Washington, DC Academics team in writing via email at least 7 days before being absent for this purpose.

Your Lecturer

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](#).

