

# COM JO 510: GOVERNMENT AND THE MEDIA

SPRING 2013

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## *COURSE DESCRIPTION:*

This is an advanced course on political journalism and the relationship between government and the media. It is intended for students who already have a familiarity with or experience in journalism or communications. Through lectures, classroom discussions, writing assignments and readings, we will explore the basics of political reporting and the influence of media on public policy. Students will also leave with a knowledge of how Washington works, and how the media affects – and is affected by – the workings of Washington, both the government side and the special interests side.

During the course, we will also examine how the changing media environment and new media have changed both the way political figures behave, and how the press reports on them. We will also discuss ethics in journalism, and the impact ethical transgressions have had on reporters and the industry as a whole.

We will learn how to navigate the world of Washington, learning how to meld reporting of politics with reporting on policy. We will discuss campaign reporting, how to find and use public documents in news writing, and how to cover largely under-reported federal agencies.

As we are coming off a presidential campaign, we will study also the machinery of campaigns – the political ads, the political consultants who run the campaigns, the art, science, and lack of science of polling, and the extraordinary impact of the *Citizens United* decision. We will also enjoy the input of guest speakers, dates and names TBA.

We will have at least one class on the Hill. We will work with students' schedules to make this work, so everyone can see what life is like in the Capitol, and how to report up there.

The course will demand several writing assignments, the last of which – a profile of a political figure or political movement – will serve as the final project. Assignments and quizzes will be tailored to fit the makeup of the class. If everyone, for example, is in a journalism internship, then most of the assignments will be news stories. If we have a group that has only a few journalism interns, assignments will be tweaked to accommodate that. For example, students

who are doing internships with members of Congress will not be asked to write a straight news story about Congress if it presents a conflict of interest.

*REQUIRED TEXTS:*

**Game Change: Obama and the Clintons, McCain and Palin, and the Race of a Lifetime**, by John Heilemann and Mark Halperin, Harper Collins

**The Broken Branch: How Congress is Failing America and How to Get it Back on Track**, by Tom Mann and Norm Ornstein, Oxford University Press

***Citizens United vs Federal Election Commission***,

<http://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/09pdf/08-205.pdf>

For most classes, you will be given magazine and newspaper articles by the professor to read ahead of the next class.

**Grading Criteria:**

**Quizzes and Midterm: 40%**

**Assignments and class participation, including speaker questions: 30%**

**Final Project (profile of a political figure, movement or interest group): 30 %**

**Plagiarism is forbidden and will result in automatic failure. Deadlines, which are central to news reporting, must be observed. Late assignments must be approved in advance by the professor. An unexcused missed deadline will be counted as a failed assignment.**

**Class topics may be switched to other weeks to accommodate news developments. Students will be given ample time to adjust to any changes.**

**Week One:** Course introduction and syllabus, and part one of the Basics of Covering Congress.

**Week Two:** The Basics of Covering Congress

**If this accommodates everyone's schedule, we will hold this class on the Hill, on the Tuesday of the week, and mid-day. This is because Congress is hopping on Tuesdays, and it's in everyone's interest to be up there when the members are there. But we will work things out so no one is forced to miss this important on-site class.**

- How legislation is developed and becomes law
- How to report on Capitol Hill
- Where and how to find sources and develop your beat
- Navigating spin from press secretaries and interest groups
- Avoiding he said-he said reporting; ``throwing out the net.”
- The Un-story: when what is NOT happening is the real story

Readings: **The Broken Branch** (chapters one and two)

**Week Three:** How to read a budget and report on it

- Deciphering the numbers: debt, deficit, outlays, authorizations vs appropriations, and why ten-year projections are an accepted Washington fiction
- What is the fiscal cliff, and why do we keep coming to the precipice?
- How does the federal budget differ from a household budget and a private company budget (or, why is it so hard for Congress to fix the debt and deficit?)
- How to find stories in the budget – policy shifts, defunding, new funding
- The Historical Tables – a little-used volume that is rich with stories

**Week Four:** Who runs Congress, and who influences Congress

- The committee system
- The Speaker, the Minority leader, whips, and threats to leadership
- The caucuses – party caucuses, issue caucuses and ideological caucuses such as the Tea Party
- Hearings and floor debates – how to cover them, and how to find hidden stories
- Lobbying basics (to be revisited in detail in another session)

Readings: **The Broken Branch** (chapter three). Newspaper articles to be provided by professor.

**Week Five:** Political Ads

- The growth and development of political advertising – from direct mail to TV and web ads
- Fact-checking campaign ads and ``issue ads” produced by independent groups. Do the fact-checks work, or are people just looking for reaffirmation of their views?

- Messaging and image – how ads define candidates, and how outside ads have taken control of the messaging further away from the candidate.
- Negative campaign ads – how they can destroy a candidate or a piece of legislation.
- Case studies: “Understands” (Priorities USA ad on Romney, plant closure and cancer death); “Right Choice” (Romney ad attacking Obama on welfare reform); “Harry and Louise;” Christine O’Donnell’s “I am Not a Witch.” Jack Conway’s anti-Rand Paul ad, “Aqua Buddha.”

Assignment (due the following week): pick three political ads (current or past) and write 300-400 words on each, explaining what the ad is trying to say, who is the target audience, and how the ad-makers used spoken and non-verbal elements to make a point. DO NOT CHOOSE ADS WE HAVE ALREADY ANALYZED IN CLASS.

**Week Six:** Campaign Finance and personal finances of lawmakers

- The basics of campaign finance – limits on fundraising and spending
- The impact of PACs and the historic influence of the Citizens United case
- How to read an FEC report and find hidden stories
- How to read a personal financial disclosure and find stories
- How early fundraising affects campaign momentum, and how the Internet has upended old “rules” about early cash.

Readings: The Supreme Court decision on *Citizens United*. You can find it online, or I can give you a printed copy:

[http://www2.bloomberglaw.com/public/document/Citizens\\_United\\_v\\_Federal\\_Election\\_Commission\\_130\\_S\\_Ct\\_876\\_175\\_L](http://www2.bloomberglaw.com/public/document/Citizens_United_v_Federal_Election_Commission_130_S_Ct_876_175_L)

**Week Seven: Mid-term, to be taken in class. The mid-term will cover the basic of Congress, the federal budget and campaign finance.**

**Week Eight:** The role of the media in Washington – how print and broadcast media influence – and are influenced by – government. We will discuss the impact of cable TV shows, the Internet and blogging on the development of public policy. Readings to be provided in advance by professor. A guest speaker is likely. A spirited class discussion is expected.

**Week Nine:** Campaign reporting, on and off the bus, and covering the White House

- Reporting in the “bubble” – what you get from it, and what you lose from it
- How to cover a campaign when you can’t afford to travel
- Iowa and New Hampshire – why they matter
- The money primary
- The presidential primary process- basics
- Deconstructing the 2012 presidential and congressional elections – what role did the media coverage play? Case studies of Akin (Missouri) and Mourdock (Indiana)
- The basics of White House reporting, from security background checks to traveling on Air Force One
- The relationship between the White House press secretary and the press corps
- Pool reports – who writes them, who gets them and how they are used
- The severe limits to reporting in the White House – security and mobility restrictions
- How to cover the White House effectively by traveling the halls of Congress and federal agencies
- How television has changed coverage of the White House and the relationship between the president and the press corps

Readings: **Game Change** (should have finished reading by Week Eight)

**Week Ten:** The (well-paid) people behind the candidates: the rise of consultants

- Consultants – what they do, how they have become increasingly professionalized
- Pollsters – what they do; how to read and evaluate polls; how polls can direct public opinion. “Push polls.”
- The new media consultants – using the Internet to bring campaigns into a new era.

Readings: History of Political Consulting, [PoliticalConsulting.info](http://PoliticalConsulting.info); “Candidates Spending Millions for Advice,” *Boston Globe*, Sept. 2, 2007

“Behind Those Polls,” by Jennifer Skalka Tulumello, *Christian Science Monitor Weekly*, July 9 and 16, 2012 issue. Instructor will provide.

### **Week Eleven:** Lobbying and lobbyists

- A brief history of lobbying and lobbyists
- How lobbyists operate in the modern era
- How to read lobbying reports and find stories on lobbying
- Case study: PhRMA

Readings: “Investigating Abramoff: Special Report,” selected readings from the Pulitzer Prize-winning series from the *Washington Post*. Selected readings from the “Hired Guns” project of the Center for Public Integrity.

We will also have current readings TBA and provided by instructor in advance analyzing the influence of lobbyists in the 2012 campaigns

We may have a guest speaker this week from the Sunlight Foundation.

### **Week Twelve:** The Political Profile

- Researching and writing a political profile
- How to find sources to interview
- What to do if your subject will not be interviewed
- Using public documents to define your subject
- Using color and detail to create a whole picture of your subject

Readings: “Don’t Look Back,” a *New Yorker* profile of Darrell Issa by Ryan Lizza

In this class, we will discuss how profiles are written and how to use the research techniques learned in class to build a solid profile. The purpose of this class is to help students do their final papers, so please have some ideas in mind of your final paper topic – it will make the class more valuable to you.

### **Week Thirteen:** Ethics in Journalism

- Plagiarism – the ultimate career-killer. Case study: Jayson Blair
- Fabrication – an even more potent career-killer. Case study: Jack Kelley, whose false stories for USA Today not only ruined his career but put reporters on the ground in danger

- Getting close to sources – how close is too close? Should Christiane Amanpour have continued to report from war zones while she was involved with (and ultimately married) the State Department spokesman?
- The rules of off-the-record vs on background vs on deep background
- Inadvertent plagiarism and false reporting – how NOT to let the Internet destroy your story and your career
- Maintaining independence – the citizen rights you must give up as a reporter (contributing to campaigns, etc.)
- When is it acceptable to mislead when reporting a story? Going “undercover” vs misrepresenting oneself as a reporter.
- Not breaking the law for any reason – News of the World as case study

Readings: Articles from the *New Yorker* and *The New York Times*, provided by instructor

**Week Fourteen:** Federal agency reporting: Washington’s most uncovered institution

- The regulatory agencies – what they do, whom they watch, and who watches them
- Reading the Federal Register
- OMB – not just a budget writer
- Covering the major agencies (Education, State, etc.) and how to find stories

Readings: Current news articles TBA. Ethics in Journalism. Expected appearance by veteran regulator agency reporter and staffer (now government consultant) and BU grad Anne Marie Kelly.

**Your final papers are due the day after our last class.**