

New York University
Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute
Syllabus JOUR-UA TK
Dismantling Bias in the Media
Summer 2021
Professor: Prachi Gupta
Office hours: TK

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Course Description

How do you report on two sides of a polarizing issue without legitimizing bigotry? How do you cover the rise of white supremacy without normalizing it? To what extent are these concerns the responsibility of a journalist, who is expected to remain objective? These are some of the pressing questions that journalists today must consider and resolve as they cover our nation's divisive social and political climate.

In this course, through readings, critical thinking exercises, and written assignments, students will examine the media's dominant notion of "objectivity" and the role that it plays in perpetuating bias. Over the course, students will study how newsroom decisions—including what to cover, how to frame a story, and how to source—shape social and political narratives about diverse communities, in particular. Students will then put these lessons into practice by reporting on a local political event for which they will identify and interview multiple sources, and will contextualize the issue with relevant research and information that strives for accuracy and fairness.

Learning Objectives

In this course, students will:

- Demonstrate awareness of journalism's core ethical values
- Write clear, accurate and engaging prose in an audience-appropriate manner
- Demonstrate critical thinking, independence, and creativity appropriate to the role of journalism in a democratic society
- Interview subjects, conduct research, and evaluate information
- Work ethically in pursuit of truth, accuracy, fairness, and diverse perspectives
- Recognize power relationships, including the relative privilege or marginalization of social groups, including one's own

- Recognize, report on, analyze and discuss structures that lead to inequity and injustice
- Identify media practices, frames and other effects that shape perceptions about difference, inequity and appropriate policies

Course Structure

This course will focus heavily on class discussion, course readings, and critical thinking exercises. Class discussions and workshops will model editorial meetings in the newsroom.

Readings

The required texts for the course are:

- Maria Len-Rios, Earnest Perry; *Cross-Cultural Journalism: Communicating Strategically About Diversity*, Routledge, 2016
- Mindich, David; *Just the Facts: How "Objectivity" Came to Define American Journalism*, New York University Press, 1999

In addition, every student is expected to subscribe to the *New York Times* for the duration of the class.

Course Requirements

Assignments are due every Sunday by noon, without exception. Please send your assignment as a Word document attachment to ___@nyu.edu. Assignments not received by the due date, or in the correct format, will NOT be counted. As with in-person classes, attendance counts, and class participation is mandatory. If you're more than 10 minutes late more than once, this will affect your final grade.

Grading

Your final grade will be based on your written assignments (70 percent) and class participation (30 percent). If you miss more than two classes, for whatever reason, you cannot get higher than a B in the class.

Final grades for written assignments will be calculated as follows:

Assignment #1 due Monday, June 6 (10 percent)

Using the Fault Lines framework as your guide, write a 200-word pitch for your final project. Your pitch should clearly state the phenomenon or question you are exploring and why this is an important issue to cover now. (Some subject areas to consider: an aspect of NYC's mayoral race or how Covid-19 is affecting students/faculty/staff at NYU).

Assignment #2 due Monday, June 7 (5 percent)

Outlines for the final project are due. The outline should walk me through how you plan to frame the issue and what research you will use to support the piece.

Assignment #3 due Wednesday, June 9 (5 percent)

In 250 words, identify 3 potential sources for your final project. Explain why these sources are relevant and important to include in your reporting. Include three questions you would ask them, and why these questions are relevant to your reporting.

Assignment #4 due Monday, June 14 (15 percent)

First draft (~800 words) of final project is due.

Final Assignment (65 percent)

Final report due (1,200-1,500 words), including an annotated bibliography and source list.

Course Schedule

WEEK 1

5/24 What Is Objectivity?

What is objectivity, and why does it matter in journalism? In this class, we'll talk about why, despite being one of the tenets of journalism, "objectivity" continues to be so hard to define.

Readings for discussion during class:

- Cross-Cultural Journalism, Ch. 1
- Just the Facts: How "Objectivity" Came to Define American Journalism, Ch. 1

Assignment: Write 250 words about your news consumption habits. How do you read the news—social media? Late night TV? Newspapers? Tell me about what sources you trust, and why you trust them. Come prepared to discuss.

5/26 Acknowledging Implicit Bias

Who has historically decided what's objective? How does homogeneity of decision-makers affect reporting, and why does this matter? In this class, we'll talk about explicit and implicit bias, and how bias affects key decisions in the news making process.

Readings:

- Just the Facts: How "Objectivity" Came to Define American Journalism, Ch. 3
- Eduardo Bonilla Silva, Racism Without Racists, Ch. 3 [\[pdf here\]](#)
- [How Implicit Bias Works in Journalism](#), Nieman Reports, Issac J. Bailey

Assignment: No written assignment due today, but begin thinking about your final project. Pitches are due next Wednesday.

WEEK 2

5/31 Memorial Day holiday

6/2 Introducing “Fault Lines”

The Fault Lines framework is one way that journalists can begin to address some of their own implicit biases. We’ll also discuss what it means to be “marginalized,” and how examining issues through fault lines can bring underrepresented stories to the surface.

Readings:

- Cross-Cultural Journalism, Ch. 3
- [How to Cross Your Fault Lines](#), Sally Lehrman/Dori Maynard, Society of Professional Journalists

Assignment: Using the Fault Lines framework as your guide, write a 200-word pitch for your final project. Your pitch should clearly state the phenomenon or question you are exploring and why this is an important issue to cover now. (Some subject areas to consider: an aspect of NYC’s mayoral race or how Covid-19 is affecting students/faculty/staff at NYU). Be prepared to share these ideas in class during discussion of Fault Lines, and to take notes on the feedback you receive.

WEEK 3

6/7 Framing the News

With a basic understanding of the challenges reporters face when seeking objectivity, we will begin to explore how reflexive, instinctual decisions about coverage, framing, sourcing can have a tremendous impact on marginalized communities. In this class, we’ll focus on framing decisions.

Readings:

- [The Power of Framing](#), Brian Baresch, Shih-Hsien Hsu and Stephen D. Reese (pgs. 1-3)
- [How the News Media Persuades](#), Thomas J. Leeper and Ruth Slothuus (pg. 1-8)
- [False Equivalency and Crisis Reporting](#), The Maynard Institute for Journalism, Jean Marie Brown

Assignment: Outlines for the final project are due. The outline should walk me through how you plan to frame the issue and what research you will use to support the piece.

Note: I must approve all pitches for the final project. If you do not have an approved pitch, you cannot pass the final project.

6/9 Who Gets a Voice?: On Sourcing and Interviewing

If the frame is the story's body, then your sources are what brings the story to life. But how do you decide what sources to include? What does it mean to have diversity in sourcing, and what does this approach add to reporting?

Readings:

- [At the AP, Black Lives Don't Matter](#)
- [Sourcing Diversity](#), Andrea Wenzel, Columbia Journalism Review
- [Diverse Sources Needed—Regardless of the Topic](#), Tara Garcia Mathewson, Kappan.org

Assignment: Identify 3 potential sources for your final project. In 250 words, explain why these sources are relevant and important to include in your reporting. Include three questions you would ask them, and why these questions are relevant to your reporting.

WEEK 4

6/14 Whose Stories Matter?

Now we turn to coverage: Who decides what stories are worth pursuing, and how are these decisions made? What stories do we miss when newsrooms are homogenous?

Readings:

- [When Newsrooms Are Dominated by White People, They Miss Crucial Facts](#), Jelani Cobb, the Guardian
- [White Supremacy Threat Demands Its Own Beat Reporters](#), Christiana Mbakwe, Columbia Journalism Review
- How the Press Covered Trump, [Columbia Journalism Review](#)

Assignment: 800-word first draft of your final projects are due. We will workshop them in class.

6/16 Myths in the Media

In this class, we will look at the impact some of those racial myths have on marginalized communities, and the role that framing, sourcing, and coverage decisions played in perpetuating these myths. We will use the second part of class to review questions about the final project, and any challenges you may be facing as you begin the reporting process.

Readings:

- Watch: *Trial by Media* on Netflix, episode 3, “41 Shots”
- [The news media usually show immigrants as dangerous criminals. That’s changed — for now, at least](#), *Washington Post*, Emily Farris and Heather Silber Mohamed
- [Superpredator: The Media Myth That Defined a Generation of Black Youth](#), The Marshall Project
- [Op-Ed: How the media smears black victims](#), Adam Johnson, *Los Angeles Times*
- [Telling It Like It Is: When writing news requires a distance from neutrality](#), Roy Peter Clark, Poynter

WEEK 5

6/21 Reporting With Moral Clarity

We’ll continue the discussion with an examination of stories that prioritize moral clarity. In previous classes, we discussed overcoming bias by acknowledging blindspots. In this class, we’ll examine the work of reporters who leaned into their identities, and perspectives, through the reporting process.

Readings:

- [Covering a Country Where Race Is Everywhere](#), Columbia Journalism Review, Collier Meyerson
- Watch: Elle Reeve, [Charlottesville: Race and Terror](#), Vice News Tonight
- Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah, [A Most American Terrorist: The Making of Dylann Roof](#), GQ Magazine
- Aymann Ismail, [The Store That Called the Cops on George Floyd](#), Slate

Assignment: Focusing on the reporting by Ismail, Ghansah, or Reeve, write 300 words explaining how the reporters’ identities affected their ability to report. What would an objective framework say about this style of reporting? What would a moral clarity view this reporting?

6/23 Re-evaluating Objectivity

This week, we’ll look at how many Black and indigenous journalists are redefining how we perceive and talk about journalism and the idea of objectivity.

Readings:

- [Opinion: A Reckoning Over Objectivity, Led By Black Journalists](#), Wesley Lowery, New York Times
- [Is Journalism A Form of Activism?](#), Danielle Tcholakian, Longreads
- “Indigenous Journalisms,” from [Reckoning: Journalism's Limits and Possibilities](#), Candis Callison and Mary Lynn Young
- [How the Mainstream Media’s Whiteness Enabled Trump](#), Mary Harris, Slate

WEEK 6

6/28 Workshop

This class will be devoted to editing your final projects—we will edit and workshop them together, as a class.

6/30 Final Project Due, Guest Speaker TBD

Accommodations

Students with disabilities that necessitate accommodations should contact and register with New York University's Moses Center for Students with Disabilities (CSD) at [212-998-4980](tel:212-998-4980) or mosescsd@nyu.edu. Information about the Moses Center can be found at www.nyu.edu/csd. The Moses Center is located at 726 Broadway on the 2nd floor.

Diversity & Inclusion

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