



SYLLABUS

POLITICAL JOURNALISM IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

Instructor: Simon Waldman

Contact Hrs: 40

Language of Instruction: English

LONDON, ENGLAND

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course will begin a year – almost to the day – after the biggest political earthquake in modern British history. The unexpected referendum decision by the voters of the UK to leave the European Union changed everything, including the British Prime Minister. The politicians, lawyers, economists and business people are still struggling to come to terms with the impact and practical repercussions of this shock, whilst political journalists are trying to interpret and explain a transformed landscape.

The world in which the political journalists operate is changing too. In recent decades the balance of power between politicians and journalists has been shifting, influenced by a range of factors, such as media ownership, a contracting but still highly competitive newspaper industry and the growth of new media as a prime source of information and comment.

Politics in the UK, as in the US, has become more strident and aggressive in recent years. Public trust in British politicians is low and, worryingly, trust in journalists is waning. The reasons for this are complex, and will be one of the key issues to consider during this course.

The course will explore the way in which the media reports politics and how journalists are adjusting – or failing to adjust – to the new realities. We will hear from leading practitioners of political journalism as well as from those who seek to influence them – the “spin doctors” and the pressure groups. We will observe politicians and political journalists in action and spend time in the “mother of parliaments” at Westminster.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

The key objectives of the course are:

- To acquaint students with the UK systems of government and politics, together with how they are reported
- To explain how the different types of media report politics and what influences them

- To explore ways in which the political classes attempt to influence and manipulate media coverage
- To explore ways in which politicians and political journalists can reinvigorate and engage with the public

Learning Outcomes

On completion of the course, students will be able to demonstrate:

- A thorough understanding of the way politics and government are reported in the media
- An awareness of the typical working day of different types of journalists covering politics and government
- An ability to report on and analyse UK media coverage – and discern the key sources and processes which influenced the journalists concerned
- A basic understanding of how UK political journalists make judgements about whether an issue is a problem, dispute, crisis or catastrophe
- The confidence to make reasoned judgements about the truth and relevance of media coverage, particularly in an international context
- An appetite for monitoring, analysing and reacting to current changes in the relations between politicians and political journalists

LEARNING OUTCOMES:

Students who undertake this course and participate fully can expect to gain a thorough knowledge of the country's political process, as well as its key cultural, social and economic challenges.

INSTRUCTIONAL METHODOLOGY

The class will be taught through classroom sessions, guest speakers, practical exercises and field visits. The emphasis will be on meeting guest speakers in their working environment and engaging with politicians at Westminster and beyond.

Written Work

Four pieces of written work are required from students taking this course.

Students will be asked to write a short **News story** in the first week of the course. They will write a **Feature** article of 800-900 words based on a highly topical issue. They will also write a sketch or **Descriptive piece** of between 300 and 400 words on a political event.

In addition, students will be required to write a **Leader** – modelled on leading articles carried in the main newspapers, such as The Times, Daily Telegraph and The Guardian. It will be about 300-350 words long and on a topical subject of their choice. It should be suitable for publication in one of above national newspapers and their websites.

All written work will require students to work independently, as if they were working journalists. They will be offered support and advice at every stage.

METHOD OF EVALUATION (GRADING)

15% News story

30% Feature article

25% Editorial/Opinion piece

20% Sketch/descriptive colour piece
10% Participation in class and attendance

Academic Integrity

It is expected that any written work submitted for this work is entirely a student's own work. If within your work you have relied on outside sources, you will be required to identify them. Failure to acknowledge any source may leave you open to the charge of plagiarism and, at the very least, result in failure to secure a credit for this course.

Attendance

Every class (whether on site or field trip) must be attended. Absence will be accepted only on the grounds of sickness. Sickness must be notified in advance via Amanda, Mary or your course supervisor. Any absence not for sickness will affect your grade.

CLASS BOOK

Students will be required to read *So you want to be a Political Journalist*, edited by Sheila Gunn, published by Biteback Publications (ISBN 978 1849540858)

Additional recommended reading: Morrison, James (2011). *Essential Public Affairs for Journalists*. Oxford University Press.

Students will also be required to read at least two national newspapers on a daily basis and to access political news stories in the broadcast and online media from the following sources: The Times, The Guardian, Daily Telegraph, The Independent, Daily Mail, The Sun, BBC, ITV, Sky. The politics sections of two websites are also particularly recommended: www.bbc.co.uk (particularly its links to Democracy Live and its College of Journalism) and www.guardian.co.uk Both cover not just the topical news stories, but analysis and explanatory articles. Their political and parliamentary glossaries are also useful.

GUEST SPEAKERS & EXTERNAL VISITS

Speakers will be selected because of their specific experience and knowledge across the different media and political parties. Past speakers have included:

- Richard Fitzwilliams, a respected commentator on the Royal Family and former editor of International Who's Who
- Rob Gibson, Editor of Parliamentary Gallery News
- Prof Ivor Gabor, former BBC political producer and head of the master's course in political journalism, City University
- Scarlett MccGwire, former national TV political journalist, now advises UK Labour politicians and trains parliamentary candidates abroad
- Joy Johnson, former BBC political editor and currently (Labour) political commentator and lecturer
- Jonathan Isaby, Chief Executive of the think tank, The Taxpayers' Alliance, and former political journalist on the Daily Telegraph
- Rob Thomas, Political Consultant at the Conservative Party's international office
- David Douglas, Conservative Party agent, Hampstead & Kilburn

Students will be taken to political events and a large part of the course will be conducted away from the classroom. Past visits have included:

- The Supreme Court

- Both Houses of Parliament
- The Westminster “Village” (i.e. the key political institutions)
- Conservative Party headquarters
- 4 Millbank (where most political interviews are done)
- City Hall, home of the London Mayor and Assembly
- A leading think tank

COURSE OUTLINE

WEEK ONE: BROAD OUTLINE

The first week will focus on giving a broad outline of the way politics works; the most influential forms of political journalism; relations between journalists and politicians; and the cultural differences between the US and UK. The following weeks will follow up with visits and meetings with journalists, politicians and other key influencers. The course will focus on specific topical issues and track how they are dealt with by politicians and reported by journalists.

WEEK TWO: INTRODUCTION TO THE UK POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT & THE LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK

We will outline the course and the different UK political systems and Who’s Who in politics. It will include an analysis of how the law is changed. In addition, it will cover the work of the Supreme Court, the highest court of appeal

WEEK THREE: WHAT ARE POLITICIANS THINKING?

A focus on how new policies are researched and reported – and particularly how the main Opposition Party (currently Labour) operates and influences the Government. We will discuss the role of opposition parties, policy groups and think tanks and the work of political party HQs, including international work with sister parties

WEEK FOUR: HOLDING THE GOVERNMENT TO ACCOUNT

This week will focus on how journalists scrutinise and report the work of politicians and their advisors. It will also focus on how journalists report and reflect public opinion.

WEEK FIVE: CAMPAIGNING & ELECTIONS

This will include media coverage of polls, campaigns, elections and referenda. It will discuss the future challenges of political journalism and the relationship between the media, politicians and the electorate. We will also cover similarities and differences between elections in the UK & US and the media coverage of them.