

GOVT 412: Politics and the Mass Media

Fall 2017

George Mason University

Monday/Wednesday: 3-4:15
Innovation Hall 206

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Office Hours: Monday 1-2:30, or by appointment

COURSE OVERVIEW

The basis of our governments being the opinion of the people, the very first object should be to keep that right; and were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter. But I should mean that every man should receive those papers and be capable of reading them.

– President Thomas Jefferson

The FAKE NEWS media (failing @nytimes, @CNN, @NBCNews and many more) is not my enemy, it is the enemy of the American people. SICK!

– President Donald Trump

The news media is a cornerstone of democratic theory. Political philosophers and early presidents alike believed that a free press was essential for a healthy public debate and effective policy. Yet between the Enlightenment of the 18th century and today journalism has lost some of its luster. Many in the public are deeply suspicious of the media's ability to faithfully convey truth, and worry about its outsized influence on society.

With this tension between theory and practice as a backdrop, this course has three broad objectives. The first is to understand the theoretical role of media in the Marketplace of Ideas. The second is to assess how well journalism in practice lives up to its idealized role. This debate will cover many of the most contentious issues of recent years: the tension between education and infotainment, partisan news, “fake” content and “alternate facts,” and the media as a tool of disinformation and manipulation.

The final objective is to have fun. And lots of it. We are living in a golden age for media studies. Our conversation will reach from John Stewart (philosopher) to John Stewart (comic), and many others both serious and satirical along the way.

READINGS

There are no texts assigned for the course. All readings are hosted on BB or available online.

ASSIGNMENTS & GRADING

Course grades are based on six components:

Attendance and participation	15%
Twitter scofftolog	10%
Reading prompts	20%
Midterm exam	25%
Final exam	30%

Attendance and Participation

Attendance and *active participation* is critical for this course. Just coming to class won't cut it; I expect you to actively engage with the material and the discussion. This reflects a firm expectation that you have done the readings before each class.

That said, life happens. Everyone is allowed to miss two classes without negatively impacting your final grade. If you miss or expect to miss more than two classes, please contact me.

Twitter Scofftolog

By Wednesday 9/6 everyone must create a Twitter account—a anonymous/bogus handle is both acceptable and encouraged—devoted to this course. In addition to following your classmates, I will provide an initial list of 15 actual handles to follow, with others added on a rolling basis.

In addition, we will vote on a Twitter handle for the class itself. Students must bring a suggested handle to class on 9/6. The student whose handle is ultimately selected to represent the class will win a yuge prize.

Every week you must do two things on your Twitter account. First, you must mention the class handle in at least one post you create. Secondly, you must respond to at least one post created by a classmate. Each week's post must be entered by midnight on Sunday.

Critical Reaction

Over the course of the semester you will write five critical reactions to the week's readings. All the week's readings are fair game. Each reaction should be approximately 2-3 double-spaced pages. A strong reaction will not simply summarize the readings, but critically assess the broader implications for the marketplace of ideas and democracy.

Each reaction must be submitted electronically through Blackboard, and are due by noon on Monday. Tardy submissions will lose 5 points for every day late.

Midterm/Final Exams

The exams include multiple choice, short answer, and long-form responses. If circumstances require a day change for the midterm, it can only be moved later in the semester, never earlier.

The final exam is cumulative, but will focus primarily on readings from the second half of the semester. A number of questions on the final exam will be pulled directly from the midterm, so preparing for the midterm will pay double dividends.

POLICIES

Be Respectful

Active participation is a major part of the course. While debate is encouraged where appropriate, in the spirit of productive discussion it is vital to remain thoughtful and respectful.

No Electronics

No electronics of any kind—laptops, cell phones, recorders, surveillance drones, etc.—will be allowed during class. Please silence your phone before class starts. If your phone rings during class I reserve the right to answer it and tell jokes to whomever is calling.

Students With Disabilities

If you are a student with a disability, please contact the Office of Disability Resources. Accommodations will be arranged in accordance with their policies.

Blackboard

Take a moment to familiarize yourself with the course's Blackboard page. Your grades will be posted on BB. In addition, I will post lecture slides after each week, additional readings as noted on the syllabus, and general content on an ongoing basis.

Academic Honesty

Integrity is integral GMU's academic and social culture. Cheating and other forms of academic dishonesty will not be tolerated, and suspected violations will be referred to the Honor Committee. Please refer to Blackboard for additional information about the Honor Code. But, seriously folks, you're all adults. Just don't cheat.

Late Assignments

Barring documentation of an emergency or prior notification, assignments will lose 5 points for each day late.

Extra Credit

There will be several chances for extra credit throughout the semester. All opportunities will be available to everyone. Details will be provided in class and on Blackboard. In fairness to fellow students, *absolutely no extra credit work will be assigned on an individual basis.*

Date	Readings	Assignment
1. Introduction Mon 8/28 Wed 8/30	Introduction Kahneman & Tversky 1973 - Prediction Julia Galef TED - Why You Think You're Right NPR Hidden Brain Podcast, Episode 64 YouTube Art of the Problem: Conditional Probability	
2. The Marketplace of Ideas Mon 9/4: No class. Wed. 9/6	Ingber 1984 - The Marketplace of Ideas Mill 1859 - Liberty of Thought and Expression	Create Twitter handle
3. Portraying the Press Mon 9/11 Wed 9/13	Thrall 2005 - Competing Images of the Press Herman & Chomsky 1988 - A Propaganda Model Bennett 1990 - Theory of Press-State Relations Althaus et al. 1996 - Revisiting the Indexing	Reaction 1 due.
4. Agenda Setting & Framing Mon 9/18 Wed 9/20	McCombs & Shaw 1972 - Agenda Setting Scheufelel & Tewksbury 2007 - Framing Benett & Iyengar 2008 - Minimal Effects Holbert et al. 2008 - Response to Minimal Effects	
5. The CNN Effect Mon 9/25 Wed 9/27	Eagleburger 2003 - CNN Effect Robinson 1999 - CNN Effect Slovic 2007 – Mass Brader 2005 - Responsive Chord	Reaction 2 due.
6. Shoot the Messenger? Mon 10/2 Wed 10/4	Druckman 2001 - Who Can Frame Kuklinski & Hurley 1994 - Hearing and Interpreting Vallone 1985 - Hostile Media Tormala & Petty 2004 - Source Credibility	
7. Selective Exposure & Bias DAY CHANGE: TUES 10/10 Wed 10/11	Sears & Freedman 1967 - Selective Exposure Stroud 2008 - Revisiting Selective Exposure Prior 2005 - News vs. Entertainment Redlawsk 2002 - Motivated Reasoning	
8. The Partisan Circus Mon 10/16 Wed 10/18	Arceneaux et al. 2012 - Polarized Political Prior 2013 - Political Polarization Iyengar & Hahn 2009 - Red Media, Blue Media	Reaction 3 due.

	Levendusky 2013 - Partisan Media Polarize Stroud 2010 - Partisan Selective Exposure	
9. News In the Digital Age Mon 10/23 Wed 10/25	None Wihbey 2014 - News and Information Shirky 2010 - Social Media Bump 2017 – Resolved	Midterm exam
10. Revisiting the MOI Mon 10/30 Wed 11/1	Caplan 2007 - Myth of the Rational Voter Stecula 2015 - McCarthy or Inhofe Groelin & Baum 2008 - Crossing Water's Edge Brulle et al 2012 - Shifting Public Opinion	
11. Political Advertising Mon 11/6 Wed 11/8	Kaid 2004 - Part 7 (Advertising) & 9 (Campaigns) Franz & Ridout 2007 - Political Advertising Ansolabehere et al. 1994 - Attack Advertising	Reaction 4 due.
12. The Bulliest of Pulpits Mon 11/13 Wed 11/15	Domke et a. 2006 - Going Public Baum & Groeling 2010 - Elasticity of Reality Hart & Childers 2004 - Verbal Certainty Barabas 2005 – Certitude	
13. Election: 2016 Mon 11/20 Wed 11/22	Armstrong WP - Certainly Biased Sides 2016 - Media Bias Shafer 2016 - Trump Took Over Thanksgiving	Eat all the things.
14. Weaponizing the News Mon 11/27 Wed 11/29	Allcott & Gentzkow 2017 - Pages 211-236 Jin et al. 2014 - Misinformation Propagation Timberg 2016 - Fake News Sanovich 2017 - Computational Propoganda	Reaction 5 due.
15. Political Humor Mon 12/4 Wed 12/6	Warner 2010 - Daily Show LaMarre et al 2009 - Irony of Satire None	
Final Exam - Monday 12/18 @ 1:30		