

PUBPOL 3140/5140 Political Journalism: Understanding Media & Politics in Multicultural America

Fall 2024 * 4 credits

Tuesdays, 6:30-9:50 p.m.

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Description: As the United States grows increasingly diverse, the nation's politics – as refracted through a myriad of media lenses – becomes ever more polarized. Evidence of this emerges as widening swaths of citizens experience their political/civic life based in large measure on the sets of media-produced “facts” and “opinions” in alignment with their identities, beliefs, and values. U.S. politics has never been mild-mannered. What transpires nowadays as harsh (or in some cases, outright dishonest) political rhetoric (and those who support it) is nothing new; its roots extend to the 18th century founding of the nation. However, something is unique in contemporary America: the 21st century bears witness to a multiplicity of voices – women; racial, ethnic, and religious minorities; immigrants; LGBTQ; and other socially constructed identities – that were nonexistent, excluded or silenced in earlier generations of political discourse, all legitimately laying claim to being American and demanding to share in its bounty. While much attention has been given to our polarized politics, especially since Donald Trump announced his ultimately successful candidacy for president in 2015, far less notice has been given to the struggles of the journalists whose job is to make sense of it all. Just as society is more diverse, so too are the people who cover the events that shape the nation. Today, the incredible, personal power of technology, an unprecedented number of “average” citizens can produce information and entertainment that often passes as news without the filters of the traditional, dead-tree media establishment.

Learning Objectives: *Students are expected to gain insight into the relationship between media-generated messages, how the messages shape political discourse, and influence public policies. Ultimately, students will (1) understand the evolution of political reporting and discourse in U.S. history; (2) learn and practice some of the techniques and tradecraft of fact-based, accurate reporting; (3) explain how media messaging shapes cultural and political norms; (4) develop fundamental media literacy to defend against the technology-driven information presented as news and entertainment, and (5) demonstrate a scholarly understanding of political journalism (graduate students only).*

The goal of this class is to help students understand the complexity and contradictions inherent in collecting and reporting the swirl of daily events. What's more, the class will explore how the instantaneous power of a 24-hour-news cycle, social media, and powerful new technologies (AI, cell phones/computers/etc..) wield a double-edged sword to the traditions of democratic life. On one hand, a great number of Americans can be seen and heard in the public square, reaching a wide audience, and wielding unprecedented influence over public life. On the other hand, the cacophony of voices exists without verifiable scrutiny or authority, leaving many Americans adrift in an ocean of indistinguishable mélange of fact/fiction passing as political discourse.

Thematic approach: This course will explore the critical role that news reporting plays in citizens' understanding of U.S. society and the preservation of democracy. We will begin with an historical understanding of how political journalism emerged in the colonial colonies and played a critical role in creating a democratic nation. From there, the class will examine key moments in the evolution of a journalistic tradition in the U.S., culminating with the current challenges and issues that impact how citizens receive, react, and replicate political news. Finally, we will analyze the impact of the unsettled media landscape on citizen involvement in the federal 2024 Election. The through-line thread of the course should put students in the role of reporter, separating fact from fiction from opinion. This course will feature lectures, guest speakers and interactive lessons. Most importantly, the class will draw upon students and their scholarly understanding of the topic to enrich our shared learning experience by making in-class presentations and will have an opportunity experience reporting and writing as practiced by mainstream journalists. There are no prerequisites for this course.

Assignments	Grade %	Due Date	Hand In
Preliminary writing assignment (interview and written essay of a classmate)	Grade 5%	Due at the start of class September 3, 2024	In class (Optional Canvas/email)
Four, bi-weekly news analysis (emphasis on the underlying messaging in current events)	Grade 20% (5% each)	Due 9/17; 10/1; 10/22; 11/5	In class (Optional Canvas/email)
Mid-term writing (man-in-the-street political reporting)	Grade 25%	Due at the start of class time October 20, 2024	In class (Optional Canvas/email)
Class participation	Grade 20%	Weekly	
Final class presentation on topic related to course material. (Undergraduates will be graded on how effectively they meet learning objectives 1-4. Graduate students will be evaluated on 1-5.)	Grade 30%	November 17, 24, and December 1 (To be determined individually)	In class

Grade Scale	Value
A+	98-100
A	93-97
A-	90-92
B+	88-89
B	83-87
B-	80-82
C+	78-79
C	73-77
C-	70-72
D	60-69
F	<59

Structure: This course must be taken for a letter grade. You must bring your laptop to class and be ready to use it. This is a presidential election year, so stay on top of current events by reading political and government stories in at least one major daily newspaper as well as scanning reports from other reputable news outlets. Assignment extensions are possible, but reserved for truly special cases and must be cleared with me in advance. Late assignments will be penalized one grade increment (e.g., an A to an A-) per day. I reserve the right to change this syllabus and will inform you if I must do so.

Office hours: I will have office hours from 5-6 p.m. every Tuesday via Zoom. I'm available for scheduled appointments at times of mutual convenience. The two official channels of communication for the course are email and Canvas. Be sure to monitor both.

Integrity: Everyone in this course is expected to abide by the Cornell University Code of Academic Integrity. Any work submitted by a student in this course for academic credit will be the student's own and unique work.

Message From Student Disability Services (SDS): Your access in this course is important. Please request your accommodation letter early in the semester, or as soon as you become registered with SDS, so that we have adequate time to arrange your approved academic accommodations.

- Once SDS approves your accommodation letter, it will be emailed to both you and me. Please follow up with me to discuss the necessary logistics of your accommodations.
- If you are approved for exam accommodations, please consult with me at least two weeks before the scheduled exam date to confirm the testing arrangements.
- If you experience any access barriers in this course, such as with printed content, graphics, online materials, or any communication barriers; reach out to me or your SDS counselor right away. If you need an immediate accommodation, please speak with me after class or send an email message to me and SDS at sds_cu@cornell.edu. If you have, or think you may have a disability, please contact Student Disability Services for a confidential discussion: sds_cu@cornell.edu, 607-254-4545, sds.cornell.edu.

Class Schedule (Wednesdays, 6:30-9:50 pm)

August 27: Introductions and Orientation: Review syllabus and conduct class introductions, including one-on-one interviews of classmates and a written “news story” based on your interview.

Turning to the course materials, we will discuss how democracy depends upon an informed public. We’ll explore the various ways information is gathered, shared and consumed by citizens; and we’ll begin to examine the role that various forms of media play in this process.

Assignment: Preliminary writing (in-class interviews of a classmate; “news story” based on interview due at start of next week’s class.)

September 3: Storytelling. News writing is storytelling.

Class discussion to unwrap the art of story: what makes a compelling story? Class will watch the “Darmok” episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* to unravel a narrative arc and reveal how it shapes, informs and supports shared understanding of culture and current events. We will have an opportunity to collect and analyze various story forms to develop awareness of the underlying narrative structures and hidden messages in stories. Guest lecturer Amy Saidman, director of Story District, a program that teaches storytelling in Washington.

Reading: Lule. *Daily News, Eternal Stories: The Mythological Role of Journalism.*

September 10: Infamous Scribblers. Lecture on how the early American pamphleteers created a democracy with a less than honest media. Class discussion on how news consumption tracks with public engagement with politics in the past and in the present. Will examine news coverage during important U.S. eras, including the Civil War and Reconstruction, Yellow Journalism at the turn of 20th century, world wars, Civil Rights, Watergate, Vietnam, September 11 and MAGA.

Reading: Burns, *Infamous Scribblers: The Founding Fathers and the Rowdy Beginnings of American Journalism*

Hall, Jane. *Politics and the Media: Intersections and New Directions*

September 17: Media & Presidential Politics Class lecture/discussion on how news media cover the U.S. presidential elections

Guest lecturer Melanie Sill, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and former media executive, will discuss media challenges in the U.S. presidential campaign. Class activity: Deep-dive analysis of the story-behind-the-story in reporting of the presidential campaign. What is horse-race coverage and how does it shape the narrative arc of political stories? Who are the sources supporting the media’s coverage? How does the public filter fact from opinion?

First bi-weekly news analysis due at start of class.

September 24: Polling, Media and Outcomes. What are polls? How do they work? Are they reliable indicators of elections. We will examine the latest round of polls for the U.S. presidential election. Guest lecture by Joseph Campbell, professor and polling expert.

Class discussion to preview and outline the mid-term writing assignment.

Reading: Campbell, W. Joseph. *Lost in a Gallup: Polling Failure in U.S. Presidential Elections.*

October 1: To be a reporter. In-class reporting practicum – class will begin with a lecture on interviewing and reporting with multiple sources. An in-class activity will be a “mock” news conference with a visiting news-making subject (TBD), followed by students using class time to write (under deadline pressure) a news story augmented with online reporting. Guest lecture by Cherri Gregg, afternoon drive host/news anchor WHY-FM in Philadelphia.

Second bi-weekly news analysis due at start of class.

October 8: What is a News Desert? Class discussion on the diminishing nature of local news and the phenomenon’s impact of credible community-based citizen awareness and involvement in a

representative democracy. We'll conduct an in-class assignment to survey online news sites to critically analyze how various communities determine local news. Guest lecture by John Robinson, longtime editor of the Greensboro (N.C.) News & Record.

Assignment: This class will feature an in-class, local news review and deadline writing exercise. **(Mid-term writing assignment due at start of class)**

Reading: On the Media, "Trouble at The Baltimore Sun, and the End of an Era for Pitchfork," January 19, 2024.

"The State of Local News Project: Tracking and analyzing changes to the local journalism landscape across the country." <https://localnewsinitiative.northwestern.edu/projects/state-of-local-news/>

Reading: "News Deserts and Ghost Newspapers: Will Local News Survive?"

<https://www.usnewsdeserts.com/reports/news-deserts-and-ghost-newspapers-will-local-news-survive/>

October 15: Fall Break (no class)

October 22: Economic/Technological challenges in Media to Democracy: Lecture and class discussion on how technological changes through history has altered the public's media consumption and restructured social/civic engagement. Class will focus on the media's symbiotic triangle of Money-Technology-Democracy.

Guest lecture by Jon Hilsenrath, writer/editor/entrepreneur and former senior editor *The Wall Street Journal*.

Third bi-weekly news analysis due at start of class.

Optional (preferred) Reading: Story, Louise and Reed, Ebony. *Fifteen Cents on the Dollar: How Americans Made the Black-White Wealth Gap*.

October 29: Media in U.S. Pop Culture: Lecture on how popular culture shapes perceptions of the news media and vice versa. Class will view excerpts from books, television shows and movies to see how public attitudes on media consumption and confidence have changed as media forms evolved from exclusive printed words to radio broadcasts to televised images to digital/A.I. media forms. Guest lecture by Eric Deggans, NPR's full-time TV critic and media analysts.

November 6: Election Day 2024: Class will watch and discuss Election returns with emphasis on media influence during the night's activities.

Guest lecture by Eugene Scott, host of Axios Live and a current fellow at Harvard's Institute of Politics.

Fourth bi-weekly news analysis due at start of class.

November 12: Class presentations

November 19: Class presentations

November 26: Thanksgiving Break/No class

December 3: What the future holds? Lecture on possible paths forward for U.S. media consumption and democracy. What have we learned? Class discussion to wrap up and evaluate the class. Guest speaker Stuart Warner, retired newspaper editor, on the benefits and challenges of high-tech (e.g. A.I.) as a reporting tool.

Readings: Bustillos, Maria. "The Future of Media is Journalist-Run." March 29, 2014, *The Nation*.

Deloitte. "The Future of Media & Entertainment 2023"

<https://www.thenation.com/article/society/journalist-run-media-flaming-hydra/>

December 10: Study Period/No class