

American Politics and the Mass Media
COMM 395 (01) & POLI 326 (01) Spring 2018

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This course examines the relationship between American political institutions, the public, and the mass media. Generally, we will analyze the importance of media in cultivating political attitudes, the impact of media on political campaigns, policies, and institutions, and the control of media often exercised by politicians. In order to assess these broad issues, this course traces two concepts, objectivity and bias, through the history of the mass media and political theories of democracy. We will address related issues such as framing, objectivity, narratives, and news cycles. Along the way, we will debate questions such as a) what is the importance of media in democracies and b) beyond entertainment, what real use value does news have in citizens' lives? We will examine the consequences of coverage on the ways in which politics is understood by the public. To close the course, we will examine the journalistic methods and quality of Gonzo "reporters" who take direct aim at the norms of journalism and the social standing of elected officials. In sum, this course combines perspectives from communication, philosophy, political science, history, and economics in order to gain a full picture of media in the U.S. political culture.

Assigned Texts:

Walter Lippmann, *Liberty and the News* (Princeton University Press, 2008)

Matt Taibbi, *Spanking the Donkey: Dispatches from the Dumb Season* (Three Rivers Press, 2006)

Additional readings will be available on Oaks

Student familiarity with current political events is essential to success in this course. Students should register for a major newspaper for free online (like the *New York Times* or *Washington Post*) and/or read a regular news magazine (like *National Review*, *Harper's*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, or *The New Republic*).

Course Objectives:

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

1. Work intensively in groups and teams to confront practical situations and "real world" communication problems.
2. Where appropriate, integrate information from other disciplines.

3. Gather information from multiple sources regarding the “issue” presented in class (both to identify the problem and seek possible solutions).
4. Present and share data with the class.
5. Participate in class discussion and debate, challenging and testing student definitions of the problems, models, and solutions.
6. Reflect on their learning experience (both process and outcome) in writing.

Course Requirements:

Read the following policies carefully. Enrollment in the class constitutes agreement and understanding of these policies. Ignorance of these policies will not be an acceptable excuse for violating them.

Tardiness - Come to class on time. If you must arrive late, please let me know in advance. The same goes for leaving class early.

Late & Unfinished Work – I only accept hard copies of papers. Turning work in late is highly discouraged.

Email – I check my email regularly during normal business hours and am usually prompt in responding to messages. When given an assignment, please anticipate problems in advance and talk to me about it in class or send me an email with some time allotted for a response. As a general rule, try to allot 48 hours for a response to your emails.

Grievance Procedure - Occasionally, students are dissatisfied with some dimension of a course. In such cases, students should make grade appeals on specific assignments within *one week* of the return of the assignment. After that period has expired, the grade issued is final.

Special Needs - The College of Charleston provides reasonable accommodations to students who have disabilities, including learning disabilities, which may affect their capacity to participate in course activities or to meet course requirements. If you have any such needs, please talk to me as soon as possible.

Honor Code - Lying, cheating, attempted cheating, and plagiarism are violations of our Honor Code that, when identified, are investigated. Each incident will be examined to determine the degree of deception involved.

Incidents where the instructor determines the student’s actions are related more to a misunderstanding will be handled by the instructor. A written intervention designed to help prevent the student from repeating the error will be given to the student. The intervention, submitted by form and signed both by the instructor and the student, will be forwarded to the Dean of Students and placed in the student’s file.

Cases of suspected academic dishonesty will be reported directly by the instructor and/or others having knowledge of the incident to the Dean of Students. A student found responsible by the Honor Board for academic dishonesty will receive a XF in the course, indicating failure of the

course due to academic dishonesty. This grade will appear on the student's transcript for two years after which the student may petition for the X to be expunged. The student may also be placed on disciplinary probation, suspended (temporary removal) or expelled (permanent removal) from the College by the Honor Board.

Students should be aware that unauthorized collaboration--working together without permission-- is a form of cheating. Unless the instructor specifies that students can work together on an assignment, quiz and/or test, no collaboration during the completion of the assignment is permitted. Other forms of cheating include possessing or using an unauthorized study aid (which could include accessing information via a cell phone or computer), copying from others' exams, fabricating data, and giving unauthorized assistance.

Research conducted and/or papers written for other classes cannot be used in whole or in part for any assignment in this class without obtaining prior permission from the instructor. Students can find the complete Honor Code in the *Student Handbook* at <http://studentaffairs.cofc.edu/honorsystem/studenthandbook/index.php>

Assignments:

*Final course grades are the result of an entire semester of quality work. To ensure a satisfactory course grade, students must succeed throughout the semester.

1. Participation: 100 points
2. Lippmann Paper: 300 points
3. Media Watch Presentation: 300 points
4. Final: 300 points

Class Participation, Class Activities, Quizzes (100 points)

This course is designed to provide students with a clear method to understand public controversies concerning media and politics. As such, we will discuss controversial questions during the semester. *In a general sense, the success of this process depends on the willingness of students to read before class and be ready to discuss the readings. Students who do not attend class regularly will receive lower participation grades. Students who attend class without being ready to participate will receive a lower class participation grade. The highest participation grades are reserved for those students whose attendance and comments about the readings and course materials are regular.* Participation grades will be taken very seriously and I highly encourage all students to actively participate in course discussions and activities throughout the semester. Quizzes will only be given if I become convinced that the readings are not directing class discussion.

Two final notes about participation:

1. A major theme is evident in each week's readings. This theme is evident in both the theoretical readings on argument as well as historical case studies. Since a concept is developed each week, it is imperative that students complete and understand the assigned theoretical readings before we move to the examples.
2. Since a portion of this course will be dedicated to public presentations, there must be a "public" present. Thus, attendance during the last three classes when the presentations

are scheduled is mandatory. Failure to attend class then will result in a 10-point deduction from your presentation grade.

Participation grading scale

A participation = Demonstrates thorough engagement with course readings and relevant media – Consistently asks challenging questions and makes informed judgments that draw distinctions between relevant concepts discussed in course readings, media, and lecture concepts – Asks questions that challenge core assumptions of readings, pundits, and course concepts in innovative ways – Is assertive about working comments and questions into discussion – Demonstrates that comments and discussion questions have been prepared in advance – Relates comments to other group’s discussion questions

B participation = Less frequent and challenging than A level participation - Demonstrates good grasp of lecture topics, readings, and relevant media – Comments are well-informed

C participation = Average demonstration of knowledge of course concepts – Sporadic participation – Comments are not well-prepared or organized in advance – Comments are of a descriptive rather than critical nature - Is present and on-time for each class

D participation = Very infrequent participation – Primarily descriptive comments

F participation = If I have a hard time remembering your name well into the course, you risk a failing participation grade

Lippmann Paper (8-10 pages, 300 points)

Students will be given a prompt or question concerning major themes from the first portion (“bias”) of the course and asked to take a position, state a thesis, develop arguments, and provide evidence where necessary. Some outside research will be necessary; citing the course readings, either favorably or unfavorably, is especially encouraged as you make your case. I will distribute the specific paper prompt in early February. *In addition to the merit of your argument, the quality of your writing figures heavily in my evaluation of your paper. Students are highly encouraged to prepare early and consult the College writing center if needed* (see: <http://www.cofc.edu/studentlearningcenter/writing/>).

Paper Grading Criteria

*In addition to argumentative content, I have high expectations for the quality and clarity of written assignments. In order to clarify these expectations, I will distribute several writing handouts throughout the semester that explain basic writing principles and tactical suggestions. Additionally, the following grade definitions should serve as a preliminary indicator of how your paper will be judged.

A paper - Paper offers a succinct and clearly stated thesis that guides the essay. Your thesis should be provocative, possibly addressing an issue from a perspective that most readers have not considered, perhaps even changing the way they look at it altogether. To construct such a thesis, investigate the full range of positions on your issue. Carefully examine the underlying assumptions, values, ethos, and use of evidence in your sources, instead of taking them at face value. As always, you should demonstrate a command of written style, voice, mechanics, and syntax. The paper is clearly outlined within the first few paragraphs with a thorough preview that assists the reader in following the paper’s major arguments. Paragraphs are fully developed and follow naturally from what precedes them; the introduction brings the reader into the case

and the conclusion reinforces the reader's confidence in the writer's control of the paper. The style is appropriate to the writer's audience and purpose; stylistic variety is used for emphasis; the prose is clear, apt, free of errors and occasionally memorable. Evidence and citations are used effectively and are formatted correctly. A papers skillfully integrate necessary descriptiveness with critical analysis.

**Students sometimes feel that the best papers are those that are written in the most complicated prose. More often than not, complicating a clear paper with confusing prose or syntax reduces the coherence of the paper as well as the student's grade.

B paper - Often, this is the kind of paper that revision could have made into an A paper. The paper fits within an effectively defined scope, providing a clear thesis and strong textual evidence to support the argument. The prose of a B paper is persuasive and controlled, containing few major syntactical or grammatical errors. Paragraphs are cohesive. Some transitions may be weak or mechanical. The logic of the paper is clear but not as sophisticated as that of an A paper. Interpretations of theories are plausible and supported with textual evidence; more than one source is considered. The arguments may be on the obvious or predictable side, though the writer does not consistently settle for the obvious. The reasoning is better than adequate; it is thoughtful, with some awareness of other points of view. The introduction and conclusion are clear, but perhaps not as forceful or appropriate to the case or audience as they could be. Paragraphs follow well and are appropriately divided. The expression demonstrates attention to sentence-level concerns. Not only is sentence structure correct, but subordination, emphasis, sentence length, and stylistic variation are generally used effectively. Some sentences could be improved, but it would be surprising to find serious sentence errors - comma splice, fragments, or fused sentences--in a "B" paper.

**Papers that slip into the B- range may have a simplistic thesis or develop sections of the paper that are unrelated to the thesis. Evidence may be lacking in key sections of the paper. Limited conceptual/theoretical problems may also result in a B- grade or lower. Writing and/or organization may negatively affect readability. B- papers may be overly critical without evidence, rely too much on unsubstantiated or undocumented information, or be too descriptive without developing a critical edge.

C paper – C papers take a clear stand on one debatable claim and provide sufficient evidence to support that position. Paper responds adequately to the essay topic, providing an argument that may be general or somewhat obvious. The thesis may be too broad or too general, or the writer may not have expressed a clear exigence for the paper's intended audience. Though an effort has been made to support the case with arguments, the arguments may be obvious or predictable; the paper may even lack some pertinent information. The paper may lack sufficient or appropriate textual evidence. The paper may need work on organization, paragraph development, and transitions. The logic of the paper may be strained and/or inconsistent. C (average) papers reflect average writing. Sentence structure is generally correct, although there may be a lack of elements such as subordination, sentence variety, and stylistic devices to achieve emphasis. Comma splices, unintentional fragments, fused sentences, subject/verb disagreements, and other mechanical errors may bring an otherwise fine paper into the low C or even D range.

D paper – Paper may lack a clear thesis or coherent argument, or fail to offer supporting evidence from the text. The prose of a D paper may exhibit significant grammatical and/or

stylistic problems. Lack of proofreading may turn an otherwise adequate paper into a D paper, *regardless* of the quality of reasoning present. The logic and/or structure of the paper are difficult to follow. The D paper demonstrates a limited sense of purpose. Necessary arguments or evidence may be out of order and/or missing; irrelevant arguments may instead be present. The introduction may be unclear or nonexistent, paragraphs may not be well developed or arranged, and transitions between paragraphs and/or ideas may be confusing or missing.

F paper – The paper displays a lack of understanding of basic principles that guide scholarly endeavors. Examples include but are not limited to gross mistakes in citing source materials as well as significant errors in framing the paper. The case study or supporting arguments may be seriously flawed and unable to withstand even casual scrutiny.

Media Watch Collaboration (300 points)

The last three class periods of the semester are devoted to class presentations. Groups of 4-5 students will collaborate to gather data, analyze, and present findings regarding an aspect of media coverage of the presidential election of their choosing. The presentations should feature a substantial speaking component for each student (at least 5 minutes) and should demonstrate a *clear argument with evidence* to the class. In this case, presenting evidence means exhibiting quotations, playing video clips, student-collated montages, web pages, and/or distributing handouts. This evidence should be collected over the course of at least 4 weeks. If you decide to show video clips, try to keep them as short as possible (less than 30-45 seconds per individual presentation). Your voices, your take, your analysis should dominate the presentation.

Consider these basic tasks of the assignment:

- Form a group and schedule a topic meeting with me the week following spring break.
- Decide your overall topic as well as how labor will be divided within the group. Division of labor is a key consideration; students should avoid excessive summary and repeating the claims of their partners.
- There are tons of possible topics; be creative. Here are a few examples meant only to illustrate possibilities:
 - Overall topic: comedic news. Division of labor: 2 students watch *x show* twice a week and 2 students watch *y show* twice a week and compare the two.
 - Overall topic: Fox vs. MSNBC. Division of labor: 1 student watches *x MSNBC show* for a week; 1 watches *y Fox show* for a week; 1 watches *w MSNBC show* for a week; 1 watches *z Fox show* for a week.
 - Overall topic: propaganda in recent film. Students can collect and evaluate different examples of and audience reactions to government propaganda in films. For instance, one student could analyze the use of propaganda in *The Hunger Games*, one could do so for *V for Vendetta*, and so forth.
 - Potential topics include the favorable or unfavorable coverage of particular issues, “fake news,” the impact or irrelevance of twitter, coverage styles of particular networks, and many others. Your group may consider issues such as coverage themes, coverage time allocation, coverage organization, and/or the broader value of a coverage theme. Groups are encouraged to be innovative regarding their topic choices. Depending on your topic choice,

students may collect data from twitter, major nightly news shows, or 24-hour cable news, internet news, major national papers, or additional outlets.

- What is your group's overall evaluation? Your thesis must evaluate, not just describe, your selected program's content and/or coverage style. Why is this show or news event important in our political culture?
- Assemble your presentation so that each presenter advances your overall thesis. Thus, each student's presentation should make a unique contribution to the group's presentation. Presentations are expected to be no less than 25 minutes and no more than 35 minutes. If the group progresses beyond 35 minutes, class time will end or I will have to stop your presentation to allow another group to present that day.
- *Please play well with others. Everyone should pull their weight within the group; please let me know if a group member is not contributing. In addition to evaluating the content, organization, and evidence of each presentation, I will also be grading public presentation skills. All groups are encouraged to collaborate with the College of Charleston's Speaking Lab to improve speaking ability and facility with visual aids (see: <http://www.cofc.edu/studentlearningcenter/speaking/>).*

Final Exam (300 points)

Test questions will take a variety of forms including multiple choice, true/false, short answer, and essay. The test will cover materials presented since the beginning of the semester.

Grading Scale - Final course grades are assigned on the following scale:

93-100 % = A	80-82 % = B-	67-69 % = D+
90-92 % = A-	77-79 % = C+	63-66 % = D
87-89 % = B+	73-76 % = C	60-62 % = D-
83-86 % = B	70-72 % = C-	59 % and below = F

Course Schedule:

***Students will need to access Oaks to find some readings listed on this schedule. Those readings will need to be *brought* to class. The following course schedule may be changed according to the flow of discussions, assignments, or current events. Students will be given ample warning in the event of a change. Also, as I learn more about your interests, the readings may change slightly. Thus, it is always helpful to tell me about your impressions of the readings during discussion.

Section 1: Objectivity and Bias in the American News Media

M – 1/8 – Overview

W – 1/10 – The Role of the Press: The Ideal and the Real

***read** – Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Paul Waldman, “The Press as Storyteller” and “The Press as Custodian of Fact” (**Oaks**)

M – 1/15 – No Class

W – 1/17 – A History of Objectivity

*read – Lippmann, *Liberty and the News*, Chs. 1 & 2

M – 1/22 – Defining Bias

*read – Lippmann, *Liberty and the News*, Ch. 3

W – 1/24 – Propaganda and Bias

*read – McChesney, preface to *Liberty and the News* (**Oaks**)

*read – Blumenthal, afterword to *Liberty and the News* (**Oaks**)

*read – Schudson, review of *Liberty and the News* (**Oaks**)

*read – Steel, foreword to *Liberty and the News*

M – 1/29 – Liberal Bias I

*read – Indoctrination (**Oaks**)

W – 1/31 – Liberal Bias II

*read – Coulter (**Oaks**)

M – 2/5 – Conservative Bias I

*read – Alterman, *What Liberal Media?* (**Oaks**)

W – 2/7 – Conservative Bias II

*read – Brock, *The Republican Noise Machine* (**Oaks**)

M – 2/12 – Bias toward Established Power I

*read – *From Cronkite to Colbert*, Ch. 2 & 3 (**Oaks**)

W – 2/14 – Bias toward Established Power II

*read – *From Cronkite to Colbert*, Ch. 4 & 5 (**Oaks**)

*read – Scott McClellan, *What Happened* (**Oaks**)

M – 2/19 – Bias toward Sensationalism I

*read – George Saunders, “Brain Dead Megaphone” (**Oaks**)

*read – Schudson, *Why Democracies Need an Unlovable Press* (**Oaks**)

W – 2/21 – Bias toward Sensationalism II

*read – Infotainment (**Oaks**)

Section 2: Partisan News Media

M – 2/26 – Conservative Media History

*read – Jamieson and Capella, *Echo Chamber*, Ch. 1 & 2 (**Oaks**)

Lippmann Paper Due

W – 2/28 – Conservative Media Culture I

*read – Buckley (**Oaks**)

M – 3/5 – Conservative Media Culture II
 *read - Ailes and the Fox News Brand (Oaks)
 *read - David Foster Wallace, “Host” (Oaks)

W – 3/7 – Conservative Media Culture III
 *read - Immersion in Right Media (Oaks)

M – 3/12 – Conservative Media Culture III
 *read - *Echo Chamber*, Ch. 11 & 12 (Oaks)

W – 3/14 – The Promises and Perils of an Echo Chamber
 *read - *Echo Chamber*, Ch. 13 & 14 (Oaks)

M- 3/19 – Spring Break

W – 3/21 – Spring Break

Section 3: New and Gonzo Journalism

M – 3/26 – An Inventory of Alternative Journalists
 *read – Baym, *From Cronkite to Colbert*, Ch. 6, 7

W – 3/28 – “New” Journalism vs. “Gonzo” Journalism
 *read – Taibbi, *Spanking the Donkey*, 1-67

M – 4/2 – Gonzo Journalism and its Offshoots I
 *read – Taibbi, *Spanking the Donkey*, 68-120

W – 4/4 – Gonzo” Journalism and its Offshoots II
 *read – Taibbi, *Spanking the Donkey*, 121-187

M – 4/9 – “Gonzo” Journalism and its Offshoots III
 *read – Taibbi, *Spanking the Donkey*, 188-219

W – 4/11 – No class

M – 4/16 – *Media Watch Presentations*

W – 4/18 – *Media Watch Presentations*

M – 4/23 – *Media Watch Presentations*

Final Exam: Monday, April 30, 12-3pm, in the same classroom