

American Politics and Mass Media

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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 is divided into three sections. First, we will consider media and democratic theory. 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? Second, we will "follow the money" and consider the political economy of news media including issues such as ownership, media conglomerates, advertising revenue, regulation, and the *de facto* censorship of journalists. Third, we will examine the consequences of coverage on the ways in which politics is understood by the public. In this last section, we will address related issues such as framing, objectivity, narratives, and news cycles. 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:

Doris Graber (ed.), *Media Power in Politics*, 5th Edition (CQ Press, 2006)

Ben Bagdikian, *The New Media Monopoly* (Beacon Press, 2004)

Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (Book Jungle, 2008)

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

Additional readings will be available on WebCT

Student familiarity with current political events is essential to success in this course. Students should register for a major newspaper for free online and read reputable national opinion journalists of their choosing.

Free papers with comprehensive political reporting include *The New York Times* (www.nytimes.com) and *The Washington Post* (www.washingtonpost.com).

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.

Honor Code: At the College of Charleston, student conduct, including but not limited to academic honesty, is held to a high standard. Scholastic dishonesty is defined as any act violating the rights of another student in academic work or involving the misrepresentation of a student's own work. Students who violate the College of Charleston's guidelines on academic honesty risk earning zero points on the relevant assignment, an F for the course, and a permanent academic record mark. Please see http://www.cofc.edu/StudentAffairs/general_info/honor_system/ for additional details.

Tardiness: Come to class on time. If you must arrive late, please arrange that with me ahead of time. The same goes for leaving class early.

Late & Unfinished Work – I only accept hard copies of papers. Turning work in late is highly discouraged. Any material turned in late will be reduced 10 points per calendar day late. Please arrange to turn in assignments early if you plan to be absent on the day an assignment is due.

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.

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 (10%)
2. Media Theory Paper (20%), Due: 10/2
3. Political Economy Paper (20%), Due: 10/28
4. Coverage Collaboration, Due: 11/25, 12/2, 12/4 (20%)
5. Test 1 (15%), Due: 10/21
6. Test 2 (15%), 9:25 course on 12/11, 10:50 course on 12/13

Class Participation, Class Activities, Quizzes (10%):

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

Media Theory Paper (5-7pgs, 20%)

Students will be given a prompt or question concerning major themes from the media and democratic theory portion of the course and asked to take a position, state a thesis, develop arguments, and provide evidence where necessary. Outside research may be

necessary; however, this assignment is not intended to be a “research paper” and is instead designed to demonstrate your grasp of course concepts. Citing the course readings, either favorably or unfavorably, is especially encouraged as you make your case. *In addition to the merit of your case, the quality of your writing figures heavily in my evaluation of your paper. Students are highly encouraged to prepare early and consult the writing center* (see: <http://www.cofc.edu/studentlearningcenter/writing/>).

Political Economy Paper (6-8pgs, 20%)

Students will be given a prompt or question concerning major themes from the political economy portion of the course and asked to take a position, state a thesis, develop arguments, and provide evidence where necessary. The prompt or question I distribute will concern the costs and benefits of government regulations on media organizations. Since this assignment concerns current events, your claims may require additional outside research beyond the course readings. *In addition to the merit of your case, the quality of your writing figures heavily in my evaluation of your paper. Students are highly encouraged to prepare early and consult the writing center* (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.

Coverage Collaboration

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 4-5 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. Division of labor is a key consideration; students should avoid excessive summary and repeating the claims of their partners. 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, I may have to stop your presentation to allow another group to present that day. Potential topics include the favorable or unfavorable coverage of Barack Obama and/or John McCain, the impact or irrelevance of the blogosphere, coverage styles of particular networks, lack of media attention to candidates' positions about an issue, 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 major nightly news shows, or 24-hour cable news, internet news, major national papers, or additional outlets. *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/>).

Two Tests (15% each)

Test questions will take a variety of forms including multiple choice, true/false, short answer, and essay. Each test will cover *only* those materials presented since the beginning of the class or the last test.

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 WebCT to find some readings listed on this schedule. Those readings will need to be *printed* and *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: Media Theory and Research

T: Aug. 26 – Introduction

R: Aug. 28 – The Pessimist

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

T: Sept. 2 – The Pessimist II

***read** – Neil Postman, vii-29

R: Sept. 4 – The Optimist

read – *Media Power in Politics*, Chs. 3 & 28

T: Sept. 9 – Media Research

***read** – *Media Power in Politics*, Chs. 1, 2, & 7

R: Sept. 11 – Whither the Public

***read** – Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, 7-48

T: Sept. 16 – Whither the Public II

***read** – Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, 170-211

R: Sept. 18 – Whither the Public III

***read** – Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, 212-244

T: Sept. 23 – Whither the Public IV

***read** – Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, 245-279

R: Sept. 25 – Class Activity

T: Sept. 30 – The Return of the Public

***read** – John Dewey, selections from *The Public and its Problems* (**WebCT**)

Section 2: Political Economy

R: Oct. 2 – The Rise of the Profit Press

***read** – Ben Bagdikian, *The New Media Monopoly*, vi-54
Media Theory Paper Due

T: Oct. 7 – Media Diversity

***read** – Bagdikian, *The New Media Monopoly*, 74-113

R: Oct. 9 – Conglomeration
 ***read** – Bagdikian, *The New Media Monopoly*, 131-176

T: Oct. 14 – Fall Break

R: Oct. 16 – Alternatives?
 ***read** - Bagdikian, *The New Media Monopoly*, 204-265

T: Oct. 21 – *Test 1*

The Framing of Politics

R: Oct. 23 – Press Roles
 ***read** – Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Paul Waldman, “The Press as Storyteller,” and “The Press as Custodian of Fact” (**WebCT**)

T: Oct. 28 – Whose advantage? McCain/Obama coverage
 ***read** - WebCT readings and *Media Power in Politics*, ch. 14
Political Economy Paper Due

R: Oct. 30 – Hard vs. Soft News
 ***read** – *Media Power in Politics*, chs. 11 and 16

T: Nov. 4 – Controlling Media I
 ***read** - *Media Power in Politics*, chs. 19 and 20

R: Nov. 6 – Controlling Media II
 ***read** - *Media Power in Politics*, ch. 9 and Scott McClellan, *What Happened* (**WebCT**)

T: Nov. 11 – “Gonzo” Journalism and its Offshoots I
 ***read** – Matt Taibbi, *Spanking the Donkey*, 1-67

R: Nov. 13 – “Gonzo” Journalism and its Offshoots II
 ***read** – Taibbi, *Spanking the Donkey*, 68-156

T: Nov. 18 – “Gonzo” Journalism and its Offshoots III
 ***read** – Taibbi, *Spanking the Donkey*, 157-219

R: Nov. 20 – No Class

T: Nov. 25 – *Presentations*

R: Nov. 27 – Thanksgiving

T: Dec. 2 – *Presentations*

R: Dec. 4 – *Presentations* and Review Session

Final Exam: 9:25-10:40 - Thursday, Dec. 11, 8:00-11:00AM, regular classroom
10:50-12:05 – Saturday, Dec. 13, 8:00-11:00AM, regular classroom