

# POLITICS AND THE MEDIA

FALL 2025

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<b>Instructor:</b>	Matthew Mettler	<b>Time:</b>	T-TH 3:30-4:50 PM
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## Course Description:

This course examines the processes of mass-mediated political communication in democratic societies. Although these processes can be studied in a variety of contexts, this course will focus primarily on the interaction between news media, audiences, and strategic communicators in the United States. Emphasis will be given to the role of news media in democratic theory, the effects of media messages on audiences, the impact of new mass communication technologies, and factors shaping the construction and selection of news reports such as journalistic routines, media economics, and the strategic management of news by political actors.

## Course goals and objectives:

This course has four primary learning objectives. By the end of this course, students should be able to:

1. Identify the key roles played by communication media in contemporary American politics
2. Appreciate the production of political communication as a complex interaction between journalistic organizations, audiences, and political actors
3. Understand how the “marketplace of ideas” constituted by mediated political communication affects democratic politics, and how the content of this marketplace is affected by the constraints under which communication media operate
4. Analyze critically a variety of journalistic coverage and processes

## Grade Distribution:

Participation/class activities	10%
Writing assignments 2x	30%
Exams 3x	60%

## Grading Scale:

>= 98.00	A+		
93 - 97	A	73 - 77	C
90 - 92	A-	70 - 72	C-
87 - 89	B+	67 - 69	D+
83 - 86	B	63 - 66	D
80 - 82	B-	60 - 62	D-
77 - 79	C+	<= 59	F

## Course expectations

### • Participation, reading, and class activities

- Readings assigned for particular days should be read prior to each class session. We will either be discussing these materials in that particular class session or we will be assuming that you are familiar with them prior to coming to class. You will undermine the learning path that this course has been designed to lead you on if you fail to come fully prepared to make the most out of every class session.
- You are expected to attend class sessions. Class sessions will normally be devoted to covering readings, but may also use the readings as background for discussing particular examples, go deeper into details or specifics, or use the readings as a springboard for discussion.
- Class discussion or activities should be conducted with good intentions. By this, I mean you should approach these activities with intellectual curiosity. I expect students to treat each other with respect and with the assumption that everyone is making a good faith argument. I retain the right to dock participation points if I believe these guidelines are not being followed, though I will first discuss this with the student before I reduce points.
- Participation will be through reading questions that we do at the beginning of each class period. There will be between three and four questions that are administered through Canvas. These questions will be graded as 75% participation and 25% correct responses.
- I will have handouts that will be used for class activities. These will be group work that you will put your and your groups names on and turn in at the end of class.

- **Writing assignments**

- There are two required writing assignments for this course. However, you can choose from six writing prompts, one for each module. These will be due one week after the end of the Module. You will choose which modules to write on but I will not accept late work on these, other than that last module of the course and that will be with a 5% penalty per day. I will accept three total writing assignments and drop the lowest score or use the score of your third writing assignment to replace the score of the lowest weighted test.
- These will be analysis papers and respond to a prompt that I will release at the beginning of each module. These analysis papers should come in at roughly five pages of double-spaced text each (using 1” margins, standard font sizes—generally 10 to 12 points—and not counting the separate title page or the separate reference list page). These papers are designed to help you develop skills at synthesizing and applying relevant course content in the process of critically analyzing news-making systems and the journalistic coverage produced by mainstream news organizations. These papers will be turned in via Canvas and all will be checked with TurnItIn plagiarism detection software. I expect proper bibliographic references in the paper and prefer the APA author-date style.
- Conflicts with deadlines or other matters should be brought up with me well in advance of the conflict. I will do my best to find a remedy for the conflict, so long as the conflict is brought to my attention in a timely manner.

- **Exams**

- There are three multiple choice exams for this course that will range between 30 and 40 questions. The exams in total are worth 60% of your grade but are weighted from worst to best score, 15%, 20%, 25% respectively. Exams are in-person and you are allowed to bring a 4.25 x 5.5 notecard with your notes to use on each exam. I will generally have three more questions than the actual denominator for the exam. For instance, If I score the exam out of 30 questions I will generally have 33 questions on the exam giving you a chance to score better than 100

- **Final grades and extra credit**

- Final grades are tabulated by first rounding each weighted component: participation, writing assignments to two decimal points and then summing. The total is then rounded to the next highest whole number. For instance, a summed score of 89.01 is rounded to 90.
- The only extra credit opportunity of this course is to complete the political science student subject pool. If I receive notification that you participated in the subject pool I will add 1% to your final grade.

## Course Policies:

- **Attendance policy:**

- Regular class attendance is expected of all students (as outlined in the Student Code § 1-501). Students who are absent for in-class activities will not be awarded participation points (see “work required” above for a description of exceptions). I do allow for two missed classes due to sickness, personal issues, etc.

- **Late, incomplete, and revised work policy:**

- **Make up exams** will be scheduled as needed if the absence is for acceptable reasons as outlined in the Student Code (e.g., religious observance, disability accommodation, illness, university athletic participation). Students must inform the instructor in advance if they are going to miss an exam. In the event that a student misses an exam without first providing a legitimate reason in advance, a 2-point (10%) penalty will be applied for each day or part of a day that passes until a make-up date is scheduled.
- **Writing assignments** The writing assignment is due one week after the end of the module (e.g. Module 1 writing assignment is due Sept 18th at midnight). I do not give extensions for writing assignments as there are only two required of six total opportunities. I will only accept late writing assignments on the final module of the course with a 5% penalty per day. Students are allowed to submit up to three writing assignments. The third writing assignment can be used to replace a lower score on a writing assignment or used as a replacement score on the lowest weighted exam.

- **Use of Personal Electronic Devices in the Classroom:**

- Disruptions or interruptions in the classroom due to the improper use of cell phones or laptops (e.g., texting, chatting, browsing social media) will not be tolerated. Students who are disrupting the class will be asked to stop using their electronic device and may be asked to leave.

- **Email policy:**

- If you have a question about the course or an assignment, check the syllabus first to see if the answer to your question is there. If you cannot find the answer to your question on the syllabus, email me directly and I will attempt to respond as quickly as I can within reason. You are also encouraged to discuss any questions or concerns about the course with me at office hours or after class.

- **Academic integrity policy:**

- Cheating, plagiarism, fabrication, and other infractions outlined in the Student Code, Article 1, Part 4 will not be tolerated. If such an infraction is suspected, action will be taken following the procedures outlined in the Student Code § 1-403.

- “(a) Cheating. No student shall use or attempt to use in any academic exercise materials, information, study aids, or electronic data that the student knows or should know is unauthorized...
  - \* (1) Allowing others to conduct research or prepare any work for a student without prior authorization from the Instructor, including using the services of commercial term paper companies.
  - \* (2) Submitting substantial portions of the same academic work for credit more than once or by more than one student without authorization from the Instructors to whom the work is being submitted.
  - \* (3) Working with another person without authorization to satisfy an individual assignment.”
- “(b) Plagiarism. No student shall represent the words, work, or ideas of another as his or her own in any academic endeavor. A violation of this section includes but is not limited to:
  - \* (1) Copying: Submitting the work of another as one’s own.
  - \* (2) Direct Quotation: Every direct quotation must be identified by quotation marks or by appropriate indentation and must be promptly cited. Proper citation style for many academic departments is outlined in such manuals as the MLA Handbook or K.L. Turabian’s A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses and Dissertations. These and similar publications are available in the University bookstore or library. The actual source from which cited information was obtained should be acknowledged.
  - \* (3) Paraphrase: Prompt acknowledgment is required when material from another source is paraphrased or summarized in whole or in part. This is true even if the student’s words differ substantially from those of the source. A citation acknowledging only a directly quoted statement does not suffice as an acknowledgment of any preceding or succeeding paraphrased material.
  - \* (4) Borrowed Facts or Information: Information obtained in one’s reading or research that is not common knowledge must be acknowledged. Examples of common knowledge might include the names of leaders of prominent nations, basic scientific laws, etc. Materials that contribute only to one’s general understanding of the subject may be acknowledged in a bibliography and need not be immediately cited. One citation is usually sufficient to acknowledge indebtedness when a number of connected sentences in the paper draw their special information from one source.”

- **AI policy:**

- An emerging area of concern in higher education is the use of natural language models in the classroom (for example, ChatGPT). To be clear, using an AI model to complete your assignments for you is cheating under (a)(1) in the academic integrity policy below. There are tools for detecting whether written work is AI-generated. If you submit AI-generated work, it will be treated as an academic

infraction, just like if you plagiarized a published work or had someone else write your paper for you.

- However, I also recognize that AI-assisted research is a complicated topic where norms are still emerging; it is a tool, like your textbook, a search engine, or Wikipedia, and it has legitimate uses. It can be useful for brainstorming ideas, but it can also provide you with false information. The guiding principle in using AI is transparency. Just like when you provide citations to published work or webpages to give credit for ideas, if you get inspiration or ideas from an AI tool, you must cite your source and use quotation marks if you want to use a direct quotation. For guidance, see, for example, <https://style.mla.org/citing-artificial-intelligence/>. In addition, because the AI does not know if what it is saying is true, you should seek out other sources to confirm any factual claims made in statements by a natural language model.
- If you have questions about using AI for this course, ask for permission for your proposed use in advance rather than assuming and risking an academic infraction; we can work together to navigate these new opportunities and challenges. When unsure, it is always safer to abstain from using AI for coursework this semester until the standards become clearer.
- It is important to recognize that other professors will approach AI in their classrooms differently; talk to your professors about their policies and do not assume that this policy applies to other courses.

- **DRES Accomodations:**

- To ensure that disability-related concerns are properly addressed from the beginning, students with disabilities who require assistance to participate in this class are asked to see me as soon as possible.

## **Module 1: What is media supposed to do?**

What is the role of communication between citizens, representatives, and government institutions? Is effective communication a necessary component of a democratic society? If so, what do we mean by effective communication and what exactly are the effects on democratic politics? These are difficult questions that are answered tackled in different ways and depend on competing visions of how democracy is ideally supposed to operate. In addition, there are alternative models of journalism that work well with some models of democracy and worse with others. In this module, we'll explore the alternative models of democracy and the alternative models of journalism that can be combined into a defensible answer to this question, and along the way you'll start developing your own answer to the question of what the news is supposed to do for democratic governance.

### **8/26: Course overview and introductions**

### **8/28: Principles of Political Representation**

- Wolfsfeld, Gadi, Tamir Sheafer, and Scott Althaus. 2022. *Building Theory in Political Communication: The Politics-Media-Politics Approach*. New York: Oxford University Press. Chapter 6 135-155
- Wolfsfeld, Gadi, Tamir Sheafer, and Scott Althaus. 2022. *Building Theory in Political Communication: The Politics-Media-Politics Approach*. New York: Oxford University Press. Chapter 1 (Optional reading)

### **9/2: Marketplace of ideas**

- Mill, John S. [1859] 1972. *Of the liberty of thought and discussion*. in Acton, H. ed. *Utilitarianism, On Liberty, and Considerations on Representative Government*. London: J.M. Dent.
- Marcuse, H. (1969). *Repressive tolerance*. In R. P. Wolff, B. Moore, & H. Marcuse (Eds.), *A critique of pure tolerance* (pp. 81-123). Beacon Press.

### **9/4: Three models of Journalism**

- Lippmann, Walter. 1922. *Public opinion*. (New York: Free Press) Chapter 1, "The World Outside and the Pictures in Our Heads," Chapter 23, "The Nature of News," and chapter 24, "News, Truth, and a Conclusion".

## **9/9: Three models of Democracy**

- Baker, C. Edwin. 2002. Media, markets, and democracy (New York: Cambridge University Press) pp. 125-153.

## **9/11: Putting it all together**

- Wolfsfeld, Gadi, Tamir Sheafer, and Scott Althaus. 2022. Building Theory in Political Communication: The Politics-Media-Politics Approach. New York: Oxford University Press. Chapter 6 155-172
- Schudson, Michael. 2000. Good citizens & bad history: Today's political ideals in historical perspective. John Seigenthaler Chair of Excellence First Amendment Studies, College of Mass Communication, Middle Tennessee State University.

## **Module 2: Audience Attention and the Economics of the News-Making Process**

Understanding the provision of political information through news and social media requires understanding who is seeking such information out, who is sharing political information, and how audiences feel about the sources of public affairs information available to them. These behaviors drive the underlying logic of the attention economy that structures the news-making process. Since political communication can't happen efficiently without adequate funding for producing the news, this module explores changes in the economic underpinnings of the news business that have important implications for determining which stories get reported and how they get reported in the communication ecosystem. Special attention will be paid to understanding how economic competition affects the provision of high-quality news content, and the rapid loss of local news coverage that has accompanied the digital revolution of the last two decades.

## **9/16: What's changing and what's not**

- Mitchell, Amy, Mark Jurkowitz, J. Baxter Oliphant, and Elisa Shearer. 2021. How Americans Navigated the News in 2020: A Tumultuous Year in Review. Washington D.C.: Pew Research Center. Available URL:
- Walker, Mason, and Katerina Eva Matsa. 2021. News consumption across social media in 2021. Pew Research Center.
- Americans news influencers  
<https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2024/11/18/americas-news-influencers/>

- Tracking Americans media use in the 21st century  
<https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/feature/news-media-tracker/>

## **9/18: Why the Traditional News-Making Process Was Organized the Way It Was**

- Boczkowski, Pablo. 2009. Technology, monitoring, and imitation in contemporary news work. *Communication, Culture & Critique* 2 (1):39-59.
- Chadwick, Andrew. 2011. The Political Information Cycle in a Hybrid News System: The British Prime Minister and the ‘Bullygate’ Affair. *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 16 (1):3-29

## **9/23: The digital revolution and news consumption**

- Impact of the Digital Revolution Toff, Benjamin, and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen. 2018. “I Just Google It”: Folk Theories of Distributed Discovery. *Journal of Communication* 68 (3):636-657.
- Haim, Mario ; Breuer, Johannes ; Stier, Sebastian, Do News Actually “Find Me”? Using Digital Behavioral Data to Study the News-Finds-Me Phenomenon, *Social media + society*, 2021-07, Vol.7 (3) London, England: SAGE Publications

## **9/25: Markets and monopolies of news**

- Hindman, Matthew. 2018. *The Internet trap: How the digital economy builds monopolies and undermines democracy*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press. Chapters 2 and 4.

## **9/30: How Economic Competition Affects the Business of News**

- Munger, Kevin. 2020. All the News That’s Fit to Click: The Economics of Clickbait Media. *Political Communication* 37 (3):376-397.

## **10/2: The Increasing Nationalization and Trivialization of News Coverage**

- Sobieraj, Sarah, and Jeffrey M. Berry. 2011. From Incivility to Outrage: Political Discourse in Blogs, Talk Radio, and Cable News. *Political Communication* 28(1):19-41.

## **10/7 Exam 1**

- Exam 1 covering Modules 1 & 2

## **Module 3: How Journalists Decide What to Cover and How to Cover It**

This module examines journalism as both an academic field and a profession. It explains how journalists develop routine judgments about which stories to cover and how to cover them to work efficiently and manage risk. We focus on the decision rules and norms that guide “trustee” journalists in the United States—especially objectivity, news values, and other rules of thumb used to navigate reporting under time pressure.

## **10/9: What is journalism?**

- Deuze, M. What is journalism? Professional identity and ideology of journalists reconsidered. *Journalism*, 6(4), 442-464. 2005.

## **10/14: Trustee Journalism Reports Events through the Lens of News Values**

- Althaus, Scott L., Nathaniel Swigger, Svitlana Chernykh, David Hendry, Sergio Wals, and Christopher Tiwald. 2011. *A. Journal of Politics* 73 (4):1065-1080.

## **10/16: The norm of objectivity**

- Tuchman, Gaye. 1972. Objectivity as strategic ritual: An examination of newsmen’s notions of objectivity. *American Journal of Sociology*. 77: 660-679.
- Boudana, S. (2011). A definition of journalistic objectivity as a performance. *Media, Culture & Society*, 33(3), 385-398. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443710394899> (Original work published 2011)

## 10/21: Does politics or media have the upper hand?

- Wolfsfeld, Gadi. 2022. Making sense of media and politics. Chapter 1, “Political power and power over the media” and chapter 2, “Political control and media independence.

## Module 4: Media effects

Assumptions about how democracy is supposed to work (hearkening back to Module 1) tend to assume that citizens process (or fail to process) new politically-relevant information in particular ways. Now that we’ve explored not only the different ways that democracies can work and the types of journalism that can support effective democratic rule, as well as the various constraints that communication ecosystems are under when performing these communicative roles, we are ready to fill in an important but previously ignored piece of the puzzle: what do citizens do with the new information that is brought to them by the communication ecosystem? The answers to this question both define the limits of what we can expect from democratic rule and also open up new ways of understanding how citizens use the information that they encounter to exercise sovereign power over the basic representational activities that democracy entails. We will trace research on media effects through time beginning with research suggesting minimal media effects to more contemporary effects of media on their audience. We will discuss the overall landscape of media effects as well as the psychological processes used to explain these effects.

## 10/23: Early research on the impact of media on politics

- Berelson, Bernard, Paul Lazarsfeld, and William McPhee. 1954. Voting: A study of opinion formation in a presidential campaign. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Chapter 11, “Political processes: The role of the mass media.”
- Lazarsfeld, P. F., Berelson, B., & Gaudet, H. (1944). The flow of political communication. In *The people’s choice: How the voter makes up his mind in a presidential campaign* New York: Columbia University Press. Chapter 7

## 10/28: Not so minimal effects / Gatekeeping

- Iyengar, Shanto, ‘A Typology of Media Effects’, in Kate Kenski, and Kathleen Hall Jamieson (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Communication*, Oxford Handbooks (2017; online edn, Oxford Academic, 13 Jan. 2014),
- Shoemaker, Pamela, ‘The Gatekeeping of Political Messages’, in Kate Kenski, and Kathleen Hall Jamieson (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Communication*, Oxford Handbooks (2017; online edn, Oxford Academic, 13 Jan. 2014)

## **10/30: Motivated reasoning, agenda setting, and priming**

- Roy Behr, Shanto Iyengar, Television News, Real-World Cues, and Changes in the Public Agenda, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Volume 49, Issue 1, Spring 1985, Pages 38–57.
- Iyengar, Shanto, et al. “Experimental Demonstrations of the ‘Not-So-Minimal’ Consequences of Television News Programs.” *The American Political Science Review*, vol. 76, no. 4, 1982, pp. 848–58.

## **11/4: Framing effects**

- Nelson, Thomas E., Rosalee A. Clawson, and Zoe M. Oxley. “Media framing of a civil liberties conflict and its effect on tolerance.” *American Political Science Review* 91.3 (1997): 567-583.

## **11/6 Exam 2**

- Exam 2 covering module 3 & 4

## **Module 5: Media bias**

Nearly as soon as trustee journalism became the dominant mode of news production in the United States (around the early middle of the 20th century), there followed accusations that trustee journalists were secretly biased in their presentation of the news in ways that systematically favored one political side or another. These concerns about trustee journalism harboring a secret political agenda have not only continued to this day, but have become even more central to criticisms of “mainstream media” than ever before. This module explores the evidence for and against ideological bias in mainstream trustee news coverage, and also examines other types of non-ideological bias that might be important factors structuring trustee news coverage.

## **11/11: Case for general liberal bias in media**

- Lichter, S. Robert. 2017. Theories of media bias. In *The Oxford Handbook of Political Communication*, edited by Kate Kenski and Kathleen Hall Jamieson. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

## **11/13- Case against liberal bias in media**

- Niven, David. 2003. Objective Evidence on Media Bias: Newspaper Coverage of Congressional Party Switchers. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* no. 80 (2):311-326.

## **11/18 - Bring your own bias**

- Turner, Joel. "The messenger overwhelming the message: Ideological cues and perceptions of bias in television news." *Political Behavior* 29.4 (2007): 441-464.

## **11/20 Other media biases**

- Bennett, W. Lance. *News: The Politics of Illusion*, Tenth Edition. United Kingdom, University of Chicago Press, 2016. Chapter 2.

## **Module 6: Present and future challenges in the digital age**

This final module focuses on issues of media in the digital age. As we move further away from legacy media and toward online news engagement, citizens encounter both new opportunities and new challenges. The module also returns to the question first raised in Module 1: What should we allow in the marketplace of ideas, particularly when the digital space is so lightly regulated? We will consider how this environment affects citizens' ability to be informed, who bears responsibility for the spread of misinformation online, and what measures have been taken to address these concerns.

## **12/2 The future of news in a changing environment**

- Bennett, W. Lance. *News: The Politics of Illusion*, Tenth Edition. United Kingdom, University of Chicago Press, 2016. Chapter 8.

## **12/4 Misinformation and media literacy**

- Xiao, X., Su, Y., & Lee, D. K. L. Who Consumes New Media Content More Wisely? Examining Personality Factors, SNS Use, and New Media Literacy in the Era of Misinformation. *Social Media + Society*, 7(1), 2021
- M. Sultan, A.N. Tump, N. Ehmann, P. Lorenz-Spreen, R. Hertwig, A. Gollwitzer, & R.H.J.M. Kurvers, Susceptibility to online misinformation: A systematic meta-analysis of demographic and psychological factors, *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. U.S.A.* 121 (47), 2024.

## **12/9 Generative AI and the future of media**

- De-Lima-Santos, M.-F., & Jamil, S. (2024). Bridging the AI Divide: Human and Responsible AI in News and Media Industries. *Emerging Media*, 2(3), 335-346. (Original work published 2024)