Course Overview

“Social media have gone from being the natural infrastructure for sharing collective grievances and coordinating civic engagement to being a computational tool for social control, manipulated by canny political consultants and available to politicians in democracies and dictatorships alike,” – Center for Computational Propaganda report on Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Election

Like it or not, the media sits at the heart of democratic politics. Ancient political philosophers and America’s Founders alike believed that a free press was essential for a healthy public debate and effective policy. Today, however, it is clear that faith in the press is in decline even as the marketplace of ideas comes under attack from every direction. Many 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, the broad objective of this course is to understand the modern critiques of the media and to assess how well journalism lives up to its idealized role. This course 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.

In the end this course will be successful if it does three things: First, if it gives you a more sophisticated understanding of how the news media and marketplace of ideas function. Second, if it gives you an appreciation that the media are the site of a tremendous struggle for control between competing political actors. And third, if it convinces you that to understand fully any political issue you need to understand the role of the media.

Learning Objectives

In this course you will develop:

1. Knowledge of how political news and information are produced and disseminated
2. Knowledge of how news and information affect public opinion and political behavior
3. Knowledge of the major debates about the impact of the media on the quality of the American political system
4. Skill using content analysis for political communication research
Course Materials
All of the required readings, videos, etc., are available on the course Blackboard site, which should show up as “Politics and Media” on your Courses list in Blackboard.

Assessment
- Attendance and Participation 10%
- Online Discussion (“Hot Takes”) 15%
- Midterm 25%
- Final Exam 25%
- Class Project 25%

Attendance and Participation
This will be a pretty small class, which is great because it will let me get to know everyone by name and give everyone a chance to contribute a lot to our discussions.

Online Discussion
This is Washington, D.C., folks; everyone needs to be ready with a hot take! Roughly each week I will post a provocation on the discussion board – usually in the form of a link to something and a related question – and you will post a sizzling response. We will then begin class with a discussion based on your hot takes.

Class Project
The Class Project folder on Blackboard will have the details, but in short, we will be collaborating on a content analysis research project in which each student will be responsible for analyzing a chunk of the project dataset and writing a final report that analyzes the full dataset from the entire class.

Midterm and Final Exam
Exams will be based on both the readings and the lectures and include a mix of multiple choice, short answer, and essay questions.

Format and Protocol
We will start each session with a quick round up of relevant news and events. I expect students to monitor at least one news media site throughout the term for politics and media related issues so that we can discuss and dissect them in class as part of our broader exploration of the course concepts.

As noted we will also have weekly hot takes discussions. Hot takes will require students to engage some news or other content before class and then respond with their “hot take” on the discussion board. We will then discuss your hot takes in class. These discussions will be great preparation for blogging, bloviating, and generally annoying people you know. It’s great preparation for a career in the D.C. area.
After we get warmed up I will typically provide some sort of lecture, though the first four class sessions will feature case studies and discussion instead. I will ask lots of questions and I will expect lots of discussion. Students should feel free to ask questions or make a comment at any point if anything is unclear or they are suddenly moved by an important insight or question.

Course Schedule

Section I: Cases, Frameworks, and Debates

Jan 23 Welcome and Course Overview
- No readings yet!

Jan 28 Case Study: Creating the Presidential Image
- McGinniss, Chs. 1-2, “The Selling of the President,” (30)
- In class video: The 30-Second President

Jan 30 Case Study: Al Gore and the Embellishment Issue
- Case Study, “Al Gore and the Embellishment Issue” (27)
- Note: you must purchase this for $3.95 here.

Feb 4 Case Study: The Civil Rights Movement
- Donovan and Scherer, “Police dogs, firehoses, and television cameras,” (19)
- In class video: Eyes on the Prize

Feb 6 Case Study: White House Under Siege: ABC News and the Iran Hostage Crisis
- Case Study, “Siege Mentality: ABC, the White House and the Iran Hostage Crisis,” (22)
- Note: You must purchase this for $3.95 here.

Feb 11 Class Project Introduction: Fear in the News
- Thrall, “Introducing the American Fear Index,” (5)
- Stearns, American Fear, pp. TBD
- Class Project > Training Assignment Handed Out

Feb 13 The Great Debate: Is the Media Good for America?
- Thrall, “Competing Images of the Press” (40)
- **Class Project > Training Assignment Due**
- **Class Project > Fear Coding Methods Assignment Handed Out**

Feb 18 The Marketplace of Ideas: Classical Theory

- Mill, *On Liberty*, Ch. 2 (20)

Feb 20 The Marketplace of Ideas: Critiques and Threats

- Ingber, “The Marketplace of Ideas,” pp. 16-49 (33)
- **Class Project > Fear Coding Methods Assignment Due**
- **Class Project > Primary Coding Assignment Handed Out**

*Section II: Making News, Information Flow, & Information Quality in the MOI*

Feb 25 How News Organizations Produce News

- Bennett et al, Ch. 2, *When the Press Fails* (25)

Feb 27 Objectivity and Bias in the News Media I

- Budak, Goel, Rao, “*Fair and Balanced? Quantifying Media Bias through Crowdsourced Content Analysis,*” (20)

Mar 4 Objectivity and Bias in the News Media II

- Bennett, Ch. 2, *News: The Politics of Illusion* (30)

Mar 6 From Pseudo Events to Protests: How Political Leaders Make News

- Bennett, Ch. 4, *News: The Politics of Illusion*, (37)

**Mar 11 and 13 Spring Break**


- Allcott and Gentzkow, “Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election” (23)
- Pariser, “*Beware Online Filter Bubbles,*” TED Talk (9 minutes)
- Fisher, “*Inside Facebook’s Secret Rulebook for Global Political Speech,*” (10)
- Diresta and Harris, “*Why Facebook and Twitter Can’t Be Trusted to Police Themselves,*” (4)
Mar 20 Sharing the (Bad) News: Deepfakes, Bots, and Going Viral

- Howard and Kollanyi, “Bots and Brexit,” (6)
- Chesney and Citron, “Deepfakes and the New Disinformation War,” (5)
- Bloomberg, “Deepfakes Video” (3 min)
- Conover et al, “Political Polarization on Twitter,” (8)

- Class Project > Primary Coding Assignment Due
- Class Project > Secondary Coding Assignment Handed Out

Mar 25 MIDTERM EXAM

Section III: The Impact of Public on the MOI and the MOI on the Public

Mar 27 Guest Lecture TBD

- Readings TBD

Apr 1 News Consumption

- Iyengar and Hahn, “Red Media, Blue Media,” (24 but skim the math)
- Pew, “How Americans Encounter….Digital News,” (40 but mostly charts)

Apr 3 How News Influences Public Opinion: A Model

- Zaller, Chs. 2-3 from The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion (45)

Apr 8 The Public: Motivated, But Not by the Search for Truth

- Taber and Lodge, “Motivated Skepticism in the Evaluation of Political Beliefs,” (15)
- Galef, TED Talk, “Why you think you’re right, even if you’re wrong,” (12 min)

Apr 10 The Public: Often Wrong, Rarely in Doubt

- Sunstein and Vermeule, “Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures,” (26)
- Pew Research Center, “Distinguishing Between Factual News and Opinion Statements in the News,” (5)

- Class Project > Secondary Coding assignment due
- Class Project > Final report assignment handed out

Apr 15 Telling Us What to Think About: Agenda Setting & Priming
- Iyengar and Kinder, Chs. 1, 3, 7 from News That Matters (30)

**Apr 17 Telling Us How to Feel: The CNN Effect & the Power of Images**

- Strobel, “The CNN Effect,” (10)
- Parker et al, “Horrible pictures of suffering moved Trump to action on Syria,” (3)
- Slovic, "If I Look at the Mass I Will Never Act," (17)

**Apr 22 Telling Us How to Think: Framing Effects**

- Entman, “Framing U.S. Coverage of International News…” (22)
- Lakoff, “Why It Matters How We Frame the Environment,” (13)

**Apr 24 You Can’t Tell Me That: Messages and Their Messengers**

- Kuklinski and Hurley, "On Hearing and Interpreting Political Messages" (25)
- Vallone, Ross, and Lepper, "The Hostile Media Phenomenon," (9)

*Section IV: The Impact of the MOI on the Political System*

**Apr 29 Bear Market? How Big a Threat are the Russians to the Marketplace of Ideas?**

- Mayer, “How Russia Helped Swing the Election for Trump,” (19)

**May 1 Can We Build a Better Marketplace?**

- No readings for today

- **Final Class Project report due in class today**

**May 6 Wrapping Up: How Are We Doing?**

- Strömback, “In Search of a Standard: Four Models of Democracy and Their Normative Implications for Journalism,” (16)

**May 8 FINAL EXAM 10:30 AM – 1:15 PM**
SYLLABUS APPENDIX: THE OTHER STUFF

Blackboard
Access to MyMason and GMU email are required to participate successfully in this course. Please make sure to update your computer and prepare yourself to begin using the online format BEFORE the first day of class. Check the IT Support Center website. Navigate to the Student Support page for help and information about Blackboard. In the menu bar to the left you will find all the tools you need to become familiar with for this course. Take time to learn each tool. Make sure you run a system check a few days before class. Become familiar with the attributes of Blackboard and online learning.

To login in to the course:
2. Login using your NETID and password.
3. Click on the ‘Courses” tab.
4. Click on GOVT 412 (Spring 2018)

Technical Help
If you have difficulty with accessing Blackboard, please contact the ITU Support Center at 703.993.8870 or support@gmu.edu. If you have trouble with using the features in Blackboard, email courses@gmu.edu

University Policies & Information

Academic Integrity
Students must be responsible for their own work, and students and faculty must take on the responsibility of dealing explicitly with violations. The tenet must be a foundation of our university culture. [See http://academicintegrity.gmu.edu/distance].

Honor Code
Students must adhere to the guidelines of the George Mason University Honor Code [See http://academicintegrity.gmu.edu/honorcode].
Student members of the George Mason University community pledge not to cheat, plagiarize, steal, or lie in matters related to academic work.

MasonLive/Email
Students are responsible for the content of university communications sent to their George Mason University email account and are required to activate their account and check it regularly. All communication from the university, college, school, and program will be sent to students solely through their Mason email account. [See https://thanatos.gmu.edu/masonlive/login].

Patriot Pass
Once you sign up for your Patriot Pass, your passwords will be synchronized, and you will use your Patriot Pass username and password to log in to the following systems:
Blackboard, University Libraries, MasonLive, myMason, Patriot Web, Virtual Computing Lab, and WEMS. [See https://thanatos.gmu.edu/passwordchange/index.jsp].

**Responsible Use of Computing**
Students must follow the university policy for Responsible Use of Computing. [See http://universitypolicy.gmu.edu/1301gen.html].

**Students with Disabilities**
Students with disabilities who seek accommodations in a course must be registered with the George Mason University Office of Disability Services (ODS) and inform their instructor, in writing, at the beginning of the semester [See http://ods.gmu.edu].

**University Libraries**
University Libraries provides resources for distance students. [See http://library.gmu.edu/distance].

**Writing Center**
The George Mason University Writing Center staff provides a variety of resources and services (e.g., tutoring, workshops, writing guides, handbooks) intended to support students as they work to construct and share knowledge through writing. [See http://writingcenter.gmu.edu]. You can now sign up for an Online Writing Lab (OWL) session just like you sign up for a face-to-face session in the Writing Center, which means YOU set the date and time of the appointment! Learn more about the Online Writing Lab (OWL).

**Counseling and Psychological Services**
The George Mason University Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) staff consists of professional counseling and clinical psychologists, social workers, and counselors who offer a wide range of services (e.g., individual and group counseling, workshops and outreach programs) to enhance students' personal experience and academic performance [See http://caps.gmu.edu].

**Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)**
The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (FERPA), also known as the "Buckley Amendment," is a federal law that gives protection to student educational records and provides students with certain rights. [See http://registrar.gmu.edu/privacy].

**Other Considerations**
If there are any issues related to religious holidays, please inform the instructor the first week of class.