

## Political Science 497A

### POLITICS AND THE MEDIA

Autumn 2003

2:30-3:45 Monday and Wednesday

Dr. Marie Hojnacki  
Office hours: Monday 4:00 to 5:00  
Tuesday 1:00 to 3:00  
& by appointment

Office: N-165 Burrowes  
Office phone: 865.1912  
Email: marieh@psu.edu

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### Course Description

The media have always been a conspicuous presence in American political life. But the nature of the media and the media's role in shaping political life have changed considerably from the founding days of the Republic. Although most Americans embrace the notion of freedom of the press as a centerpiece of democracy, it is also common to hear complaints that the media have become too powerful in America through their control of the content and flow of politically relevant information. But what precisely is the source of media power in America? Do media organizations and journalists exercise the power they have responsibly? Are citizens' attitudes toward social and political problems shaped by the popular media or do television and film simply reflect the attitudes that exist? Do political leaders manipulate the media? How has the proliferation of cable news networks, the popularity and expansion of the Internet, the often mentioned blurring of news and entertainment, and corporate mergers between media outlets affected the information that is conveyed to the public? How have these trends, if at all, affected democracy in America?

This course will address questions like these as it examines the role and impact of the mass media in shaping political life. Students will learn about the historical development of the news media; the economic and professional forces that shape news coverage of political leaders, political institutions, and policy issues; how political actors engage the media to achieve their objectives; and how the mass media affect citizens' acquisition of information and their abilities to think about political issues and politicians. The course schedule provides a set of questions that will guide our discussions throughout the semester.

The objective of this course is to think critically about the qualitative and quantitative changes to the media that have occurred over time, how the media affect the information that is conveyed to the public about political issues and public policy, and what citizens should expect from the media in a representative democracy.

### Books & Other Reading Materials

Most of the reading for this course will be drawn from four texts. The books are: (1) Graber, Doris A. 2002. *Mass Media and American Politics*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. Washington, DC: CQ Press; (2) Alterman, Eric. 2003. *What Liberal Media? The Truth About Bias and the News*. New York: Basic Books; (3) Goldberg, Bernard. 2003. *Bias: A CBS Insider Exposes How the Media Distort the News*. New York: Perennial/HarperCollins Publishers; and, (4) Sunstein, Cass. 2001. *republic.com*. Princeton: Princeton

University Press. These four books are available for sale in the bookstore and through regular reserve.

I will assign additional reading either in class or by Email (you are responsible for making sure that I have an accurate Email address for you throughout the semester and also for checking your Email regularly). I will either provide these additional readings for you or make them available through electronic reserve.

You will get more out of the course (and you will have more to contribute to class discussions and to your written assignments) if you are attentive to the media's coverage of politics. I strongly recommend that you read a daily newspaper, watch an evening television news program, view any one of the many television programs devoted to politics (*K Street, The West Wing, The Daily Show*), and explore politically-oriented websites. As you do this, pay attention to what issues and events get covered, how they are covered, and any differences you observe in content or presentation between sources.

## Grading/Course Requirements

Investigative reporting paper	25%
News content paper	25%
Candidate coverage group project & presentation	25%
Participation/attendance/quizzes	25%

The papers and the group project are described following the course schedule.

Class participation and attendance are an important part of your grade. I expect students to read *carefully* the assigned materials on time, to attend class, and to contribute to class discussions. You'll learn a lot more if you come to class than if you don't, and you'll also get more from the class if you participate actively in the learning process (by engaging in class discussions, asking questions, and listening attentively to me and to others in the class). ***If you miss a substantial number of classes (more than six) for any reason, you will not receive a passing grade for participation and attendance.*** This applies even if you have missed these days because of illness. If you become so sick that you miss more than six classes (equivalent to more than 20 percent of the semester), then your illness will have prevented you from fulfilling the participation/attendance requirement for the class. ***If you do not participate in class discussion, your grade for the participation and attendance portion of the course will be adversely affected.***

Quizzes also are an important part of your course grade. Over the course of the semester I will give you *at least* 6 quizzes on the assigned reading, 5 of which will count toward your quiz grade. Missed quizzes cannot be made up. I may give you questions to answer that I will expect to be completed for the next class – these may be graded as quizzes. If you do not have the assignment completed for the appropriate class, then you will receive a zero quiz grade for that exercise.

***Note that it is not possible in this class to submit extra assignments in an effort to raise your grade, unless I have specified in advance to the entire class that such an opportunity exists.*** See the statement at the end of the syllabus for information regarding academic misconduct and dishonesty.

## Course Schedule

*I reserve the right to make changes to the syllabus as the semester progresses. **You are responsible for keeping up with these changes**, which will be announced either in class or via Email. You are responsible for making sure that I have an accurate Email address for you throughout the semester, and for checking your Email regularly.*

Unless otherwise specified, the first reading listed is due on the first day of each of the units mapped out below (e.g., for the first unit, both Graber, chapter 1 and the chapters from Cook are due on 8 September; for the second unit, only Graber, chapter 2 is due on 10 September). As we approach each of these units, I will tell you precisely when the other readings will be due.

**Introduction: What is the role of the mass media in the American political system? What type of information and news flow is necessary in a democracy? (8 September)**

Graber, Chapter 1

Cook, Timothy E. 1998. *Governing with the News: The News Media as a Political Institution*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pages 20-60. **Notes:** Available through electronic reserve; read for 8 September.

**The Law and Economics of News Organizations: Who controls the media? How does media control affect the variety and content of the information disseminated by the media? How much free expression is there in America? How unlimited is public access to news and information? (10-15 September)**

Graber, chapter 2

Jacobson, Louis and Bara Vaida. 2003. "Lobbying-Broadcast Blues." *National Journal*, 9 August. **Note:** Available through electronic reserve.

Graber, chapter 3

**Reporting on Politics: What relationships exist between journalists and government officials, and between journalists and the public? How, if at all, have these relationships changed over time? (17 September-1 October)**

Graber, chapter 6 (pages 159-178)

Fallows, James. 1996. "Why Americans Hate the Media." *The Atlantic Monthly*, February, pages 45-64. **Note:** Available through electronic reserve.

*All the President's Men*

*Watergate Plus 30: Shadow of History* (selected portions will be viewed in class)

***Investigative Reporting Paper Due 8 October***

**The Fair & Balanced Media?: Do the media have a liberal bias? Do they have a conservative bias? What is the source of the bias that exists? How is the bias of the media manifest in what we see, hear, and read? (6-13 October)**

**Note:** Please read chapters 1-7 of Goldberg and chapters 1-7 of Alterman for 6 October.

Goldberg, Bernard. 2003. *Bias: A CBS Insider Exposes How the Media Distort the News*. New York: Perennial/HarperCollins Publishers.

Alterman, Eric. 2003. *What Liberal Media? The Truth About Bias and the News*. New York: Basic Books.

**Sources of News and News Coverage: Where does the public get information about politics? What is the nature of the information they receive? Does the information conveyed depend on the topic being covered? Who decides what is news? (15-22 October)**

Graber, chapter 4

Rutenberg, Jim. 2003. "Suffering News Burnout? Rest of America Is, Too." *New York Times*, 11 August. **Note:** Available through electronic reserve.

Graber, chapter 5

***News content paper due 3 November***

**The Internet: Has the Internet really transformed how the public gets news and political information? What aspects of the Internet, if any, are likely to enhance democratic governance? What aspects, if any, are likely to detract from democracy? (27-29 October)**

Sunstein, Cass. 2001. *republic.com*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. **Note:** Please read the entire book for 27 October.

**Non-News Portrayals of Politics and Social Problems: What images and ideas are reflected in popular portrayals of politics? Are they reflecting or shaping public perceptions? How and why? (3-12 November)**

Graber, chapter 7

Sampling of perspectives on politics in the popular media that may include portions of the following: *The X Files*; *JFK*; *The Simpson's* "The Cartridges" and "Mr. Spritz Goes to Washington;" *The Manchurian Candidate*; *The Candidate*; *The West Wing*; *The Daily Show Presents Iraq: A Look Baq*; and late night comedy including *The Daily Show*, *The Tonight Show*, *Late Night with David Letterman*, and *Saturday Night Live*. Selections will be viewed in class.

**Media Coverage of Elections: How do the media convey information about political campaigns? What impact does the form of coverage have for what we learn about candidates? How does the coverage of campaigns influence the criteria that we use to select a candidate for office? (17-19 November)**

Graber, chapter 8

*Debating Our Destiny: 40 Years of Presidential Debates* (selected portions will be viewed in class)

**Coverage of the Government and Spin Control: How do the media convey information about the president and presidential activities? How do the media convey information about Congress and congressional activity? What impact do these forms of coverage have for what the public learns about each institution? To what extent can the president and members of Congress “control” the news? (24 November)**

Graber, chapter 9

**Coverage of International Politics: How do the media convey information about the international political events and actions? How does the form of this coverage affect public information and understanding of international politics? (1-3 December)**

Graber, chapter 11

Rutenberg, Jim and Robin Toner. 2003. “Critics of Iraq War Say Lack of Scrutiny Helped Administration to Press Its Case.” *New York Times*, 22 March, B10. **Note:** Available through electronic reserve.

**Group Presentations, Analysis of Candidate Coverage: 8-10 December  
(Group Reports Due 10 December)**

## First Paper Assignment: Investigative Reporting During Watergate & Today

We have read about and discussed in class the concept of investigative journalism. *All the President's Men* provides an example of that type of reporting, and *Watergate Plus 30* helps us to see the context in which that reporting took place.

Using the example of Watergate as seen through the lens of *All the President's Men* and *Watergate Plus 30*, develop an argument for what you believe are the three most important conditions for successful investigative journalism. *That is, under what conditions will it be possible for journalists to identify a problem or potential problem, to present fairly comprehensive information about that problem, to draw elite and mass attention to that problem, and to produce some type of resolution (temporary or permanent) to that problem.* Be very specific about the conditions that are most important (e.g., it is not sufficient to say that the media need to make the public see a problem as important; rather you should talk about how they might do so), and be sure to explain them generally and through specific examples from Watergate. Make plain whether the conditions you identify as most important are largely rooted in the conduct and behavior of journalists, whether the conditions are rooted in society more broadly, or whether both sets of forces are critical to successful investigative journalism. Then imagine that a scandal identical to Watergate occurs today. What conditions are present today that would allow investigative journalism to have the same impact it did then? What conditions are missing today that would not allow investigative journalism to have the same impact?

In order to complete this exercise effectively, you need to draw upon *All the President's Men*, *Watergate Plus 30*, and the readings for this class. You may also find it useful to draw upon relevant academic journal articles, books, and news stories. Any arguments you make in your paper must be supported by evidence you gather from these and other sources. It is not appropriate for this assignment to present only your thoughts on this topic. Rather, I am asking you to do research and construct an argument rooted in evidence to support your claims.

Be sure to include proper citations for all sources used. If you are uncertain about the proper way to give attribution to your sources, please ask me at least one week in advance of the date the paper is due. The paper should be about five or six double-spaced pages in length (margins should be no less than one inch and font should be no smaller than 11 point). **Papers are due in class on 8 October.** If you turn in the paper after the due date, your grade will be reduced by five points for each day the paper is late.

## Second Paper Assignment: Local and National Newspaper Content

For this project you will examine the content of *The Centre Daily Times (CDT)* and a national newspaper (of your choice) across three days in each of two years in order to: first, compare what constitutes national and local news, and second, assess whether and how content has changed over time. Everyone will examine the content of both the *CDT* and the national newspaper on February 11, 12, and 13, 2003. I will assign a third of the class to compare the content in 2003 to three days in February 1983, another third to use three days in February 1968 for comparison, and the final third to compare 2003 with three days in February 1953. You may select any consecutive Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday in February for comparison with February 11, 12, and 13, 2003. Below I offer guidance for choosing a national newspaper and give you a deadline for making your choice.

In order to complete this assignment, you must itemize the content of each newspaper on each day for each of the two years you are studying. To keep the task manageable, focus only on the first section of the paper (i.e., section A or the front page section). Record the headline and subhead of each story on these pages. In addition, note the number and rough size (full page, less than half page, etc.) of advertisements that appear on these pages. Based on your analysis of these data, your paper should address the following:

- How many different stories are being covered by each paper in an average day? Are there important differences in the number of stories covered across the two papers? Are there important differences over time? Are there differences in the number and size of advertisements that appear across papers and over time? Do “trends” in story numbers and ad numbers appear to be related in any way?
- What types of stories are being covered by the *CDT* and the national newspaper? (You may find it useful to develop categories for the stories such as foreign affairs, federal government, and so on. You may use whatever categories you find useful to discuss the results of your content search.) In other words, what appears to constitute local news and what constitutes national news? What similarities and differences are apparent across the national paper and the *CDT*? What similarities and differences are apparent over time? Are there areas of news that seem to have emerged or receded? Is there greater or less similarity between the content of the national newspaper and the *CDT* today or in the past? Describe the differences and similarities you observe between the papers in each time period. Why might these differences/similarities be apparent?
- Consider the content of a few stories in each paper and time period. Do there appear to be differences in the way stories are covered at the national and local level? That is, are there differences in the way the stories are narrated? In what ways is the nature of coverage similar or different? Are there differences of this type apparent over time? Be as explicit as you can in your description, providing examples from the text of the stories you read.

In order to effectively interpret and analyze your data, you need to draw upon readings from this class. You may find it useful to consult additional journal articles, books, and reports about national and local news, and trends in news coverage. Be sure to include proper citations for all sources used. The paper should be about five double-spaced pages in length (margins should be no less than one inch and font should be no smaller than 11 point). **Papers are due by in class on 3 November.** If you turn in the paper after the due date, your grade will be reduced by five points for each day the paper is late.

### **Selecting a National Newspaper:**

In order to look at the current and past content of the *CDT* and your national newspaper, you will need to “read” the paper on microfilm. Microfilm and microfilm readers are available in Pattee (ground level). The national papers that you can choose for this project are: *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Atlanta Constitution/Atlanta Journal Constitution*, *Washington Post*, or *Boston Globe* (available only from 1967 to the present). **Please submit to me the name of the national newspaper you will study by 13 October.**

## **Group Project: Analyzing Coverage of Candidates and Campaigns**

We have read and discussed in class a number of ideas about how the media cover political events and issues, and also what impact (or lack thereof) this coverage has on how the mass public and political elites come to think about events and issues. For this project, you will work in groups of five or six to analyze the coverage of one of the Democratic presidential candidates. The purpose of your analysis will be to document how different media outlets are covering a subset of the nine Democratic presidential contenders, and to explain both the amount and type of information that the public is getting about these candidates.

Each group will select (at random) a particular Democratic presidential candidate and a particular broadcast media outlet. Your first task after making this selection will be to develop a plan for studying the coverage during a specific week or two that I will specify. The study or research plan should make clear what you will watch (what programs, what hours of the day, etc.), and what criteria you will use to categorize the coverage. (The reading for this course will help you to develop these criteria but you are encouraged to develop whatever categories you think may be useful for understanding the kind of information that is transmitted to the public about your candidate.) Your next task is to implement your research plan, gathering information about the coverage of your candidate during the week or so that I specify.

Each group will prepare a report based on an analysis of these data. I will provide information about the content of the report later in the semester. These reports will be presented to the class during the week of 8 December. Each group will have no more than 20 minutes to provide an overview of the results of their analysis of the candidate coverage.

Your grade on this report will be based on the clarity of the research plan that is developed, the care and creativity shown in evaluating the coverage information, the organization of the report and the presentation, and the grammar and spelling contained in the report. Each member of the group will have an opportunity to grade themselves and all other members of the group. I will incorporate these evaluations into the grade I assign each student.

**The reports are due in class on Wednesday 10 December.**

## **Academic Integrity and Academic Dishonesty<sup>1</sup>**

Along with the Department of Political Science, the College of the Liberal Arts and the University, I take violations of academic dishonesty seriously. Observing basic honesty in one's work, words, ideas, and actions is a principle to which all members of the community are required to subscribe.

All course work by students is to be done on an individual basis unless an instructor clearly states that an alternative is acceptable. Any reference materials used in the preparation of any assignment must be explicitly cited. For a quiz, violations of academic integrity consist of any attempt to receive assistance from written or printed aids, or from any person or papers or electronic devices, or of any attempt to give assistance, whether the one so doing has completed his or her own work or not.

Other violations include, but are not limited to, any attempt to gain an unfair advantage in regard to a quiz, such as tampering with a graded quiz or claiming another's work to be one's own. Violations shall also consist of obtaining or attempting to obtain, previous to any quiz, copies of the quiz or the questions to appear thereon, or to obtain any illegal knowledge of these questions. Lying to the instructor or purposely misleading any Penn State administrator shall also constitute a violation of academic integrity.

In cases of a violation of academic integrity it is my policy to impose appropriate penalties that are consistent with College and University guidelines. The College of Liberal Arts academic integrity website <http://www.la.psu.edu/assocdea/academicinteg.htm> provides additional information about the procedures that are followed in cases of academic dishonesty.

## **Disabilities**

The Pennsylvania State University encourages qualified people with disabilities to participate in its programs and activities and is committed to the policy that all people shall have equal access to programs, facilities, and admissions without regard to personal characteristics not related to ability, performance, or qualifications as determined by University policy or by state or federal authorities. If you anticipate needing any type of accommodation in this course or have questions about physical access, please tell me as soon as possible. Reasonable accommodations will be made for all students with disabilities, but it is your responsibility to inform me early in the semester so that appropriate accommodations can be arranged.

## **Department of Political Science web site**

You will find a wealth of information on the Political Science Department web site including course schedules, faculty office hours, faculty home pages describing their areas of teaching and research activities, answers to questions about advising, internship opportunities, announcements, and much, much, more. Check back often: we will continuously update our information about internships and career opportunities: <http://polisci.la.psu.edu/>

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<sup>1</sup>Much of this text has been directly obtained from the sections of the Princeton University website <http://www.princeton.edu/pr/pub/rrr/99/pages/OI.htm> concerning academic integrity (Rights, Rules, Responsibilities introductory text as well as pages 55-69) as well as from the website of the Department

of Economics at The Pennsylvania State University.