PSC 2229
MEDIA AND POLITICS

Fall 2012
T + Th, 9:35-10:50am
Funger Hall 103

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COURSE OVERVIEW AND GOALS
The media have long been recognized as an essential component of American politics. Reflecting the
oft-cited designation of the press as the “fourth branch” of government, political observers from the
earliest days of the republic noted the indispensable role of the mass media in a democratic society.
Even before the signing of the Constitution, the seminal debate between the Federalists and Anti-
Federalists took place in the newspaper. News outlets, moreover, have a long tradition as agents of
partisan warfare, promoting and perpetuating party loyalties and voter turnout in the 19th and early
20th centuries. And as the summer of 2012 wound down, the media were playing a central role in the
presidential election, with Barack Obama and Mitt Romney attempting to use news outlets, television
ads, and social media tools to mobilize their supporters and persuade skeptics. In short, it is
impossible to fully comprehend American politics without understanding the media. (Ask Todd
Akin.)

This course provides an overview of the media’s role in American political life. In doing so, we will
focus on several broad themes: the relationship between the media and government; the process of
newsmaking and how it shapes the content of political news; the effects of the media on public
opinion and voting behavior; and the critical changes to the media (new and old) taking place today.
We will devote many of our class discussions and readings to scholarship in political science and
communication. But we will also pay special attention to the content of the news we encounter every
day—be it about the presidential contest, the recent raucous debate over health care reform, the war
in Afghanistan, or controversies over the revealing of secret national security documents and
programs.

In the end, the course has four goals:
• To help you understand the development of the mass media and its role in American
  politics
• To help you understand how the interaction among journalists, politicians, and citizens
  shapes contemporary American politics
• To help you learn how social scientists ask and answer interesting questions about
  politics
• To help you become a savvy consumer of political news, in this class and beyond

READING
There is one book for this course, available at the GW Bookstore:

York: Routledge.
The majority of the other required readings—mostly journal articles and book chapters—are available for download through our course’s Blackboard page (http://blackboard.gwu.edu). On the left-hand menu, click the “Files” link, and then click the “Course Readings” folder. Here, you’ll find PDF versions of each week’s readings. It will be your responsibility to download the items as they are assigned. It might be worthwhile to print the readings early in the semester, which will keep you from having to do this every week.

The remaining readings are available online, with the URLs in the course schedule below.

Finally, it should come as no surprise that you are expected to keep up with political news. Reading a newspaper (in print or online) is the best way to do this. Our discussions will frequently touch on current events, often as a way to illustrate a concept from lecture or a reading. Regularly consuming the news will not only bring course material to life, but it will undoubtedly make the class more interesting. (And as a non-trivial side benefit, being a news junkie invariably gives you interesting things to talk about at parties when you find yourself in a conversation that has lapsed into awkward silence.) You are free to read (in print or online) any paper(s) of your choosing, with the following limitation: You need to choose a news source that includes frequent coverage of national politics.

**EVALUATION**

Your grade will be based on three exams and five quizzes. The breakdown is as follows:

- Exam 1 (October 16): 25%
- Exam 2 (November 15): 30%
- Exam 3 (TBD): 30%
- Quizzes: 15% total (3% each)

At the end of the semester, your grade will be assigned based on the following scale:

A (93-100), A- (90-92), B+ (87-89), B (83-86), B- (80-82), C+ (77-79), C (73-76), C- (70-72), D (60-69), and F (0-59).

There is no extra credit.

**Exam Format**

All three exams will consist of essay questions and short-answer identifications. I will say more about the format as the first exam approaches.

Makeup exams will be given only in extreme circumstances, such as the death of an immediate family member. I will be the final arbiters of what “extreme” means. If you miss an exam or quiz, it is your responsibility to notify us immediately.

**Quiz Format**

The quizzes will consist of five multiple choice questions about the assigned readings. Showing up to take the quiz earns you 50 points. Each question is worth 10 points. For instance, if you answer three questions correctly, you would receive an 80. The quizzes will not be particularly difficult, but you will do well only if you keep up with the reading assignments. Here are the quiz dates:

- September 11
- October 9
- October 30
- November 20
- December 6
SCHOLASTIC DISHONESTY AND ACADEMIC INTEGRITY
Thinking about cheating? Don’t do it. In the Code of Academic Integrity, the University defines academic dishonesty as “cheating of any kind, including misrepresenting one’s own work, taking credit for the work of others without crediting them and without appropriate authorization, and the fabrication of information.” Scholastic dishonesty also includes, but is not limited to, providing false or misleading information to receive a postponement or extension on a test, quiz, or assignment, and submission of essentially the same written assignment for two different courses without the prior permission of faculty members. By accepting this syllabus and participating in the course, you have agreed to abide by this Code. Students who violate the Code are subject to disciplinary penalties, including failure on the assignment in question, failure in the course, and other penalties imposed by the University. See http://www.gwu.edu/integrity/index.htm.

ACADEMIC FREEDOM
Each student is strongly encouraged to participate in class discussions. In any classroom situation that involves discussion and critical thinking, particularly about political ideas, there are bound to be many differing viewpoints. Students may not only disagree with each other at times, but the students and instructor may also find that they have disparate views on sensitive and volatile topics. It is my hope that these differences will enhance class discussion and create an atmosphere where all of us will be encouraged to think and learn from each other. Therefore, be assured that students’ grades will not be affected by any beliefs or ideas expressed in class or in assignments. Rather, we will all respect the views of others when expressed in classroom discussions.

ACCOMMODATIONS
Any student who may need an accommodation based on the potential impact of a disability should contact the Disability Support Services office at 202-994-8250 in Rome Hall, Suite 102, to establish eligibility and to coordinate reasonable accommodations. For additional information please refer to http://gwired.gwu.edu/dss/.

RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCES
If an exam or quiz is scheduled for a date when you are observing a religious holy day, I will work with you to find an acceptable alternative time to complete the assignment.

LAPTOPS, iPADS, SMART PHONES, PAGERS, TELETYPE MACHINES, ETC.
I love technology (though not as much as Napoleon Dynamite’s brother, Kip). But the fact is that laptops, smart phones, and other electronic devices are a distraction to your classmates and to me. You may not use them in class. If you have a unique reason for needing a laptop to take notes, please contact me.
COURSE SCHEDULE (Note: This is subject to change as we proceed through the semester.)

August 28: Course Introduction

August 30: No class—makeup session on December 10

Part I: The Media’s Place in American Politics
(September 4–20)

September 4: The Role of the Media in a Democracy

- Wolfsfeld, Chapter 1 (“Political Power and Power over the Media”)

September 6, 11: The American Media: Comparative and Historical Perspectives

- *Quiz 1 on September 11*

September 13, 18, 20: You’re Not the Boss of Me: Freedom of the Press and Current Controversies

- To Wikileaks or not to Wikileaks?
Part II: The Newsmaking Process  
(September 25–October 11)

September 25: Dolla Dolla Bill, Y’all: The Economics of the News Business


September 27: Values, Norms, and News Routines

- Wolfsfeld, Chapters 2 and 3 (“Political Control and Media Independence” and “No Such Thing as Objective News”)


October 9: How Politicians (Not Named Anthony Weiner) Use the Media

- *Quiz 2*

October 11: Media Bias: Reality, Myth, Evidence, and Perception


October 16: ** Exam 1**
Part III: Election Campaigns and Policy Debates
(October 18–November 13)

October 18, 23, 25, 30: News Coverage of Election Campaigns


- Jamieson, Kathleen Hall. 2009. Electing the President 2008: The Insiders’ View. Chapter 6 (“The Campaign and the Press”), pp. 135-150. [This is the transcript of a panel discussion among members of the 2008 McCain and Obama campaign teams.]


- *Quiz 3 on October 30*

November 1: How the Media Cover Policy Debates


November 6, 8: Coverage of War and Foreign Affairs (and a Nov. 8 post-election discussion)


- Wolfsfeld, pp. 83-93

November 13: Coverage of Science and Climate Change


November 15: ** Exam 2**
Part IV: The Media and Public Opinion  
(November 20–December 6)

**November 20:** Red Media, Blue Media? How We Use the News  
- *Quiz 4*

**November 22:** No class—Thanksgiving (Stuff yourselves!)

**November 27, 29, December 4 (Jay-Z’s Birthday, fyi):** How the Media Shape Public Opinion  
- Wolfsfeld, Chapter 5

**December 6:** Cable TV Is Ruining Democracy. Or Is It?  
- *Quiz 5*

**December 10:** The Future of the News  

**TBD:** **Exam 3**