

MC 2604 Spring 2021 Syllabus
Mass Media and You – Journalism, Justice & Community Change
Walsh-Childers

Class meetings: **Wednesdays periods 8-10 (3-6 p.m.)** **ONLINE ONLY, VIA ZOOM**

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About the course

What you will learn in this class

Students in this course will learn to identify and analyze how media content reflects, supports and sometimes curbs societal power structures in ways that influence social and racial justice, whether positively or negatively. Students will be exposed to relevant mass communication theories such as agenda-setting and framing. Students will engage in analytical writing in ways that help them understand key current issues of race, power and justice – and the presentation of these issues through mass media – within their historical contexts.

Students who complete the course will:

- Be more informed consumers of all forms of media, including understanding how to distinguish among information sources and evaluate their reliability;
- Gain a fuller understanding of the journalistic process, the challenges journalists face, the impacts of journalism in democratic society, and the relationships between journalists and the public they serve;
- Better understand the workings of state and local governments, including how state and local government decision-making affects our daily lives, how news coverage influences these decisions and how citizens can engage with media and with government to influence change.

The course focuses significantly on helping students understand and evaluate journalistic products and processes and their role in democracy. However, it also will provide students an opportunity to learn more about state and local government structures and processes and how citizen engagement can influence them.

Class policies

Classroom Atmosphere: Each of you plays an important role in shaping this course. We encourage you to be actively involved in class discussions and activities, and yes, this is still true, maybe even *more* true, in the online environment. That means you should keep your video turned **on** when we're meeting via Zoom. Please also be mindful of maintaining a professional

appearance and conduct during these remote meetings. *Be aware that going to a black screen or profile photo only for any significant portion of class time will be regarded as time when you are not participating in the class. If you have concerns about being recorded or other problems with Zoom attendance, please let us know.*

During class, please mute your mic unless you want to make a comment or ask a question – and please do make comments and ask questions! To the extent that you can, please try to find a quiet environment, free of distractions, when joining the Zoom classes. Please also be appreciative of the contributions of others, including any guest speakers, and help create a class environment that is respectful and inclusive. This does not mean you should never disagree, but you should always do so courteously.

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion: The University of Florida's College of Journalism and Communications embraces a commitment to an intellectual community enriched and enhanced by diversity along a number of dimensions, including race, ethnicity and national origins, gender and gender identity, sexuality, class and religion. We expect each of our courses to help foster an understanding of the diversity of peoples and cultures and of the significance and impact of mass communication in a global society.

People of all backgrounds have important contributions to make to this class, and I expect all of you to respect that. If, at any point, you believe someone in the class – including me – has expressed ideas in inappropriate ways, please let me know. My goal is to make certain everyone feels comfortable participating in and listening to class discussions, and I want these discussions to support a diversity of perspectives and experiences and honor your identities (including race, gender, class, sexuality, religion, abilities, etc.).

If you prefer a name and/or pronouns that differ from those in the official records, please tell me so that I can refer to you as you prefer. If experiences outside this class are interfering with your performance in the class, please let me know; I'd like to help connect you with appropriate resources for dealing with any such issues. And if you prefer to speak with someone outside the course, Joanna Hernandez, CJC's director of inclusion and diversity, is an excellent resource. You can reach her via email at jhernandez@jou.ufl.edu.

Distractions During Class: As a matter of courtesy to your fellow class members, please turn off or silence all cell phones before class starts, unless you're having to join class via your phone. Likewise, the only screen you should have open on your computer, laptop or tablet is the class Zoom meeting, except when I specifically ask you to look something up online or, perhaps, we're discussing a story that you've read online. I strongly recommend that you take handwritten notes for the class; [research](#) documents that hand-writing your notes increases your likelihood of remembering and understanding the material. **Do not** *instant or text message during class or attempt to work on assignments for other classes*. Multi-tasking is not [effective](#).

Attendance: I will not take roll for every class, but Zoom/Canvas automatically records who is and isn't present. Zoom's analytics also record the number of minutes each person is present in the meeting, and these figures will factor in to your class participation score. Your attendance and *participation* are important to making his class a success, and you cannot participate if you're not paying attention to the Zoom meeting. I expect that you will attend every class unless an emergency or some unavoidable technical problem prevents you from doing so. If you find that you do have to miss a class due to an emergency, let me know immediately. I will use in-class polls, randomly timed, to determine whether students are understanding the material from recorded lectures, required reading/listening/viewing materials and class discussions; these polls also help me determine who is and isn't "tuned in" to the class meetings. Excessive

absences, late arrival or early departure will affect your final class participation score – you can't participate if you aren't here.

Missing Deadlines or Assignments: If you believe you have an exceptional reason for missing a deadline for an assignment, please discuss it with me *immediately* and *in advance*. Please note that poor planning, including underestimating how long it will take to do the research you need to do for your final paper, does not constitute an acceptable reason for missing a deadline. Fairness, both to me and to your classmates, requires that you meet all deadlines. *All assignments are due at the times specified in Canvas. Failure to turn in your assignments by the deadline will result in a late penalty, at a minimum.*

Accommodations for Special Needs: If you have a legitimate, documented special needs situation, I will be more than happy to work with you to find accommodations. University policy requires students requesting classroom accommodation to register with the Dean of Students Office. The Dean of Students Office will provide appropriate documentation to you, and you should provide this documentation to me at the beginning of the semester. Please do so, even if you do not believe you will need the accommodations. It is your responsibility to initiate this conversation early in the semester.

Required readings

There is no textbook for this course. The reading materials, podcasts, etc., will all be available as hyperlinks from the syllabus or the course Canvas site and/or will be available in the course Modules in Canvas. Most of the readings are news articles carefully selected because they represent high-quality journalism. You are expected to read these articles and to listen to or watch the podcasts or documentaries listed on the syllabus *before* the class for which they're assigned. Most weeks, you will be required to post a comment or answer questions on the story/stories assigned for that week, and this will allow me to assess whether you're reading and understanding the content.

Plagiarism & Academic Honesty

Plagiarism on any writing assignment in the class will result in a failing grade *for the class*.

Many students in this class may have no intention of becoming communications professionals. Nonetheless, every student at the University of Florida is bound by the Honor Code, which demands that students do their own work, independent of unauthorized assistance. In short, it is your responsibility to make certain you understand what constitutes plagiarism and to ensure that you give proper credit every time you draw on someone else's writing.

- Do not rely on what you think you've learned before. I strongly recommend that everyone complete the free Poynter NewsU course called [Avoiding Plagiarism and Fabrication](#).
- Prof. Mindy McAdams also has put together an excellent guide: <http://www.macloo.com/cheat/index.htm>
- If you have questions, ask me! There's no penalty for asking questions, but the penalties for plagiarism are severe.
- Treat Internet sources, including any news articles you read, like any other book, journal article or other print source. Make certain you copy down correct reference information when you copy material from a website, even if you're paraphrasing. You will need to include references for the sources for your final project paper, and it's possible you may want to cite other sources in weekly discussion posts. For discussion posts, you can simply include hyperlinks rather than citations, but for the paper, you will need formal citations, preferably following [APA style](#).
- For the final paper, you will be required to have **interviewed at least one human source**, and although APA style does not require it, you should include this interview in your reference list. Interview references should include the full name of the interviewee, his/her/their relationship to the story or topic, the date and time the interview was completed and the method – e.g. via email, via Zoom, telephone, etc. You also must include contact information for the interviewee, preferably including an email address and telephone number.
- Upload all assignments to the e-learning site; they will be submitted to Turnitin.com to check for plagiarism. I'll set up the Canvas site so that you can submit your paper well before deadline, see the Turnitin report, and then correct any problems identified and resubmit the paper before the final deadline.
- Do not turn in for this class any work you previously have submitted to another instructor or that you plan to submit for any other class at UF or any other institution.

Please see the UF Office of Student Judicial Affairs website for definitions of academic dishonesty (<http://www.dso.ufl.edu/sccr/honorcodes/honorcode.php>). The violations most likely to be potential problems for students in this class include plagiarism, misrepresentation and fabrication. It is your responsibility to understand what kinds of actions are prohibited. If a situation ever arises in which you think something you're contemplating *might* constitute one of these types of academic dishonesty, ask before you do it. Apologies after the fact will never resolve the problem for anyone. I consider it part of my duty as a professor and journalism educator to report academic dishonesty to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs.

ASSIGNMENTS

Weekly discussion posts or quizzes: (10 points per post, 100 points total, with 2 lowest grades dropped)

Each week, you will be required either to answer a short quiz (usually 5 questions) OR to write a short post (at least two-three paragraphs) about the readings and/or video lecture for that week. Discussion prompts will list specific questions we want you to answer about the story or stories

for that week. The first week and the last week will focus on questions that will help me assess how the class has affected your news consumption habits – complete these assignments and you're guaranteed the full 10 points, no matter how you answer.

Design Your Ideal News Source Group Project: (150 points, due March 3)

You will work in teams of two or three students to produce a description of what you envision as the ideal *trustworthy* news source. Your news source may focus on a specific topic area (e.g. education, environment, health, etc.), but it must address issues of significance to the general public. That means your news source should not focus primarily on entertainment, sports, cooking or fashion. Come up with a name, a logo, and maybe even a home page mock-up for your site (no HTML required – this can be a PDF document). The description should include:

- A mission statement for the news source, including what topics **and levels of government/business** your news source will cover.
- What your organization's policies will be for verifying information before publication and for acknowledging/correcting mistakes
- What characteristics of your site will be designed to increase public trust in its content
- How you, as the managers, will ensure that the publication provides fair, equitable coverage of all racial, ethnic, religious, geographic and social class groups
- A discussion of how many staff members you will need, how much these personnel will cost and how you will bring in enough income to cover the organization's expenses. (This isn't meant to be a formal business plan – we just want you to gain an understanding of how much it costs to produce high quality, trustworthy journalism.) Several online sources list average journalist salaries (e.g. [ZipRecruiter](#), [Salary.com](#), [Indeed.com](#), etc.), but remember that organizations also typically cover **benefits**, including health insurance, retirement/pension benefits, etc.

Journalism & Justice Reflection Essays: (2 of them, 150 points each)

For this assignment, we're going to ask you to follow at least one of a variety of news compilations or podcasts, such as Investigative Reporters & Editors' (IRE) [Local Matters newsletter](#), the [Reveal](#) podcast, or ProPublica's [Local Reporting Network](#), and find a story of some significance that addresses a social justice topic of some kind, whether it's related to housing, education, health care, environmental justice, transportation, criminal justice, or some other topic. Twice this semester – February 17 and March 31 – you'll submit a 3- to 4-page "reflection" essay about a story you chose from one of these sources. For each essay, you must address the first three questions below, as well as at least two of the remaining questions (4-8):

1. What makes this story/publication/news source trustworthy? What, if anything, would make it more trustworthy?
2. What is the problem the story focuses on?
3. What state/local policy contributes to the problem?
4. What assumptions are being made in this story? Is there a counter-narrative that isn't fully explored that could have been?
5. Who has power to change the situation, to solve the problem?
6. Who is invested in opposing change?

7. What would need to happen for change to occur / what happens next? How might citizen engagement increase the likelihood that this problem will be solved?
8. What role could this story (and potential follow-up reporting) play in bringing about change?

Story Impact Paper: (300 points total) Due April 18

Each student will select a news story/series, podcast or documentary from a list we will provide; all of them will be examples of high quality journalism that examined an important social issue at the state or local level. The purpose of this assignment is to help you see how high quality journalism affects citizens' lives and the operation of state/local government, *beyond the function of simply informing people*. Relatively early in the semester (Feb. 3), you'll submit a proposal for your paper, identifying which story/series/podcast/documentary you wish to examine, what impact you think it had or might have had, and *how you will go about determining how the journalist's or journalists' work affected individuals dealing with the problem the story addressed*. (These might include impacts on state/local government policy, impacts on business policy, impacts on community engagement and organization, etc.) The proposal will help me to see whether you understand the requirements of the project so that I can offer advice about how to assess the story's impact. The proposal itself will be worth 50 points. The final report will be worth 250 points (25% of your final grade). More information will be provided in separate documents.

Class Participation: (150 points)

Every student is expected to be an active participant in this class. Why? Because research shows that students who participate, who are engaged in the class, [learn more](#) than those who don't. That means showing up on time, *having read or listened to or watched the required materials*, asking good questions, respectfully offering your opinions and thoughts on the information presented, etc. Here's a [how-to](#), in case this is tough for you. Class participation will account for 15% of your final grade. Just attending every class Zoom meeting will NOT be enough to earn full class participation points. Someone who was present during every meeting, even for the full class, but never/rarely spoke up to offer comments or posted comments to the meeting chat, would earn 75% of the participation points, at best. I will use the Zoom analytics and meeting transcripts to help me determine students' participation engagement.

To encourage everyone to participate, each student is required to sign up for 3 weeks during which you will be a discussion leader. You won't make any formal presentation; this simply means that you're committing to be especially well prepared for class on those days. I'll make a point of calling on the assigned discussion leaders (if necessary) during each class, but of course, you should always feel free to comment or ask questions, regardless of whether you're signed up for that day. Failure to sign up as a discussion leader for all 4 weeks and/or not being present and prepared to comment during a week for which you're signed up will lower your participation grade.

Week 1, January 13: The importance of local and state government; why this course matters
READINGS, PODCASTS, ETC.

- *The Roanoke Times*: [Editorial: Why local government matters](#)
- *Oxford Political Review*: [COVID-19 and the American States: Why State Government Matters](#)
- Brookings Institute: [It's not just Trump and Biden: State and local ballot measures could have a big impact on community recovery](#)

Week 2, January 20: Why local and state news matters
READINGS, PODCASTS, ETC.

- Mary Ellen Klas: [Less local news means less democracy](#)
- Christopher Baxter: [During the coronavirus crisis, coverage of state capitols is more essential than ever](#)
- Ken Doctor: [Newsonomics: What was once unthinkable is quickly becoming reality in the destruction of local news](#)
- Pew Center After the Fact podcast: [The loss of local news – the impact](#)

Week 3, January 27: How to know what's trustworthy; Why everyone needs a trusted and trustworthy news source (or several)
READINGS, PODCASTS, ETC.

- "The Way of Skeptical Knowing: The Tradecraft of Verification," excerpt from "*Blur: How to Know What's True in the Age of Information Overload*," Bill Kovach & Tom Rosenstiel (pdf)
- News Literacy Project: [10 questions for fake news detection](#)
- Alison Escalante: [Research shows how to spot fake news about coronavirus](#)
- Priyanjani Bengani, [As election looms, a network of mysterious 'pink slime' local news outlets nearly triples in size](#)

WEEK 4, February 3: School safety
READINGS, PODCASTS, ETC.:

- Snap Judgment podcast: [No one calls me shooter](#)
- *The Oregonian*: [Targeted](#)

Proposal for Story Impact Report Paper due Feb. 3

WEEK 5, Feb. 10: Equity issues in education
READINGS, PODCASTS, ETC.:

- Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, ["Lessons Lost"](#)
- This American Life, ["The Problem We All Live With"](#)

Week 6, February 17: Housing equity issues

READINGS, PODCASTS, ETC.:

- WBEZ-Chicago: [Where banks don't lend](#)
- High Country News: [The housing policy that's turning back gentrification](#)

First Journalism & Justice reflection essay due Feb. 17

Week 7, February 24: Mental health policy

READINGS, PODCASTS, ETC.:

- Health News Florida: [Committed: Florida's children victims of dysfunctional Baker Act system](#)
- Boston Globe: The Desperate and the Dead: Solutions -- [San Antonio became a national leader in mental health care by working together as a community](#)
- Recommended but not required: Boston Globe: The Desperate and the Dead: Community Care -- [State mental hospitals were closed to give people with mental illness greater freedom](#)

WEEK 8, March 3: The health care industry, health policy and social justice

READINGS, PODCASTS, ETC.:

- MLK50/ProPublica: [Methodist Le Bonheur Makes Millions, Owns a Collection Agency and Relentlessly Sues the Poor](#)
- MLK50/ProPublica: [Methodist Le Bonheur erases debts of more than 6,500 patients it sued](#)
- Georgia Health News: [Race and COVID: Stark disparities in rural Georgia](#)

Ideal News Source group project due March 3

WEEK 9: March 10: Race, policing and criminal justice

READINGS, PODCASTS, ETC.:

- ProPublica / Times-Union, ["Walking While Black"](#)

WEEK 10: March 17: Bias in the courts

READINGS, PODCASTS, ETC.:

- American Public Media: [In the Dark, Season 2](#)

Progress report due on your final Story Impact Paper

WEEK 11: Recharge day – No class

WEEK 12, March 31: Environmental (in)justice

READINGS, PODCASTS, ETC.:

- West Virginia Gazette-Mail: [Stirring the Waters: In Southern WV, days without water are a way of life](#)
- Southerly: [The rural South's invisible public health crisis](#)

Second Journalism & Justice essay due March 31

WEEK 13, April 7: Energy, utilities and poverty

READINGS, PODCASTS, ETC.:

- WUFT: [Energy Burden series](#)

WEEK 14, April 14: Voting rights

Week 4, September 28: Voting rights

READINGS, PODCASTS, ETC.

- Reveal: Voting Matters (film)
- Atlanta Journal-Constitution: Precinct closures harm voter turnout in Georgia, AJC analysis finds

Story Impact Report due by midnight April 18.

WEEK 15, April 21: No class. I'm going to need this time to read/grade all your papers.