

Media and Politics – MMC 3614
Online Course Syllabus
Spring 2021

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About me: I'm the Election Integrity Program Manager for an independent remote newsroom and a former television news producer in large markets. I'm also a current freelancer for national publications like TIME, The Washington Post, The Atlantic, The Boston Globe, The New York Times, Salon, The Guardian, and scores more. I write both straight journalism and opinion about politics, health, science, technology, parenting, feminism / "women's issues", business, money, food and social justice. And everything else.

Course Description and Student Objectives:

The purpose of this course is to provide an understanding of the role of the media in the political system. Both historical and current political trends will be highlighted as they are deliberated and analyzed by the media as well as the advantages and challenges that come with digital media and the 24/7 news cycle. *While we are not in a Presidential season year, we are in a new presidential year. We will pay special attention to the changing climate of political expression in the online age, as well.*

Upon successful completion of this course, you will be able to:

- Recognize the fundamental role of the media in shaping the public's perceptions of politicians, the government and the political structure;
- Understand the importance of the Internet and social media in the modern information age and the profound effect it has on media coverage, campaigns and privacy;
- Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of certain media sources and develop ways to ascertain the validity of information from media sources;
- Identify how political figures are affected by the media and ways in which political figures respond to, influence or even manipulate news coverage.

Required Readings: Iyengar, S. *Media politics: A citizen's guide* (3rd ed.). New York: W. W. Norton & Co.

You will be expected to read the assigned chapters/pages and be prepared to apply them to online discussions and assessments. These readings are crucial to understanding what you will be doing in this course. *So do NOT neglect to do the readings.*

Course Structure:

This is a web-only course. A learning module will be set up for each section containing a lecture, readings and activities/assignments for the week. You will be required to read the assigned chapters/pages, go through the lecture slides and do each week's assigned work. It is your responsibility to follow and adhere to the schedule. Six assignments, two quizzes and a final exam will evaluate your knowledge and understanding of the material. Here are descriptions of each of the assessments in this course:

Your papers must meet the following requirements:

- o Use proper grammar, spelling and 12-point Times New Roman font.
- o Double space your paper with one-inch margins all around.
- o Have your name and date on the first pages as well as an appropriate title.
- o Follow AP style with in-text citations.

• **Exams:** There will be one exam in this course, a final, covering the reading in the course. The exam will be open book and timed, but you will be able to take it any time over the few days the assignment is open. It will consist of 50 multiple choice questions to be completed in Canvas. More specific details about the exam will be provided closer to the test date.

Quizzes: There are two quizzes covering different sections of the reading throughout the semester, proctored in the same way as the exam.

Final Grade Breakdown:

Your final grade in the course will be arrived at through the following combination:

Introduction: 5 points
Discussion posts: 10 points
Debate/Speech Analysis: 10 points
Social Media Discussion: 5 points
Quiz 1: 10 points
Opinion vs. Straight News Comparison Paper: 15 points
Pundit Analysis Discussion: 10 points
Quiz 2: 10 points
Twitter Comparison Paper: 15 points
Final Exam: 10 points

Total Possible: 100 points

**There will be several extra credit opportunities, using social media platforms to liveblog real-world events, so keep your eyes on the announcements for those opportunities.

Grading 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+ = 67-69
D = 63-66
D- = 60-62
F = 59 and below

Class Policies:

- 1. Deadlines:** All of the deadlines are strict in this course. But if, for any reason, you do think you will miss a deadline or exam, please discuss it with me at least 24 hours in advance. Under legitimate extenuating circumstances, such as a documented/known illness, family emergency or if you have some other situation you think may constitute a reason for an extended deadline, like a legal or military obligation, athletic participation or religious holiday, I may agree to let you schedule a make-up exam or turn in an assignment late. However, if I have not agreed to an extension or make-up exam before the deadlines, your assignment or exam grade will be a zero if not turned in on time. For the assessments to be completed on Canvas, please be mindful of technical difficulties and plan accordingly, as it is your responsibility to complete assessments by the deadlines. If you experience any technical difficulties, your first line of defense will be to contact the UF HelpDesk at (352) 392-HELP. If they cannot resolve the problem, then please contact me directly.
- 2. Discussion Demeanor:** I want this class to be fun and energetic with great discussions, but we will be covering sensitive topics and ones about which some students may have strong feelings. Therefore, I expect you to be courteous and respectful to your fellow classmates. Please be polite to others while both expressing opinions and responding to them. Racism, ableism, and misogyny will not be tolerated.
- 3. Academic Integrity:** University of Florida students live by an honor code that prohibits academic dishonesty such as (but not limited to) cheating, plagiarism, fabrication of sources or information from sources, reusing a paper from another class, writing a similar paper for two classes, drawing too heavily on another's work for your own and having someone else complete your work for you. If you're unsure of whether something constitutes a violation of academic integrity, ask me before turning in an assignment. Also, please refer to the University of Florida's guidelines regarding academic honesty at <http://www.dso.ufl.edu/sccr/process/studentconduct-honor-code/>. Ignorance is not an excuse.

An academic integrity violation will result in a failing grade for the assignment and possibly the entire course, and the instance will be reported to the university's office of Student Conduct and Conflict Resolution.

4. **Disability Assistance:** Students with disabilities who seek reasonable accommodations in the classroom or other aspects of performing their coursework must first register with the University of Florida's Disability Resource Center. The center will provide documentation, and then you must meet with me, so appropriate accommodations can be made. The center is in Reid Hall, and you can contact them by calling (352) 392-8565. For more information, visit <http://www.dso.ufl.edu/drc/>.
5. **Student Success and Seeking Help:** All of your instructors have high expectations of you, including myself. We are responsible for conveying those expectations to you. You are responsible for ensuring you meet your course obligations. Sometimes it will be draining and frustrating like it is in the communications field. But ultimately, it should also be enjoyable and purposeful. You are always encouraged to come to me both inside and outside of class with questions or concerns about this class and your assignments or the communications field in general.

Also, the UF Counseling and Wellness Center is a terrific, free resource for any student who could use help managing stress or coping with life. The center, at 3190 Radio Road on campus, is open for appointments and emergency walk-ins from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday. To make an appointment or receive afterhours assistance, call (352) 392-1575. For more information, visit <http://www.counseling.ufl.edu/cwc/>.

6. **Online Course Evaluation Process:** Just as I give feedback on your work throughout the semester, I would also like to get feedback from you on the quality of instruction in this course. Because of this, students are expected to complete online evaluations at <https://evaluations.ufl.edu>. Evaluations are typically open during the last two or three weeks of the semester, but students will be given specific times when they are open. Summary results of these assessments are available to students at <https://evaluations.ufl.edu/results>.
7. **Diversity:** The University of Florida's College of Journalism and Communications Department of Journalism embraces a commitment toward 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 journalism courses to help foster an understanding of the diversity of peoples and cultures and of the significance and impact of mass communications in a global society.

Course Schedule:

Module 1

Monday, January 11 – Sunday, January 17

Introduction

Assignment: post an introduction to yourself in the discussion section. Who are you? Where are you from? What is your major? Something you'd like to share about yourself. Make sure to include your *Twitter handle* (make one if you don't have one, for this course). We will be needing them. **DUE Tuesday, January 19**

Module 2

Tuesday, January 19 – Sunday, January 24

Media and American Politics: What are we doing here?

Politics is often portrayed as a game—sports imagery and metaphors indicate a superficial contest. Unlike other games, however, political ones have real world consequences: war or peace; high taxes or low; jobs or unemployment; health care or not. We discuss what constitutes “politics,” why it is important and how it affects daily lives; we will also look at the purpose of political reporting and what goes into good political reporting. Just how do political journalists do their job and what do they do? What are their goals, and whom do they serve? What are their typical biases and assumptions? How is this changing?

Assignment: Read *Iyengar, Chapter 2*

Read: On covering primaries: https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/03/21/media-you-are-doing-it-wrong-again/?utm_term=.e2d524a80609

Read James Klurfeld, “[Improving Media Capacity: Media Must Focus on Policy, Not Just Politics](#),” The Brookings Institution, 2015.

Read Brendan Nyhan, “[Get Off the Bus! Why Access-Based Campaign Coverage is a Dead End](#),” *Columbia Journalism Review*, 2013.

Read Jack Shafer, “[Presidential Campaigns, Sports Writing and the Fine Art of Pretending](#),” Reuters, 2012

DELIVERABLE: Choose a public social media update about Joe Biden’s swearing in as president (use Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, or Instagram). Link it in the discussion section along with 200 words (this is a STRICT word count, going over will cost points) on why you think it was posted, whether it was opinion or an objective statement, whether it leads to an article and by which publication, who posted it and why you think they posted it, how the audience members (commenters) responded and why you think they responded in that way. **DUE Monday, January 25**

Module 3

Monday, January 25 – Sunday, January 31

Media and the Three Branches of Government: How does it work?

Most political coverage consists of keeping watch over our various governmental branches and agencies, and alerting the public to decisions made about their welfare.

In the process of making laws, the members of Congress represent various interests within American society, giving them voice and attention in the national legislature. In recent years, many observers have noted the accelerating partisanship of the body and the gridlock associated. We look at the implications for political reporting and the reporter's role in covering the business of Congress and the President.

Assignment: Read *Iyengar Chapter 9*

Read Articles 1 through 3 of the [United States Constitution](#).

Read James Madison, Federalist No. 10, "[The Union as a Safeguard Against Domestic Faction and Insurrection](#)," November 23, 1787. *Note: The [Federalist Papers](#) were a series of essays written in 1788 by James Madison, Alexander Hamilton and John Jay during the debate over the Constitution's ratification.*

Read Alexander Hamilton or James Madison, Federalist No. 51, "[The Structure of the Government Must Furnish the Proper Checks and Balances Between the Different Departments](#)," February 8, 1788.

Read U.S. Constitution, [Amendments 1 through 10](#) (collectively known as the Bill of Rights) and [Amendment 14](#).

Module 4

Monday, February 1 – Sunday, February 7

Politics and the Internet: Interactivity and Social Media

Since 2000, the Internet has become an increasingly crucial tool for organizing, campaigning and communicating. We look at how the digital space is being used by campaigns and activists.

Assignment: Read *Iyengar, Chapter 5*

Read "[The 2016 Presidential Campaign – A News Event That's Hard to Miss](#)," Pew Research Center, 2016.

Read "[Twitter and the Campaign](#)," Pew Research Center, December 8, 2011.

Read Julia K. Woolley, Anthony M. Limperos, Mary Beth Oliver, "[The 2008 Presidential Election, 2.0: A Content Analysis of User-Generated Political Facebook Groups](#)," *Mass Communication and Society*, November 20, 2010.

Read Aaron Smith, "[The Internet and Campaign 2010](#)," Pew Research Center, March 17, 2011.

Read Keith Hampton, et al., "[Social Networking Sites and Our Lives](#)," Pew Research Center, June 16, 2011.

DELIVERABLE: Write a 1-3 page paper summarizing three of the talking points made during President Biden's first speech to the nation. Make note of the president's delivery and word choices. Who does it appear he is talking to? How does he interact with the audience? How does he uphold the Constitutional premises we learned about this week? Is he more positive or negative? What do you personally think about his message and tenor? Make sure to use quotes and examples from the speech. **DUE Monday, February 8 (UNLESS SPEECH HAS YET TO BE MADE)**

Module 5

Monday, February 8 – Sunday, February 14

Media, Elections and Debates: What are the rules?

Television is the most important force in our culture. How do political figures use it? How do debates form public opinion, or do they?

Assignment: Read *Iyengar, Chapter 6*

Read Gabriel S. Lenz, Chappell Lawson, "[Looking the Part: Television Leads Less Informed Citizens to Vote Based on Candidates' Appearance](#)," *American Journal of Political Science*, 2011.

DELIVERABLE: QUIZ 1, DUE MONDAY, FEBRUARY 15

Module 6

Monday, February 15 – Sunday, February 21

Media, Elections and Debates: Television versus social media

Assignment: Read *Iyengar, Chapter 3*

Watch event or read event TBD.

Participate in the discussion post on Canvas about TBD. 200 words in the original post and two comments on your classmates' posts. **DUE MONDAY, February 22**

Module 7

Monday, February 22 – Sunday, March 7 NOTICE THE LONGER MODULE

Op-eds, polemics and news coverage

LIVE LECTURE: TBD, WATCH ANNOUNCEMENTS FOR DETAILS. EXTRA CREDIT.

Assignment: Read NYT's [READERS' GUIDE](#)

Read NYT'S [The Blur Between Analysis and Opinion](#)

Read [A DEFENCE OF POLEMICS](#)

DELIVERABLE: Choose a polemical article or op-ed AND a straight news piece on an event to be announced and compare and contrast the coverage in a 2-4 page paper. What makes one opinion and the other straight coverage? How does the tone vary between the pieces? What are the different messages given to audience members? What multimedia (links, pictures, embeds, videos, etc.) were used to enhance the experience and persuade? Make sure to use examples and quotes from the two texts. **DUE March 8.**

Module 8

Monday, March 8 – Sunday, March 14

Media and Public Opinion: More polling required?

We'll discuss use and abuse of polling, drafting questions, interpreting data and the pitfalls of writing about them.

Assignment: Read *Iyengar, Chapter 8*

Read David A. Graham, "[Political Polling's Unfavorables Are on the Rise](#)," *The Atlantic*, 2015.

Read Nate Silver, "[How FiveThirtyEight Calculates Pollster Ratings](#)," FiveThirtyEight, 2014.

Read Sheldon R. Gawiser, G. Evans Witt, "[20 Questions a Journalist Should Ask about Poll Results](#)," National Council on Public Polls.

EXTRA CREDIT: Live event on TBD (see details in Canvas announcements) **If you do this, *post your Twitter Handle link in that announcement*, so I can view and grade your effort. This is entirely freeform. Tweet observations you're making in real time, statements and/or opinions about it, critiques of the news station airing the event or the pundits, crowd reactions, links to articles coming out about it, memes or gifs. Anything you want. Tweet as a member of the active audience. As a typical, everyday observer. (Doing five tweets will add .5 points to your final grade. Doing 10 will add 1 full point.) No retweets. Original content. **WEEK SUBJECT TO CHANGE BASED ON POLITICAL EVENTS.**

Module 9

Monday, March 15 – Sunday, March 21

Media Pundits and Ethics in Politics: Blurring the Lines

We examine the power and limitations of the media to shape public opinion and the tendency of the media to overplay scandal and sensationalize news. We look at the tactics that do and don't work to shape how Americans view issues and those of politicians; we'll discuss the difficulty of countering spin and misinformation once narratives are established, facts have been asserted and assumptions have become hardened.

Assignment: Read *Iyengar, Chapter 4*

Participate in the discussion post on Canvas about TBD. 200 words in the original post and two comments on your classmates' posts. **DUE MONDAY, March 22, COMMENTS WEDNESDAY, March 24.**

Watch coverage of a governmental news story TBD on two different networks, marking the different tone of coverage.

Module 10

Monday, March 22 – Sunday, March 28

Selling and Spinning: Political Advertising

We'll study the different techniques of political advertising, and examine the television political ad and its changing importance as new media takes over.

Assignment: Read *Iyengar Chapter 7*

DELIVERABLE: QUIZ 2, MONDAY, March 29

Module 11

Monday, March 29 – Sunday, Apr. 18 NOTICE THE LONGER MODULE

Politics and Money: Where does the buck stop and why?

Interest groups have an organized membership and pursue policy goals that stem from members' shared interests. But the nation's various interests are not equally well organized. We look at their influence and the challenges of covering their role in the democratic process. Lobbying is the effort by groups to influence public policy through contact with public officials. We'll look at both "inside" and "outside" lobbying — and the strategies employed, from public pressure to direct donations to politicians.

Assignment: Read Anthony Corrado, "[Financing Presidential Nomination in the Post-Public Funding Era](#)," *The Making of the Presidential Candidates 2012*.

Read R. Sam Garrett, "[State of Campaign Finance Policy: Recent Developments and Issues for Congress](#)," Congressional Research Service, July 18, 2011.

Read "[Buying of the President 2016](#)," Center for Public Integrity, 2016.

Read Kenneth T. Andrews, Neal Caren, "[Making the News: Movement Organizations, Media Attention, and the Public Agenda](#)," *American Sociological Review*, 2010.

Read Lee Drutman, "[How Corporate Lobbyists Conquered American Democracy](#)," *The Atlantic*, 2015.

Read Robert G. Kaiser, "[Citizen K Street: How Lobbying Became Washington's Biggest Business](#)," *Washington Post*, March 4, 2007.

Read Christopher Witko, "[Influence of Corporate Campaign Contributions in Government Contract Award Decisions](#)," *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, March 18, 2011.

EXTRA CREDIT: Live event on TBD (see details in Canvas announcements) **If you do this, *post your Twitter Handle link in that announcement*, so I can view and grade your effort. This is entirely freeform. Tweet observations you're making in real time, statements and/or opinions about it, critiques of the news station airing the event or the pundits, crowd reactions, links to articles coming out about it, memes or gifs. Anything you want. Tweet as a member of the active audience. As a typical, everyday observer. (Doing five tweets will add .5 points to your final grade. Doing 10 will add 1 full point.) No retweets. Original content. **WEEK SUBJECT TO CHANGE BASED ON POLITICAL EVENTS.**

DELIVERABLE: Watch two of the links provided of news coverage of an event to be announced. Write a thorough discussion post comparing and contrasting the coverage. Did you find the experience the same or different on each news channel? Expand on the similarities and differences. Point out opinions and ethical quandaries you notice. What multimedia was used by each station? How was the coverage meant to frame the message and how does the frame affect the audience? Comment on two classmates' comparison discussions. *This is a longer and more in-depth discussion post than the previous two. Think of it as a paper, in discussion form.* **DUE MONDAY, Apr. 19 COMMENTS DUE WEDNESDAY, Apr. 21.**

Module 12

Monday, April 19 – Wednesday, Apr. 21

The future of political communication: savvy or sketchy?

We'll talk about where we've been and where we are going, and how we can maintain ethical coverage of politics in the coming years.

Assignment: Read *Iyengar, Chapter 11*

DELIVERABLE: Compare five of President Trump's tweets to five of President Obama's (SUBJECT TO CHANGE, PENDING ELECTION) tweets. Analyze the difference in tone, tenor, word choice, and professional appeal versus populist appeal. Compare and contrast the content. **DUE Friday, Apr. 23**

Final Week

Final Exam Review

We'll go over important information from throughout the semester, highlighting bits that will be important for the exam.

Final Exam: DUE Monday, April 26