

Media and Politics

POLI 394-01 // Fall 2015 // Carnegie 208 // TTh 3:00-4:30 PM
Professor Philip Chen // pchen@macalester.edu // Carnegie 205
Office Hours: Tuesday 10:00 AM-11:00 AM, Thursday 1:30-2:30 PM

Course Description

Through the late 1980s, millions of Americans turned their attention to their television sets every evening to watch the national nightly news. Each family preferred one network over the others, but the options were surprisingly limited: CBS, NBC, or ABC. Contrast this with today's ever-expanding cable news options, not to mention the easy accessibility of online newspapers from around the world and countless blogs and news aggregators, and it's no wonder that the role of the media in American politics is changing dramatically.

This course examines the role of the media as the "fourth branch" of government. The class is focused around several questions. First, what role does the media play in American politics and is this role appropriate? Second, what are the rules, norms, and structures that govern the media? Third, how do citizens receive and respond to the media's coverage of politics? And finally, how has the internet changed the way we interact with the media? In our search for answers to these questions, we will keep an eye towards differences between the current media environment and the one 30 years ago. The class ends with a discussion of the increasingly blurred line between news, entertainment, and comedy.

Course Objectives

By the end of this semester, you should be able to:

- Understand the role the media should play in American politics and evaluate whether they fulfill their civic duty
- Explain how voters select and interpret news and assess the competency of voters
- Discuss the influence of new media (such as political comedy) and assess whether these new sources help or hurt American politics

In addition to these specific learning goals, there are several skills that I believe are especially important for this course. By the end of the semester, you should have:

- Learned the fundamental principles and theories on the American media
- Developed writing and oral presentation skills
- Learned to analyze and critically evaluate different arguments and theories

Office Hours and Help

I strive to make this course understandable and accessible for all students. If you have any questions about the content or structure of the course or about specific assignments, please do not hesitate to contact me. I am always happy to help if you come to me before assignments or

exams are due. Please do not wait to ask for help until after the due date, come talk to me before if you are struggling.

Required Texts

This class will feature mostly academic books with a few articles sprinkled in. The required books are listed below and are available at the college bookstore or from Amazon or other places online. Readings are available on the class Moodle site at:

<https://moodle.macalester.edu/course/view.php?id=492>

Bennett, W. Lance, Regina Lawrence, and Steven Livingston. 2007. *When The Press Fails*.

Graber, Doris and Johanna Dunaway. 2015. *Mass Media and American Politics Ninth Edition*.

Lichter, S. Robert, Jody Baumgartner, and Jonathan Morris. 2015. *Politics is a Joke!*

Course Structure

The class will be a mixture of class discussion and small group work, with very little lecture. As an upper level course, my preference is to run the course essentially as a discussion seminar. You should come to class having read the required readings and prepared to debate and discuss what you read. Response essays and discussion questions will help guide the class onto topics students found interesting.

Grading

Grades will be based on four different components, described in more detail below. 45% of your grade will come from a mini-capstone project (1) described below. In addition, there will be two response papers (2) worth 10% of your grade each, for a total of 20%. Reading quizzes (3) will make up 25% and the final 10% is for class participation (4).

Response Paper #1	10%
Response Paper #2	10%
Reading Quizzes	25%
Mini-Capstone	
Project Idea	Required (No Grade)
Prospectus	Required (No Grade)
First Draft	Required (No Grade)
Final Paper	35%
Poster Presentation	10%
Class Participation	10%

Mini-Capstone (45%) – This component of your grade can take many different forms. As a 300-level course, you are expected to complete a 15-20 page paper that addresses a topic dealing

with media and politics. Both the subject matter and form of research project are open to your choosing.

That is to say, you should make this project into something that is useful to you. The most basic description of this project is “an in-depth research study that attempts to resolve a puzzle or question in the literature.” That is not to say, however, that you must use advanced statistical analyses or collect vast amounts of data. If this type of project is of interest to you, by all means pursue it, but how you choose to approach this project should match your interests and competencies.

This project mimics (in a shorter form) the type of project that you will be required to complete as part of your senior capstone. I’ll hand out more information during the course, but you will have great freedom to select the type of project you want to complete. If you are still searching for a senior capstone experience, I encourage you to use this project as a stepping stone or building block, if you so desire.

As part of this project, you will be required to construct an academic poster that summarizes and presents the work you did during the class. We will hold a mini-academic conference during our final exam period where each of you will have a chance to display your posters and discuss your paper with each other.

You’ll notice a number of components marked “Required (No Grade).” These pieces of the research project can be thought of as low stakes requirements. In order to receive a final grade on your project, you must turn in all of these components, even though your performance on these assignments does not factor into your grade. Failing to turn in these assignments will lower your final project grade by 2/3 of a letter grade for each missing piece. For instance, if your grade for the entire project was a B+, but you failed to turn in your project idea, your final grade for the project would be a B-. If you were missing both the project idea and prospectus, your B+ would become a C.

Reading Quizzes (25%) – I really don’t like midterm and final exams, and I think it’s important for my students to understand why. I want my students to understand concepts in the readings as well as how the readings relate to each other. The best way to accomplish this goal is through discussion with your classmates. Exams, however, are high stakes affairs that too often shift the focus to memorization of definitions and concepts, leaving precious little time to actually integrate the readings.

So rather than administer exams, I want to focus discussions on the readings for each week. While I wish I could simply give a daily quiz that says “Did you do the readings?” this type of quiz seems unlikely to produce very many “No” answers. To get around this, each Thursday will feature a short reading quiz. These will feature some multiple choice or short answer questions, as well as one or two longer (2-3 paragraph) questions that ask for some synthesis and analysis of the readings. There are 10 Thursdays during the semester when we will meet and have done some readings over the prior week.

I recognize that sometimes things come up and readings do not get done. Rather than penalize one or two poor performances, out of the 10 readings quizzes, I will only count 8 of them. Your lowest 2 quiz grades will be thrown out. Each of the remaining 8 quizzes are worth 3% of your grade, and the highest grade will be worth 4% of your grade, for a total of 25% of your final grade.

Missed reading quizzes cannot be made up after the fact. If you have a prior excused absence, you can arrange an alternate time to take the quiz, provided you talk to me before class.

Response Essays and Discussion Questions (20%) – In order to help you understand the course materials and to provide me with feedback on what parts of the readings are unclear, each student will be required to turn in a response essay and discussion questions for two different class periods. You will have an opportunity to pick the class sessions to write about.

Response essays and discussion questions are due to me **24 hours before** the class we are to discuss the readings in. For example, if you signed up for the readings on February 17, your questions and essay would be due to me by Monday, February 16.

Each paper should include a brief summary of the arguments in the reading(s) and a critique of the argument, evidence, and conclusions. Papers should be 3-4 pages long, double spaced. I will distribute a separate handout with more information about this assignment.

Participation (10%) – The participation portion of your grade is based off of your regular attendance in class, completion of in-class activities, and participation in class discussions.

Grade Scale:

A	93-100	C	73-76
A-	90-92	C-	70-72
B+	87-89	D+	67-69
B	83-86	D	63-66
B-	80-82	D-	60-62
C+	77-79	F	<60

Course Schedule:
Days with reading quizzes marked with (RQ)

Week One

September 3 Introduction
 No Readings

Week Two

September 8 Why do we care?
 Iyengar Ch. 1*
 Graber Ch. 1

September 10 Informing Citizens (RQ)
 Thompson*
 Carson*

Week Three

September 15 Watchdog
 Bernstein/Woodward*
 Greenwald*
 Beckett/Ball*

September 17 Rules of the Game (RQ)
 Graber Ch. 2 & 3

Week Four

September 22 Rules of the Game
 Graber Ch. 4
 Bennett (1997)*

September 24 Objectivity (RQ)
 Niven (2001)*
 Cunningham (2003)*
 Druckman (2005)*

Week Five

- September 29 Elected Officials
 Graber Ch. 7
- October 1 Courts (RQ)
 Graber pgs. 211-220
 Slotnick Ch. 4 & 7*

Week Six

- October 6 Letting Us Down
 Bennett Introduction, Ch. 1 & 2
 Project Idea DUE
- October 8 Letting Us Down (RQ)
 Bennett Ch. 3 & 4

Week Seven

- October 13 Letting Us Down
 Bennett Ch. 5 & 6
- October 15 Paper Workshop (RQ)
 No Readings
 Prospectus DUE

Week Eight

- October 20 Media Effects
 Iyengar Ch. 8*
 Carlin/Winfrey (2009)*
- October 22 NO CLASS – FALL BREAK

Week Nine

- October 27 Media Effects
 Graber Ch. 6
- October 29 Media Effects (RQ)
 Gilens Ch. 5 & 6*

Week Ten

November 3 “New” Problems
 Stroud Ch. 1 & 3*
 Sears (1967)*

November 5 “New” Problems (RQ)
 Prior Ch. 4*

Week Eleven

November 10 “New” Problems
 Christakis Ch. 7*
 Sinclair Ch. 4 & 6*

November 12 Political Comedy (RQ)
 Lichter Ch. 1 & 2
 First Half of Paper DUE

Week Twelve

November 17 Political Comedy
 Lichter Ch. 3 & 4

November 19 Political Comedy (RQ)
 Lichter Ch. 5 & 6
 Second Half of Paper DUE

Week Thirteen

November 24 Political Comedy
 Lichter Ch. 7 & 8

November 26 NO CLASS – THANKSGIVING

Week Fourteen

December 1 NO CLASS – PAPER CONFERENCES
 Revised Full Draft DUE

December 3 NO CLASS – PAPER CONFERENCES

Week Fifteen

December 8	Peer Review No Readings
December 10	Poster Conference Preparation No Readings
December 15	Final Exam Period (1:30-3:30 PM) Poster Presentations DUE

Course Policies

Attendance: Regular attendance is vital for your success in this course. However, I understand that sometimes circumstances prevent you from coming to class. Missing one class will not destroy your participation grade; missing several will.

Late Work: Assignments are due at the **beginning of class** on the day they are listed as due. Any assignments turned in after this time will be subject to the following late penalty: For each day late, I will deduct a third of a letter grade. So if an assignment is due Friday and you turn it in after class on Friday, a B+ paper would receive a B. If you turn it in Saturday, it would be a B-, Monday would be a C.

Assignments should be turned in using the Moodle system unless otherwise noted.

Grade Changes: Any appeals of a grade must be made at least **24 hours after** I hand back an assignment or exam. If you would like to appeal the grade you got on an assignment, prior to meeting with me you must submit a written statement detailing why you think your grade should be changed. I will then meet with you to discuss your statement and why you think your grade should be changed.

If I make a mistake in totaling your grade for an exam or assignment (e.g. I added the point sum incorrectly) then you do not need to write a statement or wait 24 hours. Just talk to me after class or during office hours and I'll double check and fix the mistake.

Contacting the Professor: I encourage you to contact me with questions and concerns about the course, readings, and assignments. In general, quick clarification questions can be handled over email. More in-depth questions are best discussed in person during my office hours, where we can have an actual conversation. If my office hours conflict with your class or work schedule, I am available by appointment as well.

Please allow a full 24 hours for an email response. Often, my responses will be quicker than this, but do not send multiple emails about the same request until 24 hours have passed. I cannot guarantee that if you email me right before an assignment or exam that I will be able to answer your question in time, so please make sure and email me early if you have a time-specific question.

Extra Credit and Retakes: There is no scheduled extra credit in this course. You may not retake quizzes. There may be opportunities for extra credit, however.