
WASHINGTON MEDIA: FAKE NEWS, SOCIAL MEDIA, AND THE RESHAPING OF AMERICAN POLITICS

University of California Washington Center

Instructor: Marc Sandalow

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When in person: First Floor Multipurpose Room

SYLLABUS

Overview

Do Twitter or Facebook threaten democracy? What is the difference between fake news, propaganda, and journalism? Should the media report what people *want* to know or *ought* to know? Does objectivity exist?

This seminar examines the extraordinary changes to modern political communication and journalism and the consequences for American democracy. The never-ending-always-in-crisis-breaking-news backdrop of Washington, D.C. and the aftermath of the Trump presidency are great backdrops to assess the news media's mission, goals, and biases. We will look at the news media's incentive to fuel controversy, at politicians' efforts to manipulate – or lie to -- the media, and at how the digital revolution has fundamentally restructured the future of political communication. Classes will combine lecture, discussion, and exercises with an emphasis on current developments. Readings include scholarly articles, a book of your choice, and a steady diet of news and journal pieces to keep up with political developments.

Students will complete a major research project on a newsworthy topic which will be written in journalistic form in addition to shorter writing and speaking assignments. All assignments are aimed at sharpening research and writing skills, with a focus on identifying target audiences and communicating with clarity. Assignments may be adjusted to meet individual campus requirements.

Course Goals

Students will emerge with a sophisticated understanding of the news media's place in American democracy, better appreciate media bias, be able to distinguish between competing forces of education and entertainment, and place current developments in perspective.

Additionally, students will be able to identify techniques used to frame and manipulate the news, distinguish between credible and non-credible sources, understand the power and limitations of social media, and evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of new vs. old media. Students will be well versed in contemporary Washington politics and write with greater clarity.

The course will also provide UCDC students a place to share internship experiences, fostering a sense of community and support for experiential learning. And perhaps most importantly, students should emerge enthused by -- and committed to -- following policy and politics.

Class Hours

The course meets every Wednesday from 2 p.m. to 5 p.m. **It is important that your internship supervisor understands that Wednesday is a class day.** Please inform me by e-mail prior to class if you cannot attend.

Instructor

Marc Sandalow (msandalow@ucdc.edu) is Associate Academic Director of the University of California's Washington Program. He is the author of three books, including "Madam Speaker," a biography of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. He has been a journalist for over 30 years, including 21 years at the *San Francisco Chronicle* where he covered California politics and spent more than a decade as the paper's Washington Bureau Chief. He is currently a political analyst for KCBS radio in San Francisco and Hearst Television and writes a regular column for the *San Francisco Examiner*. He has been with the University of California's Washington Program since 2008.

Office Hours

I am available for both in-person and Zoom meetings most days. Late morning and late afternoon are usually best. You can schedule an appointment at the following link, which is also at the bottom of my e-mail signature. [Book an appointment](#)

You are also welcome to stop by my office without an appointment any day after 11 a.m. Feel free to knock if the door is closed or just cracked open.

Requirements

Attendance and participation. Lively discussions on media coverage of political developments are an important element of the course. Students are expected to be versed in political news and to actively participate in discussions. Informed participation means daily reading of multiple news sources, including the *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *Politico*. The more closely students keep up on current events, the more they will get out of the course and their time in the Washington Program. In addition to traditional news outlets, web sites such as www.realclerapolitics.com, www.talkingpointsmemo.com, www.huffpost.com, and www.breitbart.com are good ways to supplement your reading. A list of recommended political web sites will be posted.

Students are encouraged to share examples of spectacular or wretched journalism or propaganda they encounter during the week. Factual errors, dreadful or artful writing, and outrageous hyperbole all qualify.

Students are expected to attend and participate in class discussions each week. Speaking up, while encouraged, is not the only way to contribute. Other contributions might include active participation in group activities, attending office hours, sending the professor interesting items to discuss that week, or anything to demonstrate your engagement.

I will call on students who do not voluntarily participate. Attendance is mandatory.

If a conflict or health issue arises, please let me know, if possible, prior to class.

Readings In addition to rabid reading of newspapers or on-line news sites, students will select a book which pertains to Washington, politics or the news media for group discussion and the book review assignment.

Assigned readings will be posted in the “module” section of the course Canvas page and should be completed before class each week. I will distribute a list of readings each week with an explanation of what I expect you to glean from the material for the following class.

Finally, the following books contain multiple chapters to be assigned. It is not necessary to purchase the books, as selected readings will be placed in Canvas or on-line.

1. *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect* (3rd edition, 2014)'' Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, Three Rivers Press
2. *Key Readings in Journalism*, Elliot King and Jane Chapman, Routledge 2012
3. *On Bullshit*, Harry Frankfurt, Princeton University Press, 2005
4. *On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction*, William Zinsser, Harper Perennial, 2016

Assignments

E-mail all written assignments to msandalow@ucdc.edu or marc.sandalow@ucdc.edu (they are the same.) Include your name and the assignment name in the subject line. If possible, attach as a WORD document (no PDFs) Hard copies are not necessary.

--Short assignments (written and oral) Students must complete regular assignments aimed at improving writing skills and political communication. Students will also take part in a television exercise in which they will answer questions before camera and lights to appreciate the fun, fear and limitations of punditry. (~5 pages)

--Talking Points Memo: Students will write a political memo advising either their internship boss or outlining a strategy for a press interview. (~2 pages)

--Book Review – Students will select a book relevant to the topics covered in the course and write a short review for a general audience. (~2 pages)

--Pro-Con Assignment – Students will select a policy matter related to their final paper and analyze it in four distinct sections: An explanation of the issue and policy; a list of pro-arguments; a list of con-arguments; and an explanation as to which side is more substantive. (~4pages)

-Videos – Students will submit three videos during the term. The first will be a 40-second description of your final project. The second will be a 20-second summary, and the third will be 10 seconds.

--Final project. Students will write an in-depth news story on a political or policy topic of their choice to be completed by the end of the term. Topics, reporting and writing approach will be discussed with the instructor, and a draft will be due in time to revise it before the final deadline. (~8-12 pages including drafts)

I will distribute detailed prompts for each assignment along with an explanation of the assignment’s purpose.

Class Etiquette

I encourage open and lively discussion each week That means challenging conventional wisdom and at times raising contrarian ideas to promote discussion and thought. I hope class can be regarded as a safe space for students to voice opinions, play devil's advocate and challenge each other -- and the professor -- without fear of judgment. Treat your classmates with respect and try not to take challenges to your ideas as personal criticism.

Do not hesitate to bring to my attention anything I say that you find to foolish, overly provocative or offensive, let alone typos or mistakes in written material. Student input is invaluable to my perpetually evolving course.

Using electronic devices during class is permitted for class purposes only (group assignments, fact-checking the professor, monitoring current events.) I am far less tolerant of social media browsing or posts during class.

To comply with UCDC and District of Columbia rules, all students must remain masked during class. We will take regular breaks to allow students time to return to their apartments, remove their masks and check their phones.

Grading:

1. Final project 35%
2. Class participation/contribution 15%
3. Talking points memo 15%
4. Book Review 15%
5. Pro-Con Assignment 10%
6. Short assignments 10%

The typical grade in my class is between an A- and B+. A's are reserved for exceptional work and grades below a B- are quite rare for students who complete all the assignments. I will sometimes provide two grades on an assignment, for example A-/B+, which means that the grade is in between the two.

The best way to ensure a strong grade is to participate in discussions and work hard on the rough draft of your final paper. I will provide more feedback on the rough draft than on any other assignment. The more work you put into the rough draft, the more my feedback will help you produce an excellent final product.

Content, research and clarity are the most important qualities, of all writing assignments, though careful writing, grammar, a lack of typos also count.

Late assignments: Late papers will be penalized one-third of a grade per day. It is far better to turn an assignment in late than not at all.

Plagiarism

All work must be original. Any words taken directly from another source should be placed inside quotation marks and attributed. Disregard for this policy will result in severe grading penalties and possible failure. It is the responsibility of the writer to make sure all submissions contain no sentences or phrases lifted verbatim from another source.

University policies

Sexual Harassment: The University of California is committed to creating and maintaining a community where all individuals who participate in University programs and activities can work and learn together in an atmosphere free of harassment, exploitation, or intimidation. Every member of the community should be aware that the University prohibits sexual harassment and sexual violence, and that such behavior violates both law and University policy. The University will respond promptly and effectively to reports of sexual harassment and sexual violence, and will take appropriate action to prevent, to correct, and when necessary, to discipline behavior that violates this policy on Sexual Harassment and Sexual Violence.

Students who wish to speak confidentially about an incident of sexual misconduct should contact UCDC's Counseling Services at UCDCCounseling@gmail.com. To report sexual misconduct or ask questions about UCDC policies and procedures regarding sexual misconduct, contact the UCDC Title IX administrator, Debbie Deas (202) 872-8937 or debbie.deas@ucdc.edu. Because the University of California is legally obligated to investigate reports of sexual misconduct, the confidentiality of reported misconduct cannot be guaranteed.

Disabilities: In compliance with the Federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended (Public Law 93- 112) and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (Public Law 101-336), UC policy prohibits unlawful discrimination on the basis of disability in its programs, services, and activities. If you require accommodation for class, please let me know at our first meeting (if not earlier) so the necessary arrangements can be made.

Policy on Academic Misconduct: UCDC has a zero-tolerance policy for cheating, plagiarism, and any other form of dishonesty. Students should refer to their home campus Student Code of Conduct for the regulations that apply to them. The burden is on each student to know what behaviors constitute cheating and plagiarism. Ignorance of these behaviors is not an adequate defense.

WEEK-BY-WEEK SCHEDULE

Each class will begin with a discussion of your internships and the week's news and media coverage, followed by a discussion/lecture on a topic in political communication or media and conclude with a workshop on a writing or speaking skill aimed at upcoming assignments.

1. Class 1: Political Journalism: News or Entertainment?

Introductions, course overview and survey

TOPIC: Political Journalism: News or Entertainment

WORKSHOP: Opening sentences and leads

No readings assigned for the first class

2. Class 2: Media Bias: Left, Right or Shallow?

TOPIC: The subjectivity of objectivity and the media's devotion to conflict.

WORKSHOP: How to approach, scope out, research, and frame your final project.

READINGS:

1. *How to Identify Media Bias*, Citizens Coalition for Responsible Media
2. *How to Spot 11 Types of Media Bias*, All Sides, September 2019
3. Donald Trump Changed *The New York Times*. Is it Forever? Peter J. Boyer, Esquire Magazine March 19, 2019
4. *Journalism: The Democratic Craft*, G. Stuart Adam, Roy Peter Clark, Oxford University Press 2006 Chapter 8 (pg. 57-72)
5. *A Slobbering Love Affair*, Bernard Goldberg, Regnery Publishing, 2009

6. *Re-thinking Objectivity*, Brent Cunningham, Columbia Journalism Review, July/August 2003
7. *The Craft of Research, Chapter three: From Topics to Questions*, Booth, Colomb and Williams, University of Chicago Press 2008

Assignment due: Leads due Wednesday by 12 p.m. (noon)

3. Class 3: Sound Bite Democracy: Television's Influence on Politics and Governing

TOPIC: TV's contribution to political cynicism.

WORKSHOP: Speaking concisely with clarity

READINGS:

1. *A Force That Has Changed the Political Scene*, Senator John Kennedy 1957
2. *The Incredible shrinking sound bite*, Craig Fehrman, *Boston Globe* 2011
3. *Entire State Before the Cameras*, Marc Sandalow, *San Francisco Chronicle*, 2000
Can Live TV Become Journalism Again, Mark Lukasiewicz, *Columbia Journalism Review*, April 2020

Assignment due: Budget line for final project no later than Tuesday, April 5 at 2 p.m. (noon)

4. Class 4: Propaganda: How politicians manipulate the press

TOPIC: Propaganda: Truth or lies?

WORKSHOP: Group meetings on final project

READINGS:

1. *Politics and the English Language*, George Orwell, *Horizon* 1945
2. *Trump and the Media, Chapter 6*, Michael Schudson, Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2018
3. *Hardball: How Politics is Played, Told by One Who Knows the Game;* (chapter 7: The Press is the Enemy) Chris Matthews, Simon & Schuster, 1999
4. *Mikes, Cameras, Lunacy*, Marc Sandalow, *San Francisco Chronicle*, 1996

Assignment due: 40 second video describing final project by Wednesday, April 12 at 11:59 p.m.

5. Class 5: Social Media and the Internet: Saving Grace or Death Knell for Journalism

TOPIC It's a Mad, Mad, World

WORKSHOP: Completing a rough draft on deadline

READINGS:

1. *The End of the Gutenberg Era*, Jason Epstein, Johns Hopkins University Press
2. *Social Media are Ruining Political Discourse*, Jay David Bolter, *The Atlantic*, May 2019
3. *Twitter's Influence on News Judgment: An Experiment Among Journalists*, Shannon McGregor, Logan Molyneux, 2018
4. *The Age of Twitter: Donald J. Trump and the politics of debasement*, Brian Ott, *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 2017

Assignment due: Talking Points Memo by Wednesday, 11:59 p.m.

6. Class 6: Punditry in-class

READINGS:

1. *The State of the News Media*, Pew Research Center, Summer, 2021
2. *On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction*, William Zinsser, Harper

Assignments due:

- **40 second video describing final project due by Wednesday, April 27 by 11:59 p.m.**
- **Final project rough draft (early deadline -- you may submit a rough draft anytime between April 27 and May 4)**

7. Class 7: Fake News, Bullshit, and Reality TV

TOPIC: What does the mainstream media miss?

WORKSHOP: Writing with clarity

READINGS:

1. *On Bullshit*, Harry Frankfurt, Princeton University Press, 2005
2. *Rush Limbaugh: The Man Who Ate the GOP*, Michael Wolff, *Vanity Fair* March 2009
3. Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election, Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow, *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Spring 2017
4. *The Boys on the Bus*, Timothy Crouse, Random House, 1972 (3-17)
5. *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail*, Hunter Thompson, Straight Arrow Press 1972 (29-49)
6. What the Mainstream Media Can Learn from Jon Stewart, Rachel Smokin, *American Journalism Review* June/July 2007

Assignment due: Final project rough draft final deadline

8. **Class 8: The First Amendment and other Obstacles to Regulating Political Communication:**

TOPIC: Can fake news be controlled in a free society?

WORKSHOP: Stupid grammar rules up with which we must put

READINGS:

The Future of Journalism in a Networked Society, Mikael Tomwell, *Ericsson Report*, 2020

The Limits of Free Speech in Social Media, Brent Pinkus, *Accessible Law*, April 2021

A primer on Section 230, Brookings Institution Publications, June 2020

Section 230 critics are forgetting about the First Amendment, Mathew Ingram, *Columbia Journalism Review*, July 29, 2021

MAY 19 NO CLASS

9. **Class 9: Ethics and the Media Bubble**

TOPIC: What does the mainstream media miss?

WORKSHOP: Editing yourself

READINGS:

3. *The News Media Bubble*, Samuel Ebersole, *Media Matters*, April 2017

4. *Stranger: The Challenge of a Latino Immigrant in the Trump Era*, Jorge Ramos Vintage Books, 2018 Chapter 3 "Get Out of My Country."

Assignment due: Book review due Wednesday by 11:59 p.m.

10. **Class 10: Enemy of the American People?**

Lunch at the National Press Club (if open!)

TOPIC: The Future of News

WORKSHOP: Final edits

READINGS:

1. *Media Failures in the Age of Trump*, Victor Pickard, *The Political Economy of Communication*, 2016

2. *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect (3rd edition, 2014)* Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, Three Rivers Press (excerpts to be distributed)

3. *The Reconstruction of American Journalism*, Leonard Downie, Jr., Michael Schudson, *Columbia Journalism Review*, Oct. 2009

Assignment due: FINAL PROJECT by Wednesday 11:59 p.m.