



GOVT 412 Politics and the Media

Spring 2020 | M/W 10:30-11:45am | Krug Hall 253

A. Trevor Thrall

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Student Hours: M/W 12:00-2:00pm or by appointment.

Course Overview

Like it or not, the media sits at the heart of democratic politics. Ancient political philosophers and America's Founders alike believed that a free press was essential for a healthy public debate and effective policy. Today, however, it is clear that faith in the press is in decline even as the marketplace of ideas comes under attack from every direction. Many are deeply suspicious of the media's ability to faithfully convey truth, and worry about its outsized influence on society.

With this tension between theory and practice as a backdrop, the broad objective of this course is to understand the modern critiques of the media and to assess how well journalism lives up to its idealized role, especially during the 2020 presidential election. This course will cover many of the most contentious issues of recent years: the tension between education and infotainment, partisan news, "fake" content and "alternate facts," and the media as a tool of disinformation and manipulation.

Learning Objectives

In this course you will develop:

1. Knowledge of how political news and information are produced and disseminated
2. Knowledge of how news and information affect public opinion and political behavior
3. Knowledge of the major debates about the impact of the media on the quality of the American political system
4. The ability to use content analysis for political communication research

Course Materials

All of the required readings, videos, etc., are available on the course Blackboard site, which should show up as “Politics and Media” on your Courses list in Blackboard.

Assessment

- Attendance and Participation 10%
- Hot takes discussion posts 10%
- Campaign 2020 Project 40%
- Midterm 20%
- Final Exam 20%

I use the following non-curved grading system:

98-100	A+	87-89:	B+	77-79:	C+	67-69:	D+	<60:	F
94-97	A	84-86:	B	74-76:	C	64-66:	D		
90-93	A-	80-83:	B-	70-73:	C-	60-63:	D-		

Note: There are no opportunities for earning extra credit in this course. If you know you have to miss an exam you must notify me at least two days prior to the exam. Make up exams will happen at my discretion and are granted only in extraordinary circumstances, such as a verified illness or family emergency (be prepared to provide documentation).

Attendance and Participation

This will be a pretty small class, which is great because it will let me get to know everyone by name and give everyone a chance to contribute a lot to our discussions.

Online Discussion (“Hot Takes”)

This is Washington, D.C., folks; everyone needs to be ready with a hot take! Roughly each week I will post a provocation on the discussion board – usually in the form of a link to something and a related question – and you will post a sizzling response.

Campaign 2020 Project

The project folder on Blackboard will have the details, but in short, we will be collaborating on a research project in which each student will be responsible for tracking campaign news and candidate actions throughout the term and then writing a final report.

Midterm and Final Exam

Exams will feature essay questions based on both the readings and the lectures.

Format and Protocol

We will start each session with a quick round up of relevant news and events. I expect students to monitor at least one news media site throughout the term for politics and

media related issues so that we can discuss and dissect them in class as part of our broader exploration of the course concepts.

We will also have weekly hot takes discussions. Hot takes will require students to engage some news or other content before class and then respond with their “hot take” on the discussion board. We will then discuss your hot takes in class. These discussions will be great preparation for blogging, bloviating, and generally annoying people you know. It’s great preparation for a career in the D.C. area.

After we get warmed up I will typically provide some sort of lecture. I will ask lots of questions and I will expect lots of discussion. Students should feel free to ask questions or make a comment at any point if anything is unclear or they are suddenly moved by an important insight or question.

Course Schedule

Section I: Frameworks and Debates

Jan 22 Welcome and Course Overview

- No readings yet!

Jan 27 The Marketplace of Ideas

- Ingber, “The Marketplace of Ideas,” pp. 1-15 (15)
- Mill, *On Liberty*, Ch. 2 (20)
- [Class Project > Website Assignment Handed Out](#)

Jan 29 The Marketplace of Values

- Galef, TED Talk, “[Why you think you’re right, even if you’re wrong](#),” (12 min)
- Ingber, “The Marketplace of Ideas,” pp. 16-49 (33)

Feb 3 The Market Under Fire

- Rand Corporation, *Truth Decay*, pp. ix-xx and Chapter 2 (40)
- [Class Project > Website Assignment Due by Class Today](#)

Section II: Making News, Information Flow, & Information Quality in the MOI

Feb 5 Class Project Introduction: Monitoring 2020 Election Coverage

- FiveThirtyEight, “[What Issues Should the 2020 Democratic Candidates Be Talking About?](#)” (5)

- Google Trends, [2020 Democratic Primaries](#) (review)
- FiveThirtyEight, "[Who Will Win the 2020 Democratic Nomination?](#)" (review)
- **[Class Project > Data Collection Assignment Handed Out](#)**

Feb 10 Making News: The Struggle for Control

- Bennett et al, Chapter 2, from *When the Press Fails* (35)

Feb 12 Making News: How Political Actors Make News

- Bennett, Ch. 4, *News: The Politics of Illusion*, (37)
- **[Class Project > Twitter Assignment Handed Out](#)**

Feb 17 News Flow 1: Algorithms, Bots, and Social Media (Guest lecturer)

- Allcott and Gentzkow, "Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election (23)
- Howard and Kollanyi, "Bots and Brexit," (6)
- Pariser, "[Beware Online Filter Bubbles](#)," TED Talk (9 minutes)

Feb 19 News Flow 2: Spreading the (Mostly Bad) News (Guest lecturer)

- Howard, et al, "What Were Michigan Voters Sharing Over Twitter?" (6)
- Conover et al, "Political Polarization on Twitter," (8)
- Sunstein, "On Rumors" (10)

Feb 24 Neutral Gatekeepers? Objectivity and Bias in the News

- Figdor, "Objectivity in the News: Finding a Way Forward," (13)
- Budak, Goel, Rao, "[Fair and Balanced? Quantifying Media Bias through Crowdsourced Content Analysis](#)," (20)
- Bennett, Ch. 2, *News: The Politics of Illusion* (30)

Section III: The Marketplace's Impact on the Public

Feb 26 News Consumption and Learning from the News

- Prior, Introduction from *Post-Broadcast Democracy* (25)
- Sunstein and Vermeule, "Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures," (26)
- Pew Research Center, "[Distinguishing Between Factual News and Opinion Statements in the News](#)," (just read the online summary: 5)
- **[Class Project > Twitter Assignment Due by Class Today](#)**

Mar 2 The Public: Motivated, But Not by the Search for Truth

- Iyengar and Hahn, “Red Media, Blue Media,” (24)
- Iyengar and Westwood, “Fear and Loathing Across Party Lines,” (18)
- [Class Project > Campaign Ad Assignment Handed Out](#)

Mar 4 How News Influences Public Opinion

- Zaller, Chs. 2-3 from *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (45)

Mar 9 and 11 Spring Break

Mar 16 Agenda Setting & Priming: How the News Tells Us What to Think About

- Iyengar and Kinder, Chs. 1, 3, 7 from *News That Matters* (30)

Mar 18 The Power of Images: How the News Tells Us How to Feel

- Strobel, “[The CNN Effect](#),” (10)
- Gadarian, “Scary Pictures: How Terrorism Imagery Affects Voter Evaluations,” (20)
- [Class Project > Campaign Ad Assignment Due By Class](#)
- [Class Project > Final Paper Assignment Handed Out](#)

Mar 23 MIDTERM EXAM

Mar 25 Framing: How the News Tells Us How to Think (Guest lecturer)

- Entman, “Framing U.S. Coverage of International News...” (22)
- Lakoff, “Why It Matters How We Frame the Environment,” (13)

Mar 30 You Can’t Tell Me That: Messages and Their Messengers (Guest lecturer)

- Kuklinski and Hurley, “On Hearing and Interpreting Political Messages” (25)
- Vallone, Ross, and Lepper, “The Hostile Media Phenomenon,” (9)

Section IV: The Mass Media Election

Apr 1 Mass Media Election Basics

- Patterson, *Out of Order*, pp. TBD
- [Class Project > Data Collection Assignment Due by Class](#)

Apr 6 Campaign Strategy 101: How to Get Elected

- Vote choice piece TBD
- Iyengar, “Campaigns That Matter” (32)

Apr 8 The “Boys on the Bus:” Covering the Campaigns

- Harvard Kennedy School Case Study, “Al Gore and the Embellishment Issue” (27)
 - Note: you must purchase the Gore case for \$3.95 [here](#).

Apr 13 Crafting the Candidate’s Image: The Perfect President...

- McGinniss, Chs. 1-2, “The Selling of the President,” (30)

Apr 15 Campaign Ads, Part 1

- Dingfelder, “[The Science of Political Advertising](#),” (5)
- In class video: The 30-Second President

Apr 20 Campaign Ads, Part 2

- Brader, “Striking a Responsive Chord: How Political Ads Motivate and Persuade Voters by Appealing to Emotions,” (18)

Apr 22 The Digital Campaign

- Wall Street Journal, “[Presidential Candidates Take to Social Media](#),”

Apr 27 Bear Market? The Influence of Foreign Voices on the Campaign

- Mayer, “How Russia Helped Swing the Election for Trump,” (19)
- Thrall and Armstrong, “Bear Market? Grizzly Steppe and the Marketplace of Ideas,” (25)

Apr 29 Class Project Results Discussion

- No readings: finish your paper!
- [Class Project > Final Paper Due by Class](#)

May 4 Wrapping Up: How Are We Doing?

- Strömback, “In Search of a Standard: Four Models of Democracy and Their Normative Implications for Journalism,” (16)

May 6 FINAL EXAM 10:30 AM – 1:15 PM

SYLLABUS APPENDIX: THE OTHER STUFF

Blackboard

Access to [MyMason](#) and GMU email are required to participate successfully in this course. Please make sure to update your computer and prepare yourself to begin using the online format BEFORE the first day of class. Check [the IT Support Center](#) website. Navigate to [the Student Support page](#) for help and information about Blackboard. In the menu bar to the left you will find all the tools you need to become familiar with for this course. Take time to learn each tool. Make sure you run a system check a few days before class. Become familiar with the attributes of Blackboard and online learning.

To login in to the course:

1. Go to <http://mymason.gmu.edu>.
2. Login using your NETID and password.
3. Click on the 'Courses' tab.
4. Click on GOVT 412 (Spring 2018)

Technical Help

If you have difficulty with accessing Blackboard, please contact the ITU Support Center at 703.993.8870 or support@gmu.edu. If you have trouble with using the features in Blackboard, email courses@gmu.edu

University Policies & Information

Academic Integrity

Students must be responsible for their own work, and students and faculty must take on the responsibility of dealing explicitly with violations. The tenet must be a foundation of our university culture. [See <http://academicintegrity.gmu.edu/distance>].

Honor Code

Students must adhere to the guidelines of the George Mason University Honor Code [See <http://academicintegrity.gmu.edu/honorcode>].

Student members of the George Mason University community pledge not to cheat, plagiarize, steal, or lie in matters related to academic work.

MasonLive/Email

Students are responsible for the content of university communications sent to their George Mason University email account and are required to activate their account and check it regularly. All communication from the university, college, school, and program will be sent to students solely through their Mason email account. [See <https://thanatos.gmu.edu/masonlive/login>].

Patriot Pass

Once you sign up for your Patriot Pass, your passwords will be synchronized, and you will use your Patriot Pass username and password to log in to the following systems:

Blackboard, University Libraries, MasonLive, myMason, Patriot Web, Virtual Computing Lab, and WEMS. [See <https://thanatos.gmu.edu/passwordchange/index.jsp>].

Responsible Use of Computing

Students must follow the university policy for Responsible Use of Computing. [See <http://universitypolicy.gmu.edu/1301gen.html>].

Students with Disabilities

Students with disabilities who seek accommodations in a course must be registered with the George Mason University Office of Disability Services (ODS) and inform their instructor, in writing, at the beginning of the semester [See <http://ods.gmu.edu>].

University Libraries

University Libraries provides resources for distance students. [See <http://library.gmu.edu/distance>].

Writing Center

The George Mason University Writing Center staff provides a variety of resources and services (e.g., tutoring, workshops, writing guides, handbooks) intended to support students as they work to construct and share knowledge through writing. [See <http://writingcenter.gmu.edu>]. You can now sign up for an Online Writing Lab (OWL) session just like you sign up for a face-to-face session in the Writing Center, which means YOU set the date and time of the appointment! Learn more about the [Online Writing Lab \(OWL\)](#).

Counseling and Psychological Services

The George Mason University Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) staff consists of professional counseling and clinical psychologists, social workers, and counselors who offer a wide range of services (e.g., individual and group counseling, workshops and outreach programs) to enhance students' personal experience and academic performance [See <http://caps.gmu.edu>].

Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)

The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (FERPA), also known as the "Buckley Amendment," is a federal law that gives protection to student educational records and provides students with certain rights. [See <http://registrar.gmu.edu/privacy>].

Other Considerations

If there are any issues related to religious holidays, please inform the instructor the first week of class.