POL410/2391
Topics in Comparative Politics III: Media & Politics

Date/Time: Wednesday, 2PM-4PM
Location: UC 175

Instructor: Prof. Eric Merkley
Email: eric.merkley@utoronto.ca
Office: Room 3121, Sidney Smith Hall
Office Hours: Mondays 12:30-1:30pm and by appointment

1. Overview and Objectives

News media have long played an enormous role in democratic politics by shaping the behaviour of citizens and political elites alike. Technological changes over the past several decades have radically transformed the way politics is reported by journalists and discussed by citizens. This course will introduce students to important debates at the intersection of media and politics in Canada and other Western democracies. Topics include the historical development of news media, framing and priming effects, agenda setting, the rise of social media and the changing media landscape, echo chambers and partisan media, media bias, and problems of misinformation.

By the end of this course, students should be able to:

- Identify key changes in the news media environment over the 20th and 21st centuries in Canada, the U.S., and other western democracies, and their consequences.
- Understand key debates surrounding the relationship between soft news, media effects, media biases, social media, partisan media, and misinformation and democratic politics.
- Identify gaps in understanding in current literature and generate research questions on topics related to media & politics
- Synthesize existing research on media & politics and/or craft research designs that can shed light on existing debates in media & politics.

2. Course Format

The class is conducted in a seminar format on Wednesdays from 2-4pm. Attendance is mandatory. Class participation and in-class presentations together constitute a sizable amount of your grade. Seminars will be conducted in-person. The format of the course, however, is subject to change depending on evolving COVID-19 public health guidelines.
3. Required Texts and Materials:

- **Readings.** As listed below in the detailed syllabus, most required readings for the course are electronically available through the library. Readings that are not available online through the library are indicated with a (*) and will be available to download through Quercus.

- **Course webpage and emails.** There is a course webpage on Quercus. I will use this page to post important course documents (readings, syllabus, assessment instructions, etc.), post announcements and send emails to you throughout the term. It is your responsibility to regularly check Quercus for updates.

- **Google account.** I will be using Google Docs in a Google Drive folder for presenters to post their discussion questions.

4. Grading and Assessed Coursework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Date/Due Date</th>
<th>Percentage of Overall Grade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In-class participation</td>
<td>Assessed during each class</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online participation</td>
<td>Assessed during week of class</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Monday-Sunday)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary and reaction</td>
<td>Due weekly at 11:59pm</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>documents</td>
<td>Tuesday night before class</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentation and seminar lead</td>
<td>During your assigned class</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final paper outline</td>
<td>October 26, 11:59pm</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final paper</td>
<td>December 8, 11:59pm</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.1 In-class participation (15%)

The success of a seminar course depends on the active and thoughtful participation of all students. There is significant weight placed on this aspect of your work. I will not only, or even mostly, judge this grade based on the quantity of speaking that you do, but rather the quality of your comments. I will be looking for evidence that you are thoughtfully and respectfully engaging with the course readings and the comments made by your classmates. Failing to attend seminar will guarantee a grade of zero for a particular session unless prior accommodation is made.

4.2 Summary and reaction documents (30%)

Starting in week 2 you will be required to submit weekly summary and reaction documents (SRDs). These documents take the place of an exam. They will provide evidence of engagement with the readings to help stimulate class discussion. In this document, for each reading, you will briefly state:
1) the author’s research question in 1 sentence; 2) the main argument or findings of the author in 2-3 sentences; and 3) the methodology (if applicable) in 1-2 sentences. You will then briefly provide your initial thoughts on the reading, which can include questions for clarification. This document should not be in essay form. You can use headings for each component per reading. You should use headings to divide up responses to the readings and sub-headings to divide each reading by the 4 tasks from above. Feel free to use bullet points as well. Marks will be deducted for going over length. Be as concise and precise as possible!

Your response to each reading will be graded out of 5: 2 points for the summary (tasks 1-3), 3 points for the reaction (task 4). Your grade for a given week’s SRD will represent an average of your grades for N-2 of the readings. For example, if there are six readings, I will count your best 4 responses.

SRDs for a given week are due the day before class (Tuesdays at 11:59pm on Quercus). For graduate students, I will count your best 8 SRDs towards your grade (3.75% X 8). For undergraduate students, I will count your best 5 SRDs towards your grade (6% X 5). You are welcome to submit more than 8 (for graduate students) or 5 (for undergraduate students) SRDs if you wish to improve your grade further, but it is not necessary. I strongly recommend completing an SRD on the week you have a presentation (more on this below).

Note: late SRDs will not be graded for a given week.

4.3 Presentation and seminar lead (15%)

Approximately two students will lead off discussion in each class with a short 8-10 minute presentation about the week’s readings. You will sign up for a week to give a presentation in our first class and I will split the readings between the listed presenters.

The presentation should accomplish three tasks: 1) briefly remind students of the research questions and main arguments/findings for each reading (1-2 minutes); 2) discuss how the weekly readings speak to one another in their perspectives/findings (and/or to other readings in the course – 2-3 minutes); and 3) give your take on the readings (3-5 minutes). For the final component, you may talk about what you think the implications of the author’s argument/findings are for politics and democracy, and the extent to which you agree with their analysis (which shouldn’t be confused with excessive or unfounded criticism!).

You will be graded on the accuracy of your summaries, your ability to connect readings to one another, the quality of your analysis, and the clarity of your presentation. You are expected to stay within the time limit. Marks will be docked for going over time and I will end the presentation at the 12 minute mark. Be concise!

On the Monday (6pm EST) in advance of a presentation, presenters will post discussion questions related to their assigned readings (3-4 questions each) in a Google document that I will set up in advance of the class. These can include clarification questions. Graduate students will lead seminar discussion using these questions (and others they prepare) after their assigned presentation for a minimum of 20-30 minutes. Undergraduate students do not need to lead seminar discussion, but they do need to post their discussion questions on the Monday in advance of their presentation.
4.4 **Online participation (10%)**

You are expected to comment on the discussion questions posted by presenters on the Monday in advance of class using the comment and reply features in Google docs. You will be graded on the quantity and especially quality of your comments much like with in-class participation. The purpose of this component is to allow for non-oral participation and to set the stage for in-class discussion. It is the responsibility of students to ensure their name can be associated with specific comments in the document. The comment period will be closed for grading purposes for a given week by Sunday at 11:59pm after the related class.

4.5 **Final paper and preliminary outline (35%)**

You are responsible for completing a final paper. Graduate students have a choice of one of two options:

1) **Literature review**: this will be a paper that synthesizes the existing research on a topic related to course content. What does the research find? What are its limitations? What are unanswered questions? What are possible new directions for research on this topic?

2) **Research proposal**: this will be a proposal for an empirical research project on a specific topic related to course content. What is your research question? What does existing research tell us about this question? What data will you use or collect? What are your key concepts and how will you measure them? What are your hypotheses? How will you test your hypotheses? What are the implications of an affirmative (or null) result?

Both of these options require engagement with existing research, though the amount of secondary research and the depth of engagement with these sources will necessarily be greater in a literature review paper than the research proposal. The objective of this assignment is to have all students leave this class with material that can allow them to prepare for comprehensive exams at the graduate level or with an actionable research proposal that can be turned into a peer-reviewed publication upon completion.

Undergraduate students are expected to complete a literature review unless they gain explicit approval from me in advance of key deadlines (see below) to do a research proposal.

This paper will be completed in two stages. The first stage is to provide an outline of your literature review or research proposal. The outline can consist of detailed bullet points, but it must be properly sourced. It should be 3-4 pages long. This is due on Quercus at 11:59PM on October 26th. It is worth 5% of your grade. The purpose of this task is to allow me to provide formal feedback on your project. The research outline for undergraduate students will be graded as pass or fail (100% or 0%). Without documentation, late outlines will be penalized 2 points out of 100 per day, including weekends.

The second stage is to provide your final paper. You will be expected to address the comments I provide in your outline. The final paper should be between 15 and 20 pages (without references), or approximately 4500-6000 words. This is an approximate range. Well-crafted research proposals will likely be on the lower end of this range. The final paper is due on Quercus at 11:59PM on December 8th. Without documentation, late essays will be penalized 2 points out of 100 per day, including weekends. More details on the final paper can be found in a handout on Quercus.
5. Course Schedule and Readings

Topic 1 (September 14) – Foundations

Readings:

- Course Syllabus

Recommended:


September 21 – No class

Topic 2 (September 28) – The Changing Media Environment

Readings:

  


Recommended:


**Topic 3 (October 5) – Entertainment Media and Soft News**

Readings:


  

Recommended:


Topic 4 (October 12) – Media Systems, Regulation and Public Broadcasting

Readings:


Recommended:


Topic 5 (October 19) – Media Effects: Agenda-Setting and Priming

Readings:


Recommended:


Topic 6 (October 26) – Media Effects: Framing

Readings:


Recommended:


**Topic 7 (November 2) – Media Bias: Commercial and Organizational**

Readings:


**Recommended:**


**Topic 8 (November 16) – Media Bias: Corporate and Ideological**

Readings:


Recommended:


**Fall Reading Week:** No class on November 9 (and no office hours)

**Topic 9 (November 23) – Partisan Media, Selective Exposure and Echo Chambers**

Readings:


• Levendusky, M. *How partisan media polarize America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, Ch. 3-4. (*)


**Recommended:**


**Topic 10 (November 30) – Social Media**

**Readings:**


Recommended:

  [https://librarysearch.library.utoronto.ca/permalink/01UTORONTO_INST/14bjeso/alma991106937896106196](https://librarysearch.library.utoronto.ca/permalink/01UTORONTO_INST/14bjeso/alma991106937896106196).

  [https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2015.1045149](https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2015.1045149).

**Topic 11 (December 7) – Fake News and Misinformation**

Readings:

  [https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12394](https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12394).


  [https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.aau4586](https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.aau4586).

  [https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055421000290](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055421000290).


Recommended:

  [https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2018.06.011](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2018.06.011).

  [https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-018-9443-y](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-018-9443-y).

6. Course Policies

6.1 Contacting Course Instructor

I strongly recommend asking substantive questions about course content and requirements during class (for the benefit of everyone) or in my scheduled office hours. Email should be reserved strictly for time sensitive questions or quick points of clarification. I will try to respond within 24 hours, but emails received during the weekend will be answered on Monday. I will not respond to emails related to assessments on their due date.

6.2 Possible Changes to the Syllabus

I reserve the right to make adjustments to the course syllabus depending on evolving COVID-19 policies set by the University of Toronto. I will give notice to students in the event of any changes, and amended syllabi will be posted on Quercus.

6.3 Missing Class and Late Assignments

Attendance and participation is required at all class sessions due to the intensive nature of this course. Missed in-class and online participation for a given week will only be excused when accommodation is made in advance of class for a documented serious illness or personal emergency (see section on Accommodation below). I will only reschedule missed presentations when accommodation is made in advance of class for a documented serious illness or personal emergency (see section on Accommodation below). Late outlines and final papers will be penalized 2 points out of 100 per day, including weekends, except in the event of a documented serious illness or personal emergency (see section on Accommodation below). Late SRDs will not be accepted or graded.

6.4 Accommodation for Emergency Situations

Students who need additional time for their outline or final paper, or who will miss a lecture and presentation for a medical or serious personal reason, must contact me before the due date or lecture date and as soon as the problem arises. All requests for accommodation must be made to me in writing, via email.

Some documentation, such as a doctor's note, will usually be required to make accommodation. For the 2022-23 year, students who are absent from academic participation for any reason (e.g., COVID, cold, flu and other illness or injury, family situation) and who require consideration for missed academic work are to record their absence through the ACORN online absence declaration. Note that I do not receive updates from ACORN. You must also contact me in advance of a deadline or lecture date.

Please note that accommodations will not be made for foreseeable circumstances, such as having multiple papers due in the same week. Accommodations are reserved for unforeseeable events that are outside a student's control (e.g., illness, a death in the family).

Requests for accommodation made on or after an assignment's due date, or after the missed lecture will not be considered. Due date extensions will not usually be granted for work lost due to computer crashes or the loss of a computer file. There are simple and free ways of regularly and automatically backing up your work. Students are strongly advised to backup copies of their essays and assignments before submitting. These backups should be kept until the marked assignments have been returned.
6.5 Other Accommodations

The University of Toronto is committed to accessibility. If you require accommodations or have any accessibility concerns, please visit [http://studentlife.utoronto.ca/accessibility](http://studentlife.utoronto.ca/accessibility) as soon as possible.

The University provides academic accommodations for students with disabilities in accordance with the terms of the Ontario Human Rights Code. This occurs through a collaborative process that acknowledges a collective obligation to develop an accessible learning environment that both meets the needs of students and preserves the essential academic requirements of the University’s courses and programs.

Students with diverse learning styles and needs are welcome in this course. If you have a disability that may require accommodations, please feel free to approach me and/or the Accessibility Services office.

The University provides reasonable accommodation of the needs of students who observe religious holy days other than those already accommodated by ordinary scheduling and statutory holidays. Students have a responsibility to alert members of the teaching staff in a timely fashion to upcoming religious observances and anticipated absences and instructors will make every reasonable effort to avoid scheduling tests, examinations or other compulsory activities at these times. Please reach out to me as early as possible to communicate any anticipated absences related to religious observances, and to discuss any possible related implications for course work.

6.6 Equity and Harassment

The University of Toronto is committed to equity, human rights and respect for diversity. All members of the learning environment in this course should strive to create an atmosphere of mutual respect where all members of our community can express themselves, engage with each other, and respect one another’s differences. U of T does not condone discrimination or harassment against any persons or communities.

6.7 Academic Integrity and Responsibility

Academic integrity is essential to the pursuit of learning and scholarship in a university, and to ensuring that a degree from the University of Toronto is a strong signal of each student’s individual academic achievement. As a result, the University treats cases of cheating and plagiarism very seriously. The [University of Toronto’s Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters](http://studentlife.utoronto.ca/accessibility) outlines the behaviours that constitute academic dishonesty and the processes for addressing academic offences. Potential offences include, but are not limited to:

In papers and assignments:

- Using someone else’s ideas or words without appropriate acknowledgement.
- Submitting your own work in more than one course without the permission of the instructor in all relevant courses
- Making up sources or facts
- Obtaining or providing unauthorized assistance on any assignment
On tests and exams:
- Using or possessing unauthorized aids
- Looking at someone else’s answers during an exam or test
- Misrepresenting your identity

In academic work:
- Falsifying institutional documents or grades
- Falsifying or altering any documentation required by the University, including (but not limited to) doctor’s notes

All suspected cases of academic dishonesty will be investigated following procedures outlined in the Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters. If you have questions or concerns about what constitutes appropriate academic behaviour or appropriate research and citation methods, please reach out to me. Note that you are expected to seek out additional information on academic integrity from me or from other institutional resources (for example, the University of Toronto website on Academic Integrity).

6.8 Plagiarism Detection

Normally, students will be required to submit their course essays to the University’s plagiarism detection tool for a review of textual similarity and detection of possible plagiarism. In doing so, students will allow their essays to be included as source documents in the tool’s reference database, where they will be used solely for the purpose of detecting plagiarism. The terms that apply to the University’s use of this tool are described on the Centre for Teaching Support & Innovation web site (https://uoft.me/pdt-faq)