POL470/2370 – Media & Politics

Date/Time: Tuesday, 9-11AM

Instructor: Prof. Eric Merkley
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Office: Room 3121, Sidney Smith Hall
Office Hours: Mondays 1-2pm 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>
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<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>Assessed for each week</td>
<td>20%</td>
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| Summary and reaction documents  | Due weekly at 11:59pm
Monday night before class        | 30%                         |
| Presentation and seminar lead   | During your assigned class         | 20%                         |
| Final paper outline             | March 1, 11:59pm                   | 5%                          |
| Final paper                     | April 5, 11:59pm                   | 25%                         |

#### 4.1 Participation (20%)

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 engaged with the course readings. I will also reward students for engaging directly with the perspective of their classmates. Failing to attend seminar will guarantee a grade of zero for a particular session unless prior accommodation is made.

I do understand that participating actively in class can sometimes be intimidating. I will allow you to supplement your participation grade with online comments on discussion questions posted by myself and presenters on the Friday 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. It is your responsibility to ensure your posts are associated with your name.

The comment period will be closed for grading purposes for a given week by Friday at 11:59pm after the related class. Online participation, however, cannot be used to make up for missed absences. If you miss a class, you still receive a 0 for that week without prior accommodation.
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 (including separate chapters of the same book unless otherwise noted on the syllabus), 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 quantitative or qualitative methodology used (if applicable) in 1-2 sentences (this won’t apply to entirely theoretical pieces). 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 (Mondays 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 (20%)

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 Friday (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 Final paper and preliminary outline (25% + 5%)

You are responsible for completing a final paper. You 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.

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 March 1st. 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 April 5th.
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 (January 9) – Foundations

Readings:

- Course Syllabus
  https://librarysearch.library.utoronto.ca/permalink/01UTORONTO_INST/14bjeso/alma9
  91106924594406196.

• Stromback, J. (2008). Four phases of mediatization: An analysis of the mediatization of 

  ○ Rejoinder: Bennet, W. L. (2003). The burglar alarm that just keeps on ringing: A 
  https://doi.org/10.1080/105846003902111145.

Recommended:


  perspective. New York: Routledge, Ch. 1. 
  https://librarysearch.library.utoronto.ca/permalink/01UTORONTO_INST/14bjeso/alma9
  91106942062906196.

Topic 2 (January 16) – The Changing Media Environment

Readings:

  Basic Books, Ch. 1. (*)

  University Press, Ch. 2-3. 
  https://librarysearch.library.utoronto.ca/permalink/01UTORONTO_INST/14bjeso/alma9
  91106228768006196.

• Munger, K. (2020). All the news that’s fit to click: The economics of clickbait media. Political 

• Bennett, L.W., & Iyengar, S. (2008). A new era of minimal effects: The changing foundations 

  https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2009.01470.x

Recommended:

  University Press, Ch. 4.


Topic 3 (January 23) – Entertainment Media and Soft News

Readings:


Recommended:


**Topic 4 (January 30) – Media Systems, Regulation and Public Broadcasting**

**Readings:**


**Recommended:**


**Topic 5 (February 6) – Media Effects I: Agenda-Setting and Priming**

**Readings:**


Recommended:


**Topic 6 (February 13) – Media Effects II: Framing**

Readings:


Recommended:


**Winter Reading Week:** No class on February 20 (and no office hours)

**Topic 8 (February 27) – Media Bias I: Newsroom Constraints and Marketplace Incentives**

Readings:


Recommended:


**Final Paper Outline Due (March 1)**

**Topic 9 (March 5) – Media Bias II: Owner Interests and Partisan Slant**

**Readings:**


**Recommended:**


Topic 10 (March 12) – Media and Polarization I: Selective Exposure and Partisan Media

Readings:


Recommended:


- Broockman, D., & Kalla, J. (2022, April 1). Consuming cross-cutting media causes learning and moderates attitudes: A field experiment with Fox News viewers. [https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/jrw26](https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/jrw26)


Topic 11 (March 19) – Media and Polarization II: Social Media

Readings:


media can increase political polarization. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 115*(37), 9216–9221. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1804840115


Recommended:


**Topic 11 (March 26) – Media and Polarization III: Fake News and Misinformation**

**Readings:**


Recommended:


**Topic 12 (April 3) – Future Directions**

**Note: Not eligible for an SRD**


- Althaus, S. (2012). What’s good and bad in political communication research? Normative standards for evaluating media and citizen performance. In Semetko, H. A., & Scammell, M. (Eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Political Communication*. SAGE Publications, Ch. 8. [https://librarysearch.library.utoronto.ca/permalink/01UTORONTO_INST/fedca1/cdi_op enaire_primary_doi_7a922fc3c571d9f2a89ced8efa7dfbf9](https://librarysearch.library.utoronto.ca/permalink/01UTORONTO_INST/fedca1/cdi_op enaire_primary_doi_7a922fc3c571d9f2a89ced8efa7dfbf9)

### 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 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 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 website (https://uoft.me/pdt-faq)