Mass Media, Social Media, and American Politics

Politics 327
Princeton University, Fall 2020
Tuesday/Thursday 11-11:50 a.m.
Course page with Zoom links: https://princeton.instructure.com/courses/675

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Preceptors

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Course Overview

This course considers the role of the media in American politics and the influence of mass and social media on Americans' political attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. We will examine the nature of news and news-making organizations; the role of the news media in electoral campaigns; how the media shape the behavior of politicians once in office; stereotypes and prejudice; and the ability of social media to facilitate collective action. The course is designed both to impart information and to raise issues which may not have clear or easy answers. This will especially be the case when we discuss the role of the internet and social media in contemporary American politics. Precepts are a critical part of the class as they provide an opportunity to grapple with these issues — to explore the pros and cons of objectivity as a journalistic norm, the ways in which news and entertainment have become blurred in the mass media, whether social media contributes to political polarization, and so on.

Readings

Students are expected to keep up with each week's reading. All required articles and book chapters should be accessible through Canvas or the library.

Requirements

1. Attending lectures

I expect you to attend lectures. They will be recorded to accommodate different time zones and technological challenges. Please keep your audio muted but your video on, if possible.

2. Precept participation (30%)

Precepts are intended to clarify material from the readings and lectures and, just as importantly, to provide an opportunity to discuss the issues raised in class and to bring the ideas and information from the class to bear on your own experiences with the media. Precept discussions can only "work" if students have done the readings. Therefore, it is vital that you keep up with the readings week by week and come to precept having read and thought about that week's assigned readings. At a minimum, you should be able to summarize the central argument of each reading and the evidence the authors offer for their conclusion. Ideally, you should be able to offer a critique of the

readings, an account of how they relate to other course readings, and (depending on the topic) some relevant examples from your own observation of the media. Precepts will additionally help students prepare their group projects and discuss their results.

There are no precepts during the first week. You can miss one precept without penalty.

3. Media consumption report (20%)[1]

The aim of the media consumption report is to systematically monitor your personal media use for one week. This includes both news and non-news (e.g., entertainment, sports) media. Carefully record how you used all media during each day: radio, television, newspapers, magazines, movies, podcasts, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and so on. Write not only when and how long you read/listened/watched (e.g., "Thursday, October 6, 8-8:45 p.m.") but also what you read, listened to, or watched. By doing so, you are collecting original data that will be the basis of a group research project. Further instructions will be given during class. *Due in the fourth week of class.*

4. Group project: Your personal filter bubble (20%)[2]

This is a small group research project concerning "filter bubbles," a topic we will study in more detail later in the course. The aim is for us to try to actually measure our bubbles. Using original data collected for the media consumption report, you will be asked to code the content and "slant" of each listing. All group members will be required to look at everybody else's logs and code them as well. Each group will produce a report showcasing their results alongside the original data they collected. The report should take the form of something produced for members of the informed public. For inspiration, I encourage you to look at the types of reports that the Pew Research Center or the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism regularly publishes. Further instructions will be given during class. *Due in the eighth week of class.*

5. Research paper due on Dean's Date (30%).

For this assignment, you will produce a data-based research report about the role of the media in American society circa 2020. This could be about the ongoing movement for justice and associated protest activity or the election campaign, for example. You should double-space all text and appendix materials in standard 12-point font (except tables and figures), with one-inch margins. Papers should follow *American Political Science Review* style guidelines. More information about the paper will be forthcoming.

Grading

Your preceptor and I will strive to assign grades that fairly and accurately reflect the quality of the work you submit. Any requests for regrades must be submitted to me in writing within one week of receiving your graded work back, and you must explain why you feel your grade was inappropriate. Regrades can result in raising *or* lowering your initial grade.

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[1] Inspired by Professor Robert Sahr.
[2] Inspired by Professor Matthew Salganik and Professor Dominik Stecuła.

Academic Integrity

You are expected to familiarize yourself with the University Honor Code and academic integrity policy. See the following page for more information: https://rrr.princeton.edu/students

Attendance Policy

Students are expected to attend each scheduled class and precept on time and ready to participate fully. Please have your video (with whatever background you prefer to use) turned on, except during breaks, unless you have an unexpected difficulty or have arranged with me otherwise. An excused absence will only be granted in the case of a religious observance, an ODS-approved accommodation, or — as verified by your residential college — a serious illness or an exceptional circumstance.

Class Recordings

I will be recording our class sessions for students who are unable to attend. You may choose to "opt out" of any recording, in which case you should contact me to arrange alternative ways to participate. Faculty own the copyright to their instructional materials, so students should not record any class sessions without my permission. For this same reason, recordings that I make of our class may not be posted online or shared with anyone other than students enrolled in this course.

Course Schedule (subject to change at the instructor's discretion)

Week 1: Foundations and background

- Ladd, Jonathan. 2005. *Why Americans Hate the Media and Why It Matters*, ch. 2.
- Rosen, Jay. 2010. "The View from Nowhere: Questions and Answers."

Week 2: Public opinion, news impact, and media effects

- Iyengar, Shanto & Kinder, Don. 1987. *News That Matters*, chapters 1 and 7.

Week 3: Filter bubbles, echo chambers, and rabbit holes

- Sunstein, Cass. 2017. #*Republic*, ch. 1.
- Barberá, Pablo. 2020. "Social Media, Echo Chambers, and Political Polarization." In Persily, Nathaniel and Tucker, Joshua (eds.), *Social Media and Democracy: The State of the Field, Prospects for Reform*.
- Listen to *New York Times* "Rabbit Hole" podcast, episodes 1-3.

Week 4: Trust and civility

- Ladd, Jonathan. 2005. *Why Americans Hate the Media and Why It Matters*, ch. 5.

Week 5: Campaigns, elections, and polling

- Budak, Ceren et al. 2020. *Words that Matter*, chapters 1, 2, and 5.
- Film: *The War Room* (1993)

Week 6: Media biases and partisan media

- *Perspectives on Politics* Review Symposium: Does the U.S. Media Have a Liberal Bias? September 2012. 10(3):767-785. Read the pieces by Nyhan and McCarty. (Links here: http://themonkeycage.org/2012/09/symposium-on-timothy-grosecloses-arguments-about-liberal-bias/)
- Mayer, Jane. 2019. "The Making of the Fox News White House". *The New Yorker.*

Week 7: "Fake news" and misinformation

- Allen, Jennifer et al. 2020. "Evaluating the fake news problem at the scale of the information ecosystem." *Science Advances.*
- Nyhan, Brendan, 2020. "Facts and Myths about Misperceptions." *Journal of Economic Perspectives*.
- Watts, Duncan J. and Rothschild, David M. 2017. "Don't blame the election on fake news. Blame it on the media." *Columbia Journalism Review.*

Week 8: Media, protest, and collective action

- Tufekci, Zepnep. 2017. *Twitter and Tear Gas*, ch. 4.
- Wasow, Omar. 2020. "Agenda Seeding: How 1960s Black Protests Moved Elites, Public Opinion and Voting." *American Political Science Review*, pp. 1-22.

Week 9: Stereotypes and prejudice

- Mutz, Diana and Seth Goldman. 2010. "Mass Media." In J. F. Dovidio, M. Hewstone, P. Glick, V. M. Esses (eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Prejudice, Stereotyping and Discrimination*.
- Blog summary: "Why do liberals drink lattes? How lifestyles tied to political views can be self-reinforcing among partisan groups."

Week 10: Humor, anger, and other emotions

- Young, Dannagal. *Irony and Outrage*, chapters 2-3.

Week 11: Algorithms and communication technologies

- Keller, Daphne and Leerssen, Paddy. 2020. "Facts and Where to Find Them: Empirical Research on Internet Platforms and Content Moderation." In Persily, Nathaniel and Tucker, Joshua (eds.), *Social Media and Democracy: The State of the Field, Prospects for Reform*.
- Issenberg, Sasha. 2012. "How Obama's Team Used Big Data to Rally Voters." *MIT Technology Review*.
- Wong, Julia Carrie. 2020. "One year inside Trump's monumental Facebook campaign." *The Guardian.*
- Lepore, Jill. 2020. "How the Simulmatics Corporation Invented the Future." *The New Yorker*.
- Listen to *New York Times* "Rabbit Hole" podcast, episode 4.

Week 12: The media and ongoing challenges of democracy

- Nielsen, Rasmus Kleis and Fletcher, Richard. 2020. "Democratic Creative Destruction? The Effect of a Changing Media Landscape on Democracy." In Persily, Nathaniel and Tucker, Joshua (eds.), *Social Media and Democracy: The State of the Field, Prospects for Reform*.
- Yong, Ed. 2020. "Why the Coronavirus Is So Confusing." *The Atlantic*.
- Mendelberg, Tali. 2020. "America Failed to Prepare for Disaster Long Before Trump Took Over." *The New York Times*.
- [more reading TBD]