POLS 317: Media and Politics

Washington State University, Spring 2012
Tuesday, Thursday, 10:35-11:50 a.m., Room 220 College

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Course webpage: www.wsu.edu/~tnridout/ps317.htm

Introduction

The news media are sometimes called the fourth branch of government—and for good reason. Much of our exposure to politics comes not from direct experience but from mediated stories. This course is designed to help you think about this relationship between the news media and politics. We will explore how news organizations decide what is news, how they report it, how those reports have an impact on viewers or readers, and ultimately, the political system.

Readings

There are two books available for purchase:


Bennett, W. Lance, Regina G. Lawrence and Steven Livingston. 2007. When the Press Fails.

I also strongly urge you to read a newspaper daily. With luck, free copies of the New York Times, USA Today and Spokesman-Review will be available again this semester at various places around campus.

Evaluation

Your final grade in this course will depend on your success in four areas:

Midterm Examination – Thursday, March 8 (300 points)

Long Assignment - Due Friday, April 6, 5 p.m. (250 points)

Final Examination – Thursday, May 3, 10:10 a.m. – 12:10 p.m. (300 points)

Three Short Assignments - various due dates (50 points each)
**Exams.** The midterm and final exams will consist of three sections: the definition of key terms, short answers and short essays.

**Long Assignment:** You will write a 6-9 page paper comparing and contrasting news content across organizations.

Choose three days (the same three days for all sources) on which to watch one national television newscast (e.g., NBC Nightly News, the News Hour on PBS), read one major U.S. newspaper (e.g., Washington Post, Washington Times, Wall Street Journal, New York Times, Los Angeles Times) and read one international English-language newspaper. Some possibilities in the last category are the Globe and Mail from Canada (www.globeandmail.com), the Guardian from the U.K. (www.guardian.co.uk), the Times from the U.K. (www.thetimes.co.uk), the Jerusalem Post from Israel (www.jpost.com), the Hindustan Times from India (www.hindustantimes.com) and the Sydney Morning Herald from Australia (http://www.smh.com.au/). You are not, however, limited to these suggestions.

Answer the following questions in your analysis:
- Describe the three news organizations in terms of their size, ownership and audience. Answering this question may require some library research.
- Did the three news organizations emphasize different stories? What was the most prominent story for each? Did one organization cover a story that another completely ignored? What explanation do you have for any differences in emphasis that you found?
- How did coverage of the same story differ across the organizations? Why might this be?
- Did you detect any political bias in any of the media? What evidence leads you to this conclusion?
- How did each news organization cover President Obama? What major differences, if any, did you detect across news organization? What might account for the differences or similarities you identified?
- In your opinion, which news organization did the best job conveying political information? Why?

Be sure that you relate your discussion to the materials that we have read and discussed in class, and cite all sources using a generally accepted standard of citation. I will grade your assignment using several criteria, including the extent to which your paper:

1. Identifies, summarizes, and defines the issue or problem at hand
2. Clearly states purposes, objectives, or hypotheses.
3. Presents observations and results in a complete, logical and clear fashion.
4. Assesses, discusses, and reconciles the supporting data/evidence acquired from the exercise in relation to the existing literature.
5. Identifies conclusions, implications and consequences.
6. Effectively organizes and articulates information to promote understanding and communicate significance of the issue or problem.

DUE FRIDAY, APRIL 6, 5 p.m.
**Short Assignments.** You will complete 3 of the following 5 assignments. Each should be 2-3 pages long (double spaced).

1. Choose a country other than the U.S. and investigate the nature of its media system. Who owns the country’s newspapers and radio stations? How many are there? What types of stories do these outlets carry? How much control does the government have over the content of the news media? In general, does the media system of the country you chose seem to serve its citizens well? DUE JANUARY 24, 5 p.m.

2. Visit the websites of two media watchdog organizations, Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (www.fair.org) and the Media Research Center (www.mediresearch.org). Discuss two or three news reports that the organizations criticize. Is the criticism fair? Why or why not? Do you have any criticisms of the watchdog groups? DUE FEBRUARY 14, 5 p.m.

4. Find a recent political advertisement on-line. The Political Communications Lab at Stanford has a large repository: http://pcl.stanford.edu/campaigns/index.html, and my website has other links to political ads. Describe the ad, including the candidates mentioned. How would you assess its accuracy and fairness? Do you think it is effective? Why? DUE MARCH 6, 5 p.m.

3. Access the White House website (www.whitehouse.gov) and review the proceedings from a recent press gaggle or briefing. What types of issues are raised by reporters? What types of information did the administration provide? What is your assessment of the quality of the questions reporters are asking and the quality of information that is being given to them? DUE MARCH 27, 5 p.m.

5. Interview several friends or family members, asking them what they like or dislike about President Obama and/or another contemporary political figure such as the governor of or a U.S. Senator from your state. Do they mention issues in their discussion of the political figure? Are they newsworthy issues? How did your interviewees receive their information about the politician? How large was the role of the news media as a source? DUE APRIL 17, 5 p.m.

**Grading scale.**

- A: 930-1000
- A-: 900-929
- B+: 870-899
- B: 830-869
- B-: 800-829
- C+: 770-799
- C: 730-769
- C-: 700-729
- D+: 670-699
- D: 600-669
- F: 0-599

**Other Information**
If there are things I talk about in class that you do not understand, do not hesitate to talk to me about them. I am here to help you learn the course material. And if there are other matters that you think should be brought to my attention, let me know. Although a fairly large class like this one is not as conducive to discussion as smaller seminars are, it is my hope that we can engage in substantial back and forth. I definitely do not want to lecture for 75 minutes straight without interruption!

Make-up Exams. I will give make-up exams only in extraordinary circumstances. These are limited to 1) absences due to membership in an official university group or athletic team that will be out of town on the day of the exam 2) serious illness or injury and 3) family emergencies. If you will miss an exam because of a university-sanctioned event, you must alert me of the absence at least one week in advance.

Late Assignments. Assignments must be turned into my office (just slide it under the door if I’m not there) by 5 p.m. on the date they are due. For each day your assignment is late (this includes weekends), I will deduct 10 percent of the total points available for the assignment.

Extra-Credit. I do not generally give extra-credit assignments, though in rare circumstances I may offer extra credit for participation in special events (such as taking part in an out-of-class experiment).

Academic Etiquette. Do not carry on side conversations or read the newspaper during class. Doing so is disrespectful to your classmates, and I will ask you to leave the room if you are disturbing others. Turn off all cellular phones during class.

Academic Misconduct. I do not tolerate plagiarizing or cheating of any kind. Such behavior will result in failing the course and other disciplinary action. In my tenure at WSU, I have failed five students for plagiarizing, and I have no qualms about doing so again. Please visit the university’s website at http://www.wsulibs.wsu.edu/plagiarism/main.html for a full description of the types of academic misconduct. If you are unclear about what constitutes plagiarism or cheating, see me immediately.

Students with Disabilities: Reasonable accommodations are available for students with a documented disability. If you have a disability and need accommodations to fully participate in this class, please visit the Access Center (Washington Building 217) to meet with an Access Advisor. All accommodations MUST be approved through the Access Center. Either drop by the Access Center or call 509-335-3417 to schedule an appointment.

Electronic Submission. Please turn in a hard copy of each assignment to me. I will not accept email attachments.

Course Outline

Introduction (Jan 10)
Iyengar 1
History, Ownership and Media Regulation (Jan 12, 17, 19)
Iyengar 2

Making the News (Jan 24)
Iyengar 3

Global Media and Foreign Policy (Jan 26, 31)
Iyengar 4

When the Press Fails (Feb 2, 7, 9)
Bennett (all; read the first two chapters for Feb 2, the second two chapters for Feb 7 and the last two chapters for Feb 9)

The New Media (Feb 14, 16)
Iyengar 5

Media and Election Campaigns (Feb 21, 23, 28, Mar 1)
Iyengar 6

CATCH-UP DAY/MIDTERM EXAM REVIEW (Mar 6)

MIDTERM EXAM (Mar 8)

Governing Through the Media (Mar 20, 22)
Iyengar 7

The Media and Public Opinion (Mar 27, 29)
Iyengar 8

Media and Campaign Effects (Apr 3, 5, 10)
Iyengar 9

Consequences of Going Public (Apr 12, 17)
Iyengar 10

Future of the News Media (Apr 19, 24)
Iyengar 11

CATCH-UP DAY/FINAL EXAM REVIEW (Apr 26)

FINAL EXAM (Thursday, May 3, 10:10 a.m. – 12:10 p.m.)