

# Media and Politics (COMS 335 / POLS 521 at KU)

Summer 2025, Session I

University of Erfurt, SPICE Program  
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## COURSE DESCRIPTION

The primary goal of this course is to critically examine the role of media in U.S. and European political contexts. Students learn how information makes it into news coverage, as well as how media content affects individuals, political campaigns, and governing decisions. The course covers media effects theories, news bias and polarization, entertainment media, and other topics. Although the primary focus of the course is media coverage of politics and significant social issues, students interested in public relations and strategic communication also benefit from learning about journalism practices. By the end of the semester, students will be able to critically evaluate political and media systems in democratic contexts.

## COURSE LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of the semester, students should be able to:

- Understand and apply academic theories about media and politics
- Identify patterns of political media content and explain the potential effects of those patterns
- Analyze political media content through the lens of various media theories

## READINGS

The readings for the course, which are listed in the “Course Readings” section below, will be provided to students electronically.

## GRADING

Grades will be weighted and computed based on the following assignments:

### Participation Assignments

Participation	15%
In-Class Application Activities	20%

### Major Assignments

Quizzes (2 x 10% each)	20%
Research presentation	45%

This course uses a plus/minus grading system:

A	92.5-100%	C+	76.5-79.49%	D+	66.5-69.49%
A-	89.5-92.49%	C	72.5-76.49%	D	62.5-66.49%
B+	86.5-89.49%	C-	69.5-72.49%	D-	59.5-62.49%
B	82.5-86.49%			F	0-59.49%
B-	79.5-82.49%				

**Grade Consultations.** Consultations about grades are welcome in order to clarify course standards and procedures and to provide guidance that might improve future performance. Students must wait 24 hours after a grade is posted to discuss a grade with me and have 7 business days after a grade has been assigned to contest a grade. This must be done in writing. After 7 business days, all grades are considered final. Assigned grades will *not* be changed unless clear and significant procedural errors have occurred.

## COURSE REQUIREMENTS

### Participation Assignments.

In-Class Participation (15%): Students are expected to come to class prepared and ready to engage with one another during the class period. There are many ways that you can participate, here are some:

- On-time attendance to class
- Participating in informal class activities and discussion
- Coming to class prepared (e.g. reading the assigned readings before class, referring to the readings in class, raising questions about readings and other course content)
- Bringing up relevant questions, comments, and/or relevant current events in class or via email
- Staying on task during class (e.g. being respectful, not using technology unless taking notes or looking up something related to class)

In-class participation will be assessed using the following criteria:

- 90 – 100%: Student shows up to class on time, is always prepared, always completes the assigned readings and activities before class, is always engaged in discussion (without dominating or derailing discussion), displays an understanding of the readings and a willingness to ask questions, and only uses technology in on-topic ways (e.g., completing in-class assignments, taking notes). The student's participation is deep, thoughtful, and respectful, and demonstrates a clear attempt to understand the course material.
- 80 – 89%: Student shows up to most classes on time, is often prepared, often completes assigned readings and activities before class, is often engaged in discussion, and/or typically uses technology in on-topic ways. The student's participation is respectful and demonstrates some attempt to understand the material.
- 70 – 79%: Student shows up late to class most of the time, is not often prepared, has not often completed the assigned readings and activities, rarely engages in discussion, sometimes distracts other students, and/or often uses technology in off-topic ways. The participation, when it occurs, does not demonstrate an attempt to understand the course material.
- 59 – 69%: Student rarely attends class, is rarely prepared, has rarely completed the assigned readings and activities, is almost never engaged in discussion, and/or often uses technology in off-topic ways. The participation, when it occurs, does not demonstrate an attempt to understand the course materials.
- < 60%: Student has missed most classes and does not participate when attending class.

Application Activities (20%): Periodically, students will complete a formal in-class activity that will allow them to use class lecture, discussion, and readings to analyze real-life situations involving political media. These activities will give students low-stakes practice answering the types of questions I ask on quizzes and, more importantly, critically analyzing media content similar to what they could encounter outside of the classroom. Students who attend class in person and who actively participate during these sessions will earn credit for completing the application activities. Note that the dates of these activities are generally not announced in advance. Also note that these are in addition to informal activities and discussion that will take place during every class session.

Each application activity will be graded as full credit (100%), half credit (50%), or no credit (0%). The percentage grades for all application activities will be averaged to calculate the overall application activities grade:

- 100%: As long as students engage with the course content (and each other) in a generous and respectful manner, they will receive full credit for these assignments. This includes actively participating in the activities (e.g., staying on task, responding to questions, working with other students in groups, answering all of the questions, referring to the readings, uploading the assignments on time)
- 50%: If a student is completing the assignments but is not clearly engaging with the material (e.g., clearly has not completed the readings in advance, not referring to the readings, skipping questions, not actively adding to the discussion with the in-class group, saying that they haven't read, not staying on task)
- 0%: If a student does not complete the assignments or completes an assignment in a manner that disrespects me or other students in the class (e.g., being divisive, hurtful, harassing, or using derogatory language), that student will receive no credit.

**Quizzes (20%).** Students will complete two in-class quizzes, each worth 10% of their final grade. The quizzes will be in-person and designed to cover the readings and content covered in class to assess whether students have done the required reading/work, have understood the basic ideas, and can apply the material to new scenarios. Students will be able to bring in limited notes on a 5x7 notecard. More details will be provided in class.

**Final Research Presentation (45%).** For their final presentation, students will analyze political media content and speculate about the potential effects of the coverage. Students will work in small groups to conduct an original quantitative content analysis of political media content, situate their results in academic literature covered in class, and brainstorm potential solutions to problematic political media patterns that they find. Students will have some time to work on the research project in class but will likely need to complete the work outside of class. More details about this project will be provided in class.

## **COURSE POLICIES AND UNIVERSITY RESOURCES**

**Attendance.** While attendance is not directly part of students' grades, in-class participation and application activities may, as the names suggest, only be completed by students who attend class in person.

**Late Work.** Students are expected to complete the major assignments on the dates listed in the schedule. If assignments are turned in late, there will be a 10% deduction for assignments turned in between 15 minutes and 24 hours after the deadline, a 20% deduction for assignments turned in between 24 hours and 48 hours after the deadline, and assignments turned in after 48 hours will earn a 0% (but still need to be turned in to receive feedback and ultimately earn credit on the final project presentation).

**Conduct in class.** I want to build a classroom climate that is comfortable for everyone. In a communication class that focuses on politics, it is especially important that everyone (1) displays respect for all members of the classroom, including the instructor and other students; (2) pays attention to and participates in all class sessions and activities; and (3) avoids racist, sexist, homophobic, or other divisive language that may unnecessarily exclude members of our campus and classroom. Specifically, be sure to:

- Only use technology when its use is in service of the course content
- Be on time to class to avoid causing a distraction
- Avoid unnecessary disruption during class time (e.g., having private conversations, using social media, doing work for other classes, making/receiving phone calls or texts except in emergencies, etc.)

Violation of any of these guidelines will result in a warning to the student and a decreased participation grade. If the conduct continues, the student will be asked to leave class.

**Seeking assistance.** Students should not hesitate to seek assistance. Assistance is best sought before, rather than after, assignments. Much of the material covered in this class is based upon humanistic and social science research. Students will be required to think and write in ways that may be unfamiliar. Training in advanced methods is not required, but some may feel apprehensive about their understanding of course readings. If something in class or the readings is unclear, please don't hesitate to ask questions in class or to schedule an office hours visit.

**Academic Misconduct.** Students are required to produce original work and support their arguments using other researchers' work as a foundation. These assignments must be original, must not use online AI programs, and must acknowledge all sources (including those covered in class). Using any material that was written by someone else and submitting as though it was your own is unacceptable, even if it is accidental. Work submitted should represent students' original work created specifically for this class. Additionally, while artificial intelligence, including ChatGPT, can be a helpful resource during the initial phases of brainstorming, it does not substitute for credible research or original content creation. ChatGPT even provides the following statement to users: "ChatGPT may produce inaccurate information about people, places, or facts." All work in this class should be 100% original student work.

**Syllabus and Course Schedule Changes.** The syllabus and course schedule are subject to change with sufficient notice to students.

## COURSE READINGS

(In order of course appearance. The readings will be shared electronically with students)

- Schudson, M. (2008). *Why democracies need an unlovable press*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press. (Chapter 2: "Six or seven things news can do for democracy")
- Strömbäck, J. (2008). Four phases of mediatization: An analysis of the mediatization of politics. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 13(3), 228–246. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161208319097>
- Reese, S. D. (2019). Hierarchy of influences. In T. P. Vos & F. Hanusch (Eds.), *The International Encyclopedia of Journalism Studies* (pp. 1–5). John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Moy, P., Tewksbury, D., & Rinke, E. M. (2016). Agenda-setting, priming, and framing. *The International Encyclopedia of Communication Theory and Philosophy*, 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118766804.wbiect266>
- Brown, D. K., & Harlow, S. (2019). Protests, media coverage, and a hierarchy of social struggle. *International Journal of Press/Politics*, 24(4), 508–530. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161219853517>
- Wagner, M., & Perryman, M. R. (2020). *Mediated democracy: Politics, the news, and citizenship in the 21st century*. CQ Press: Washington, DC.
- Schulz, A., Wirth, W., & Müller, P. (2020). We are the people and you are fake news: A social identity approach to populist citizens' false consensus and hostile media perceptions. *Communication Research*, 47(2), 201–226. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650218794854>
- Stroud, N. J., & Muddiman, A. (n.d.). The American media system today: Is the public fragmenting. In T. Ridout (Ed.), *New directions in media and politics* (2nd ed., pp. 7–28). Routledge.
- Palmer, R., Toff, B., & Nielsen, R. K. (2020). "the media covers up a lot of things": Watchdog ideals meet folk theories of journalism. *Journalism Studies*, 21(14), 1973–1989. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2020.1808516>
- Noelle-Neumann, E. (1974). The spiral of silence a theory of public opinion. *Journal of Communication*, 24(2), 43–51. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1974.tb00367.x>
- Thorson, K., & Wells, C. (2016). Curated flows: A framework for mapping media exposure in the digital age. *Communication Theory*, 26(3), 309–328. <https://doi.org/10.1111/comt.12087>
- (optional) Stroud, N. J., & Higgins, V. de M. (2015). Content analysis. In Zhou, S., & Sloan, W. M. D. (Eds.), *Research methods in communication* (pp. 123-143). Northport, AL: Vision Press
- Hermann, E., Morgan, M., & Shanahan, J. (2023). Cultivation and social media: A meta-analysis. *New Media & Society*, 25(9), 2492–2511. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448231180257>
- Van der Pas, D. J., & Aaldering, L. (2020). Gender differences in political media coverage: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Communication*, 70(1), 114–143. <https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqz046>
- Usher, N., Darr, J. P., Napoli, P. M., & Miller, M. L. (2023). Media policy for an informed citizenry: Revisiting the information needs of communities for democracy in crisis. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 707(1), 8–20. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00027162231219550>
- Altay, S., Berriche, M., & Acerbi, A. (2023). Misinformation on misinformation: Conceptual and methodological challenges. *Social Media + Society*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051221150412>
- Masullo, G. M., Tenenboim, O., & Lu, S. (2021). "Toxic atmosphere effect": Uncivil online comments cue negative audience perceptions of news outlet credibility. *Journalism*, 24(1), 101-119. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14648849211064001>

- Becker, A. B. (2020). Applying mass communication frameworks to study humor's impact: Advancing the study of political satire. *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 44(3), 273–288. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2020.1794925>
- Young, D. G. (2019). Why liberal satire and conservative outrage are both responses to mainstream media – but with very different powers. *NiemanLab*. <https://www.niemanlab.org/2019/12/why-liberal-satire-and-conservative-outrage-are-both-responses-to-mainstream-media-but-with-very-different-powers/> (If you want more detail about Young's book, you can also listen to this WHY? Radio Times reading program: <https://why.org/episodes/irony-and-outrage/>)
- (optional) McIntyre, K. E., & Lough, K. (2021). Toward a clearer conceptualization and operationalization of solutions journalism. *Journalism*, 22(6), 1558–1573. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884918820756>

## CLASS SCHEDULE

\*note that the schedule is subject to change with advanced notice to students\*

Date	Topic	Reading	Assignment Due
<b>Week 1</b>			
Friday, June 20 (4pm – 8pm)	Journalism in Democracies Media Systems	Schudson Brüggemann et al.	
Saturday, June 21 (10am – 4pm; lunch break included)	Gatekeeping Mediatization History of media effects research	Reese Strömback	
Sunday, June 22 (10am – 4pm; lunch break included)	Agenda-Setting, Priming, & Framing	Moy et al. Brown & Harlow	
<b>Week 2</b>			
Friday, June 27 (4pm – 8pm)	Media bias: Biased Content and Biased Perceptions	Wagner & Perryman Schulz et al.	
Saturday, June 28 (10am – 4pm; lunch break included)	News Choice & Avoidance	Stroud & Muddiman Palmer et al.	
Sunday, June 29 (10am – 4pm; lunch break included)	Spiral of Silence, Information Flows, Third-Person Effect	Noelle-Neumann Thorson & Wells	Quiz #1
<b>Week 3</b>			
Friday, July 4 (4pm – 8pm)	Overview content analysis & introduce research project  In-class project work: Assign groups & get started	Stroud & Higgins (optional)	Group contract & research proposal
Saturday, July 5 (10am – 4pm; lunch break included)	Cultivation Public Sphere  In-class project work: Coder training	Hermann et al. Habermas	
Sunday, July 6 (10am – 4pm; lunch break included)	Campaign Coverage Local and Regional news  In-class project work: Coding time	Van der Pas & Aaldering Usher et al.	Final codes and completed coding spreadsheets
<b>Week 4</b>			
Friday, July 11 (4pm – 8pm)	Misinformation Negativity & Incivility In-class Project Work: Results	Altay et al. Masullo et al.	Research Results
Saturday, July 12 (10am – 4pm; lunch break included)	Entertainment media and politics  In-class project work: Prepare Presentation	Becker Young	Quiz #2
Sunday, July 13 (10am – 4pm; lunch break included)	What is <i>good</i> in media? Research presentations Class wrap-up	(Readings Optional) McIntyre & Lough <a href="#">Good Conflict</a>	Research presentations

Note that Application Activities are not announced in advance.