

SSP 045
The Virtual Republic:
American Politics in the Media Age

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Office Hours:
M & W, 3:00-5:00 PM
Fall 2008

Course Description

Many political commentators maintain that during the past few decades a number of discouraging trends have conspired to cause a coarsening of American political debate, a growth in public disaffection with American political institutions and processes, and a diminution of the American government's capacity to address pressing social and economic problems. This course will explore the role that the mass media may have played in both generating and accelerating these trends.

This course will introduce students to disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives on the role that the media play in shaping American political discourse. The course is designed to enable students to:

1. trace the developmental "histories" of political institutions, ideas, and processes
2. appreciate the relationship between the "form" of a communication and its "content"
3. acquire the analytical tools necessary to distinguish between "information" and "knowledge" and "assertion" and "argument."
4. think critically about politicians' rhetorical and marketing strategies
5. become astute consumers of political information

In addition, this is a course about knowing, particularly about ways to identify problems, formulate productive questions, and go about answering those questions. Students in this course will demonstrate the ability to:

1. distinguish among, and formulate, types of questions asked by different disciplines
2. read critically, and gather and interpret evidence
3. distinguish among the evidence and methodologies appropriate to different disciplines
4. consider and address complexities and ambiguities
5. make connections among ideas

6. recognize choices, examine assumptions and ask questions of themselves and of their own work
7. formulate conclusions based on evidence
8. communicate ideas both orally and in writing
9. relate the results of the course to their educational goals

Course Requirements

Your grade in this course will be determined by your performance on the following:

- 1) An in-class midterm examination on October 19 (25%)
- 2) One 2-page paper due on Wednesday, September 10 (10%)
- 3) Two 5-7 page papers due on Monday, October 31 and Monday, December 1 (40%)
- 4) An in-class final examination on a date selected by the inscrutable schedulers in the Registrar's Office (25%)

Attendance

I will allow you **three (3) excused absences** from class. You must, however, provide me with your Sarah Palin-caliber vetted excuse either, transmitted either by email or by phone, **before or on the day that you miss class**. If you know before the class meeting that you absolutely must miss that class (e.g., Bear Grylls needs you to fetch some tootsie rolls from his trailer, a Chinese gymnast requires you to testify before the IOC that her competition outfits were not made by Garanimals, Nancy Grace wants you to check the position of her chair to prove to her staff that someone did move it, etc.), then **inform me of your planned absence as early in the semester as possible**.

I will deduct 2% from your final grade for any unexcused absence or any absence you incur after you have expended your three excused absences. **I will count tardies as unexcused absences**.

You should also keep in mind that according to the Academic Information Guide, "any students who miss more than a third of the (class) sessions may

expect to be barred from (the final examination). In such cases, the course grade will be recorded as F."

Fourth Credit Hour Films

You are required to attend three films that **will be screened during on mutually agreeable evenings during Weeks 3, 5, and 9. These films are texts for the course.** Both the midterm and final examinations will include questions that will require you to draw on the films. **Failure to attend a film screening will result in a 5% reduction in your final grade.**

Laptops

My favorite movie is *Braveheart* (well, it is my "favorite movie" if I am awake at 1:00 am and the alternatives are *Paula's Party* and *How It's Made*). This is because I adore all things medieval, including mutton and Inquisitions of all stripes. It is this fetish, buttressed by experience, that has caused me to establish a policy of **no laptops in class** (I know what students see when they look through those tubes on the internets). Those who have a **documented learning disability that specifies that they require a laptop to take notes in class** are exempted from this policy.

Books

The following books can be purchased at the Skidmore Shop for less than it cost the Democratic Party to purchase Convention choreography rights from Aaron Sorkin.

Scott Gant, *We're All Journalists Now*

Howard Kurtz, *Spin Cycle*

Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion*

Joe McGinniss, *The Selling of the President, 1968*

Cass Sunstein, *Republic.com 2.0*

Weekly Topics and Reading Assignments

(Note: * denotes a reading to be distributed in class)

Week 1 (September 3-5): The Information Devolution?

Readings: *Nicholas Carr, "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" *The Atlantic Monthly* (July/August 2008)

Gant, Chapters 1 and 2

Week 2 (September 8-12): The Genesis of the Problem

Readings: *George Creel, "Public Opinion in War Time," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (July 1918), pp. 185-194

*Michael Schudson, "Objectivity Becomes Ideology: Journalism after World War I," Chapter 4 in *Discovering the News*

**FIRST PAPER DUE
WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 10**

Week 3 (September 15-19): Walter Lippmann on "The Crisis of Journalism"

Readings: Lippmann, "Forward" by Ronald Steel and Chapters 1, 6-10, and 21-24

Film: Good Night and Good Luck

Week 4 (September 22-26): The Dawn of Television

Readings: * James Schwoch, "Selling the Sight/Site of Sound: Broadcast Advertising and the Transition from Radio to Television," *Cinema Journal* 30(1) (Fall 1990)

*Theodore White, "The Reign of Television," from *America in Search of Itself*

Week 5 (September 29-October 3): The "New Journalism" and the "Truth" about Richard Nixon

Readings: McGinniss, Introduction and pp. 9-168

Film: All the President's Men

Week 6 (October 5-9): Watergate, Vietnam, and the Rise of an Adversarial Press

Readings: *David Greenberg, "The Washington Press Corps: Nixon as News Manager," from *Nixon's Shadow: The History of an Image*

**MIDTERM EXAMINATION
OCTOBER 9**

Week 7 (October 13-17): Ronald Reagan, and Manipulation by Inundation

Readings: *Mark Hertsgaard, "Manipulation by Inundation," from *On Bended Knee: the Press and the Reagan Presidency*

Week 8 (October 20-22): Bill Clinton and the Art of Spin

Readings: Kurtz, Chapters 1-3 and 13-17

Week 9 (October 27-October 31): Of Soft News and Soft Heads

Readings: *Thomas Patterson, "Doing Well and Doing Good?" Paper published by The Joan Shorenstein Center for the Press, Politics, and Public Policy

*Marshall Sella, "The Stiff Guy vs., The Dumb Guy," *The New York Times Magazine* (September 24, 2000)

*Jody Baumgartner and Jonathan Morris, "The Daily Show Effect," *American Politics Research* (May 2006), pp. 341-367

**SECOND PAPER DUE
MONDAY, OCTOBER 31**

Film: Primary Colors

Week 10 (November 3-7): The Worst People in the World?

Readings: *Jonathan Morris, "Slanted Objectivity?" Paper Delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Western Political Science Association (March 16-18, 2006)

*"Cable TV," from "The State of the News Media, 2008," The Project for Excellence in Journalism

Week 11 (November 10-14): "The New, New Journalism": Digital Dreams

Readings: *Matthew Klam, "Fear and Laptops on the Campaign Trail," *The New York Times Magazine* (September 26, 2004)

Gant, Chapter 4

Week 12 (November 17-21): Welcome to the Daily Me

Readings: Sunstein, Chapters 1-3

Week 13 (November 24): Catch-Up

Readings: No Reading

Week 14 (December 1-5): The Health of the Virtual State

Readings: Sunstein, Chapters, 4-6

Gant, Chapter 5

**THIRD PAPER DUE
MONDAY, DECEMBER 1**

Week 14 (December 8-10): Review for the Final Examination"

Readings: No Reading

FINAL EXAMINATION

TBA