

**University of Tennessee**  
**Political Science Department**  
**Media and Politics (POS 425)**  
**Wednesdays, 6:45-9:35 pm**  
**HSS 217**  
**Spring 2010**

Instructor: Dr. Nikki Mitchell

Office Number: 1010 McClung Tower

Office Hours: Tuesdays and Thursdays from 2:00-3:30 pm. Students may also be seen by appointment.

Campus Phone: (865) 974-7048

UT Email: jgiles3@utk.edu

Course Description/Introduction: An important component of American democracy is an independent press, one that is free from the manipulation and censorship of government. After all, democracy requires an informed public capable of evaluating and judging candidates, policies, and all manner of information. This is why we sometimes call the American media *the fourth branch of government*. The role that it plays is critical. It informs both citizens and office holders alike. It shapes public opinion. It serves as a mouthpiece for politicians. It provides strategic information to political parties, interest groups, and other organizations. The media also serves as a watchdog on government, investigating and revealing scandals and schemes. In short, participatory democracy would be impossible without a free and independent media.

In this class, we will study the relationship between politics and media in all of its forms- TV news, magazines, newspapers, Internet sites, blogs, political comedy, etc. Our focus will be on understanding and evaluating both the successes and shortcomings of media. Some of the topics included are: how the news business works; information bias; public opinion; the link between politicians and news sources; the media and election connection; and the future of news. We will also consider some important questions such as: Is it the responsibility of the media to inform the public? Are journalists too dependent on the “packaged” stories of politicians? And, why isn’t the press more critical of certain topics, such as foreign policy?

Text and Materials: One required book: Bennett, W. Lance (2009). *News: The Politics of Illusion*, 8<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: Pearson Longman.

Additional readings will be required throughout the semester. These will be posted to Blackboard.

All students must have access to Blackboard (Online@UT) and UT email for communication, assignments, readings, and other class information. We will also be discussing current events as they relate to class, so you should have regular access to news sources (newspaper, TV, or Internet) in order to participate effectively. Here are a few useful news sources:

NPR News

The Washington Post

The New York Times

The Economist

BBC News

<http://www.npr.org/>

[www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com)

[www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)

[www.economist.com](http://www.economist.com)

[www.bbcnews.com](http://www.bbcnews.com)

**Grading Scale:** A = 93-100; A- = 90-92; B+ = 87-89; B = 83-86; B- = 80-82; C+ = 77-79; C = 73-76; C- = 70-72; D+ = 67-69; D = 63-66; D- = 60-62; F = 0-59

**Grading Policy:** The total number of possible points that may be earned is 600. The following is a breakdown of this total.

3 exams, 100 pts. each	300
paper/project	200
<u>attendance</u>	<u>100</u>
Total	600

Exams will consist of multiple choice and short answer/short essay questions. Students are expected to take exams during scheduled class times. **Make-ups will be permitted only in cases of pre-arranged school related activities (athletes), documented illness, or other documented extenuating circumstances.** There will be only one make-up exam session for those who qualify. This session will be immediately following this class's scheduled final exam.

**Attendance Policy:** Attendance is mandatory for this class, and makes-up 1/6 of the final grade (see above). Attendance will be recorded each day class meets. Students may miss up to 1 day (equivalent to one week of class) without penalty. Each absence above 1 will result in a 20 point deduction from the beginning attendance grade of 100%. For example, a student who misses 3 days of class will have a grade of 60%.

If you miss more than 30 minutes of class, either because you are tardy or leave early, you will be marked absent for the day.

**Readings:** Weekly reading assignments will be specified in class.

**Standards of Conduct:** Students are expected to abide by all *Hilltopics* standards of conduct. The guide may be accessed at <http://web.utk.edu/~homepage/hilltopics>

Students must be respectful toward one another and the instructor at all times. Debates and discussions should be based on reasoned analysis and course materials rather than emotion.

Please do not: allow cell phones to ring during class; text-message during class; arrive late or leave early; talk while the instructor is talking; read the newspaper during class; surf the Internet during class; use smokeless tobacco during class; or pack-up while the instructor is talking.

Misbehavior or disruption of the college classroom is totally unacceptable and therefore will not be tolerated. Any student who disrupts class may be asked to leave.

**Statement of Plagiarism:** Plagiarism (cheating) will not be tolerated. Plagiarism is the use of ideas, facts, opinions, illustrative material, data, direct or indirect wording of another scholar and/or writer—professional or student—without giving proper credit. Expulsion, suspension, or any lesser penalty may be imposed for plagiarism.

The university requires each student to commit to the following honor code, which can be found at <http://www.lib.utk.edu/instruction/plagairism/honor>

*“As a student of the university, I pledge that I will neither knowingly give nor receive any inappropriate assistance in academic work, thus affirming my own personal commitment to honor and integrity.”*

**Email:** Due to privacy concerns, students are required to communicate with their instructor using their official UT email address.

**Withdrawal Policy:** The deadline for withdrawing from a course with a “W” has been extended to the 63rd day of the semester (formerly 42nd day). Please note, however, that students may benefit from

consulting their instructor prior to withdrawing from a course. Often the instructor can assist with challenges that arise during the semester so that withdrawal may be avoided. Students may be eligible for support services the university provides, including tutoring and other academic support, as well as assistance with personal problems.

Disability Statement: Students who have a disability that requires accommodation(s) should make an appointment with the Office of Disability Services (974-6087) to discuss their specific needs.

## Writing Assignment

DUE DATE: April \_\_\_\_\_, 2010

The writing component of the course will consist of a number of assignments that you will submit as one product (a portfolio) in April. Assignments will be posted individually throughout the semester. Each must be typed using a 12-point font, double-spaced, and with regular margins. The portfolio must be submitted as a hard copy on the due date.

### Assignments

#### 1. The Mayhem Score

Watch a local 30 minute newscast (not Live at Five at Four). Record the date, time, and station. Avoid using newscasts on snow/severe weather days. Calculate the ratio of “mayhem” stories to the total number of stories, as discussed in class (soft news to total news stories). Remember that Klite’s definition of mayhem includes scary images/stories of crime, accidents, fires, drugs, gangs, child abuse/molestation, and the general deterioration of society.

Describe the kinds of soft stories that were reported as well as the main hard news stories reported that day. Did your experience match the description of local news given in the textbook? Had you ever noticed this before? Do you think that a high number of mayhem stories reported steadily over time has a negative affect on the audience? Do you think local news programming should be changed? If so, how?

#### 2. Secrets, Sources, and Spin

This assignment is based on 2 Frontline stories to be shown in class on Wednesday, Feb. 3rd. Completely answer these questions. Use full sentences and examples where appropriate.

### Part I

- A. How did the George W. Bush administration “sell” the Iraq invasion to the American people, according to the film?
- B. Who was Judith Miller? Why did she eventually become largely disliked in journalistic circles?
- C. How were reporters skeptical of the claims that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) treated by the press generally and by the Bush administration?
- D. What were the 2 main intelligence failures related to the decision to invade Iraq?
- E. Who was Joe Wilson and why was he eventually at odds with the Bush administration? Why did David Novak assert that Wilson was sent to Niger?
- F. Who first published Valerie Plame Wilson’s name and position in government? What was the problem with this?
- G. Why did Attorney General Ashcroft step aside as lead investigator of “Plame-gate”?
- H. What was Fitzgerald’s strategy for uncovering the truth about the leak? Why were members of the press so opposed to his efforts?
- I. Who was Time reporter Cooper’s source? Who was Miller’s source?

- J. What happened with Cooper? Why didn't he go to jail? How was this different than the outcome for Judith Miller?
- K. Why were the reporters so adamant about not revealing sources?
- L. How and when did Miller get out of jail?
- M. Was anyone charged with leaking Plame's identity? How was it determined that her identity had been revealed? Why was Scooter Libby indicted?
- N. How has the confidentiality guarantee that the press gives to sources changed since Watergate?
- O. Describe the background of the *Branzburg v. Hayes* Supreme Court case. What was the decision of the case? Is there a constitutional protection for reporters?
- P. According to the film, how do members of the press justify their position that source confidentiality should be absolute?

## Part II.

- A. Why was there some public backlash against the New York Times in regard to the Bush administration's money transferring surveillance program?
- B. How did Bush's beliefs about power and secrecy in the White House differ from Clinton's?
- C. What were some steps Bush took to consolidate power once again?
- D. How did the Bush administration view the press corps? What was their relationship like?
- E. Detail the stories reported by the Washington Post and the New York Times.
- F. Why did Dana Priest contact the Bush administration before she published her story?
- G. Who decides what would be harmful to national security if published?
- H. The 1917 Espionage Act outlawed the release of what kind of information?
- I. How did the Supreme Court rule in the Pentagon Papers case?
- J. How did the Bush administration deal with possible sources of the leaks related to data mining through telephone switches?
- K. Under what circumstances can the government demand that reporters reveal sources?
- L. In the Balco scandal, why weren't the reporters sent to jail?
- M. How did Congress justify spending the time and resources to investigate steroid use in baseball?
- N. Who is Josh Wolf and why did he spend more than 6 months in jail?

## Reflection Questions:

- A. Do you think that if a reporter has information about criminal activity, that he/she should be forced to reveal it?
- B. The film asserts that government officials or other insiders providing leaked information to reporters is a normal part of how Washington works. Do you think this is healthy to the democratic process, or harmful? Why?
- C. Do you think the press has a legitimate checks and balances function on the executive branch, in terms of what the constitution intended? What is your personal opinion?
- D. Do you think the executive branch should be able to exercise prior restraint on reporters?
- E. Do you think that reporters who reveal classified information should be punished under law?
- F. The second film ends with the statement, "Life isn't simple, not in a democracy". What do you think the speaker meant?

## 3. Liberal/Conservative journalists (or personalities)

Select **two** individuals from the sources below. You must select one liberal and one conservative journalist. Research their backgrounds, professional accomplishments, and interests. Write a short essay (4 12-point double-spaced pages maximum) for each of your selected individuals. Answer the following questions:

- A. How did the person achieve the position he/she holds today (background, education, experiences, etc.)?
- B. What is this person known for? Why is this person remarkable? (Describe the type of journalism he/she employs.) Give examples.
- C. What do you think about this person's journalistic approach and views?

\*Select one name from *The Daily Beast's* list of the top 25 **conservative** journalists:

<http://www.thedailybeast.com/blogs-and-stories/2010-02-10/the-rights-top-25-journalists/>

\* Select one name from *The Daily Beast's* list of the top 25 **liberal** journalists:

<http://www.thedailybeast.com/blogs-and-stories/2010-02-17/the-lefts-top-25-journalists/>

#### 4. Objectivity in news

Write an essay (maximum of 3 pages double-spaced) detailing your opinion of neutrality/objectivity as the journalistic standard. Use your text and other sources from class to help frame your assessment. Answer the following questions:

- A. Do you think objectivity is the best standard for journalists today in light of all the problems associated with it? Support your position with examples.
- B. If you do support continued emphasis on objectivity, discuss some ways that the challenges it presents might be reconciled.

OR

If you do not support continued emphasis on objectivity, discuss some alternatives for journalists.