

COMM 310 – Media and Society

Fall 2016

T 6:30 p.m.-9:20 p.m.

ANN L105A

Instructor: Prof. Robert Scheer (bobscheer@gmail.com)

Office: KER 209

Office Hours: by appointment

Teaching Assistants:

Addison Shockley (addison.shockley@usc.edu)

Yuehan Wang (yuehanwa@usc.edu)

Office Hours: by appointment

Introduction

Our media and our society at large are experiencing tremendous shifts — economic inequality is increasing at an alarming rate; consolidated corporations are growing not only in wealth but in power; and tumultuous changes are occurring in both the financing structure and technological nature of our media. Focusing on guest speakers with deep knowledge of pieces of the larger puzzle, this class takes a dynamic look at topics as diverse as media ownership; the economic recession and its root causes; the changing news media landscape; inter-group relations and community; pornography and violence; gender and race; standards of beauty and cosmetic surgery; sexuality; media ethics; war; national security; privacy and surveillance; and the conduct of politics. These issues provide insights into the interplay of our media and broader social and economic forces, as well as how our media *as a system* reacts to current events.

With that in mind, the key concepts that we'll be exploring include the structural and social forces that drive media to cover stories a certain way — and what that means for our democracy and our relations with the world. Why was the financial crisis under-covered, or covered in an incredibly inadequate way? What forces are at play that drive particular types of coverage and not others? Why is it that “mainstream media” never seem critical enough, and is more incisive coverage even possible given the bottom-line concerns of media corporations today? We'll also be emphasizing what new media (social or otherwise) and other forces driving change mean for the future of traditional media and the way we obtain our information.

Keep in mind three questions during each session. First, what does a discussion of *ethics* mean for the topic being explored? The United States' claim to be a representative democracy relies on the notion of the “informed citizen”; our focus on “ethics” here reflects not “rights and wrongs” in a banal sense, but rather whether or not our media serves the ambitious end of truly informing the public. We also need to ask whether the changes underway make our media more or less effective at doing so. Second, how does *power* operate on and in the evolving media

environment? Finally, what *structures and systems* are at play? These are some of the core concepts we'll be emphasizing on exams and quizzes.

Electronic Device Policy

The use of laptops, phones, tablets and any other device for browsing the web or accessing social media like Twitter, Facebook, etc. is forbidden in class. I have found that this classroom policy enhances students' ability to participate in class discussions and steers note-taking away from simply "transcribing" lectures. Concentrate on the larger questions above, and you'll do fine.

Recent research supports the use of longhand over electronic note taking: Mueller, P. A., & Oppenheimer, D. M. (2014). The pen is mightier than the keyboard: Advantages of longhand over laptop note taking. *Psychological Science*, 25(6), 1159-1168.
doi:10.1177/0956797614524581

You may be on your laptop/phone/tablet only if you are using Top Hat. (See below under required purchases for the course about Top Hat). Top Hat is the only legitimate reason you should have your electronic device out. If we notice that you are using it for other purposes we will take note and dock your participation points for the course accordingly.

Texts & Screenings

Due to the fast-moving nature of our subject, we rely much more in this class on links to current news, magazine, and journal articles than on a particular text. These readings may shift somewhat during the course of the semester. All readings will be posted under the "Readings" section on Blackboard. You are expected to check Blackboard to see what readings are required for your critical response questions the following week. **This, of course, means that you are expected to read all readings BEFORE the class for which they are assigned with the exception of those assigned for the first week.**

In addition, there are **four required purchases for the course**:

1. Top Hat (the app). You will get an email regarding this app, how to use it, and how to pay for it online soon. If you don't receive this email, you can register by visiting our direct Top Hat course URL tophat.com/e/574736. You may be able to purchase Top Hat at the university bookstore using financial aid, if you have financial aid funds to use. We will be using the Top Hat (www.tophat.com) classroom response system in class. Here, you will be able to submit answers to in-class questions using Apple or Android smartphones and tablets, laptops, or via text message (SMS). You can visit <http://tinyurl.com/THStudentRegistration> for the Student Quick Start Guide which outlines how you will register for a Top Hat account, as well as providing a brief overview to get you up and running on the system.

Top Hat will require a subscription. There are three options to choose from:

- \$24 for 4 months of unlimited access
- \$36 for 12 months of unlimited access
- \$72 for lifetime* access.

2. Robert Scheer's *They Know Everything About You: How Data-Collecting Corporations and Snooping Government Agencies Are Destroying Democracy*. Copies will be available at the bookstore, on reserve at the library, and through online retailers. [Reading assignments will be announced on Blackboard].
3. Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July* (with New Intro). Copies will be available at the bookstore, on reserve at the library, and through online retailers.
4. Mr. Fish's e-book *WARNING! Graphic Content: Political Cartoons, Comix and the Uncensored Artistic Mind* (USC Annenberg Press, 2014). This e-book is available from online retailers. [Reading assignments will be announced on Blackboard].

In-class screenings including documentaries, films, and television programs occur frequently and should be regarded as assigned texts. There will be no "make-up" screenings of media items shown in class.

Grading

- **10% Attendance:** This class is heavily dependent on the content of our guest lectures. It is absolutely vital that you attend if you expect to succeed. While the Critical Response Papers (see below) will be part of determining your presence in class, *we will do a number of spot checks in the second half of class*. Only documented medical emergencies will be considered excused absences.
- **15% Participation:** This is a critical thinking class where you are expected to engage in class discussions by raising questions, comments, or different points of view. This semester we are using Top Hat technology to get students involved in class discussion; thus, you are required to obtain Top Hat. This software will allow you to raise questions, comments, etc. live during class. Please keep comments, questions, etc. to the topic of the class, remember this is an academic setting and you should respect and act accordingly. Obscene language will not be tolerated and could result in negatively impacting your grade in class or removal for the remainder of the semester. Your participation grade does NOT include your CRP's, see below.
- **25% Critical Response Papers:** You are **required** to submit a one-page Critical Response Paper (CRP) every week on Tuesday **before the beginning** of class. It is to be **based on the prior week's readings and class lecture/discussion**. For instance, your first CRP is due on Aug 30 and will be in response to the readings and lecture for the Aug 23 class. The last page of the syllabus explains the assignment and how we will grade them. Do look that over carefully. They are not meant to be hard. Just be aware, CRPs must be turned in, in class the day they are due, or they will be given a zero. We ask that you also upload a version onto Blackboard before class starts; this way, if one is lost somehow, and we can't find it, you can point us to the Blackboard version to grade. It is a backup, and it is optional, but if you ever

come to us and say you turned in a copy, but we don't have it, then we will say “sorry, unless it's on Blackboard, we can't accept it now.” If you do not prepare a Critical Response Paper (CRP), you must write your name on a sheet of paper and turn it in at the beginning of class.

- **50% Exams:** There will be 2 full exams given in the course of the semester. Each constitutes 25% of your grade, and the last of these will be given during the official final exam period. The exam covers material from class, assigned readings/texts/videos and links. It can be hypothesized that “attentive” class presence is highly correlated with exam scores.

Both exams will be multiple-choice. Your TAs will be available by appointment throughout the semester. Please schedule a time to meet with them if you have any difficulties with the material covered in the course or if you would simply like to discuss the course concepts and content.

Quiz and Exam schedule (*subject to change*)

- The **MIDTERM EXAM** will occur in class **Oct 11, 2016**.
- The **FINAL EXAM** will take place in class (TBD).

Other miscellaneous issues

Academic Integrity: All assignments must be the original work of the student and should not have been/be used for any other course. Violation of this policy is an Academic Integrity violation. The Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism is committed to upholding the University’s Academic Integrity Code as detailed in the SCampus guide. It is the policy of the School for Communication and Journalism to report all violations of the code. Any serious violations or pattern of violations of the Academic Integrity Code will result in the student’s expulsion from the Communication major or minor. The University presumes that you are familiar with its standards and policies. Should you be found to have committed a violation, ignorance of these standards and policies will not be accepted as an excuse. For further clarification, please refer to “University Student Conduct Code” and “Appendix A: Academic Dishonesty Sanction Guidelines” in the SCampus guide.

Academic Accommodations: Any student requesting academic accommodations based on a disability are required to register with Disability Services and Programs (DSP) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from DSP when adequate documentation is filed. Please be sure the letter is delivered to the professor, or TA, as early in the semester as possible. DSP is open Monday through Friday, 8:30 a.m. - 5 p.m. The office is located in Grace Ford Salvatori Hall (GFS) Room 120 and their phone number is (213) 740-0776. For more information, go to <https://dsp.usc.edu/>

Critical Response Paper Rubric

Assignment Description:

The weekly CRP paper is not meant to be difficult. After reading the material, attending lecture, and hearing the discussion each week in class, you will **write your one-page CRP to turn in the following week**. You get to choose the topic of your paper each week. However, it must be something discussed in the readings or lecture from the previous week.

Your paper should obviously identify the topic you've chosen AND where you stand on this topic AND reasons for your stance. That is the essence of the paper. However, there is one alternate option.

When it comes time to write, if you are not ready to take a stand on your topic, then, you can identify the topic and briefly discuss some of the positions that others take on the issue (whether in the readings or in class) AND raise one question that, if answered, it could help you take a stand.

See the rubric below for details on what we look for in a paper to be considered exemplary, satisfactory, or in need of improvement.

	EXEMPLARY	SATISFACTORY	NEEDS WORK
MAKES AN ARGUMENT	Your paper identifies your stance on a topic, AND it provides substantial reasons for this stance	Your paper identifies your stance on a topic, BUT it provides minimal reasoning to support the stance	Your paper does not identify a stance, OR it does not provide any reasons for a taken stance
/			
IDENTIFIES POSITIONS & A QUESTION	Your paper identifies multiple existing positions on the topic AND raises a question that if answered could help you take a stand on the issue	Your paper EITHER identifies only one existing position on the topic OR fails to raise a question that if answered could help you take a stand on the issue	Your paper fails to clearly identify existing positions on the topic OR fails to raise a question that if answered could help you take a stand on it
INTEGRATES READINGS	Your paper quotes multiple readings or paraphrases their main ideas	Your paper quotes only one reading or paraphrases its main idea	Your paper does not refer to any readings whatsoever
INTEGRATES DISCUSSION	Your paper refers to multiple specific comments made by others during class (whether Professor Scheer, a peer, or a guest speaker)	Your paper mentions only one comment made by someone else in class (whether Professor Scheer, a peer, or a guest speaker)	Your paper does not refer to any comments made during class (whether Professor Scheer, a peer, or a guest speaker)