

COMM 310 – Media and Society

Fall 2015

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

ASC G26

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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.

Laptop Policy

Laptops, phones, tablets and any other device that allows access to Twitter, Facebook, etc. are not to be used 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.

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 two **books that you should buy:**

- 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].
- 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 Reaction Questions (discussed next) will be part of determining your presence in class, *we will do a number of spot checks in the second half of class.* If you do not prepare a critical reaction paper, you must write your name on a sheet of paper and turn it in at the beginning of class. Only documented medical emergencies will be considered excused absences.
- *30% participation, demonstrated by Critical Reaction Questions that will be turned in at the start of every class (except week 1, the week of the quiz, the week of the midterm and the week of the final exam).* Beginning with week 2, prior to class you will be expected to do the readings assigned for that week and to craft *three quality discussion questions, each a paragraph in length* and based on your outside knowledge, past experiences and extra reading you might do on the week's topic. **Hard copies of the discussion questions will be turned in at the start of class. You must also upload a Word or PDF version to Blackboard under "Assignments."** **There are no exceptions; they will not be accepted via email.** *Late assignments will only be accepted in hard copy format in class one week following the class date they are due, one point taken off for lateness.* No CRQ assignments will be accepted after that. We will evaluate your questions on a scale from 0 to 10 each week. **Please refer to the document "A Guide to Critical Response Questions" in the syllabus folder on Blackboard for more information.**
 - 6 and below: Barely accomplished the task. Evident that little preparation was done.
 - 7-8: Evidence of reading and other preparation we've asked you to do is shown; questions go beyond basic "yes or no" questions or expected short answers.
 - 9: Evidence of reading and deeper efforts to explore the issue ahead of time; questions that get to the heart of the matter concerning course material. Critical thinking is exhibited.
 - 10: Accomplishes 9, but goes well above and beyond with deep thinking that ties concepts from all articles assigned together in unique and surprising ways.
- *10% Quiz.* There will be one quiz (20-25 multiple-choice questions). It will be given at the start of class and will occur halfway to the midterm exam. The quiz serves two purposes: to prepare you for the kinds of questions that you'll receive on the full exams and to reinforce content that I think should be emphasized from 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.

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.**

There will be two opportunities for extra credit during the semester.

Quiz and Exam schedule (*subject to change*)

- The **QUIZ** will be taken in class on the fifth week of the semester (Sept 22). Details to be available on Blackboard.
- The **MIDTERM EXAM** will occur in class during the eight week (October 13).
- 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. I encourage you to visit the tutorial USC has put together at <http://breeze.usc.edu/academicintegrity>.

Special Needs. Any student requesting academic accommodation based on a disability is required to register with Disability Services and Programs (DSP) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from DSP. Please be sure the letter is delivered to your instructor or TA as early in the semester as possible. For more information, go to http://sait.usc.edu/academicsupport/centerprograms/dsp/registration/guidelines/guidelines_general.html