



Join lawyer, author and former Annenberg Dean  
Geoffrey Cowan and weekly special guests for

# JOURNALISM 460

## Social Responsibility of the News Media

Spring 2017 | Tuesdays 2-5:20 PM | 21269R

*We will grapple with timely questions including:*

How well did the press cover the 2016 elections?

In what cases should the press publish classified  
information from whistleblowers or hackers?

How did a major publication like Rolling Stone get the  
story about rape at UVA so wrong?

How are new technologies like live-streaming and  
virtual reality impacting the ethics of journalism?

**OPEN TO ALL USC STUDENTS**



## Journalism 460

### Social Responsibility of the News Media

From the birth of the republic to the present era, it has been taken as an article of faith that the news media are a fourth branch of government. Journalism has the power and responsibility to hold the leaders of the three branches of government – the executive, the legislative and the judicial - to account. Indeed, that is a central reason for the First Amendment. As Mr. Justice Hugo Black stated in the Pentagon Papers case:

“In the First Amendment the [Founding Fathers](#) gave the free press the protection it must have to fulfill its essential role in our democracy. The press was to serve the governed, not the governors. The Government's power to censor the press was abolished so that the press would remain forever free to censure the Government. The press was protected so that it could bare the secrets of government and inform the people. Only a free and unrestrained press can effectively expose deception in government.”

Society relies on the news media to describe, explain and monitor every institution of society – from business to science to sports to the arts to universities – and the world counts on media from the United States, from other countries, and from their own societies to celebrate great achievements and to expose transgressions such as human rights abuses and political or corporate corruption.

On the other hand, journalists and journalism have the capacity to do great harm. Reporters can get stories wrong, destroying lives, careers and enterprises, a failing that this course calls “false indictments.” They can publish private facts with devastating impact. They can distort information in ways that help to undermine democracy.

According to studies by the American Press Institute, public trust in the press has declined sharply in recent years, partly as the result of biased, inaccurate or unfair reports and perhaps partly as the result of efforts of certain interest groups to delegitimize what is sometimes called mainstream media. Is it possible for the press to serve as a fourth branch of government – to be a watchdog – if the public does not have confidence in its work?

These topics are of singular importance to people who hope to understand the press or to go into careers in government, law, public policy, public relations, business, international affairs, science and medicine, entertainment and the arts, and any aspect of the communication field, including journalism.

This course will explore the ways in which journalism has and continues to perform at the highest levels; the ways in which it sometimes fails; and the ways in which some of the worst excesses might be remedied. We will examine these topics in the context of some common themes including First Amendment freedoms, professional journalistic ethics, the evolution of the business due to technological advances, and the business models and consumer practices of news media.

There are great reporters and great media outlets and we will celebrate their work. But there are also countless obstacles to great reporting, some imposed by governments, some by restrictive laws, and some by the ever-changing business models and financial incentives and limitations of the industry. The amazing advances in technology in recent years have helped to increase the ability of journalists to perform at the highest level and those same advances have created new opportunities for talented, innovative and non-traditional sources of information. But the technological revolution of recent years has had undermined the traditional financial base of the news media, making us less informed. There are now fewer reporters covering some vital areas of society. There are new incentives to sensationalize news – and disincentives to cover some important stories. The need to be first with a story is sometimes the enemy of the need for accuracy and fairness. Although there has been some improvement, the population of reporters is not as diverse as some would hope, limiting the kinds of stories that are covered – and the nature of the reporting.

Changes created by technological innovations are not new. Throughout history, the news media have been disrupted by changes in technology and society. In the last century, journalism was transformed by the advent of films and then radio and then broadcast television and then cable. In recent years, new entrants into journalism such as Vice, Vox, Politico, the Huffington Post, the Daily Beast and BuzzFeed have disrupted old models. How are these new entrants dealing with old ethical questions about the role of journalism? How is technology impacting their ability to do meaningful reporting? What is the impact of Facebook and Twitter and other social media innovations that have allowed citizens to report and distribute news and have provided new

opportunities for news aggregation? And, to the extent we can predict the future, how will these process continue to change in the years ahead.

During the term we will examine a series of case studies. Each class will cover a subject matter area, often using stories ripped from the headlines (to use a dated newspaper era phrase) to highlight a serious and sometimes contentious issue and to provoke a discussion of the performance of the press in that area. At the same time, each class will seek to explore some of the legal and ethical issues that confront the press – and/or are created by the press. We will, for example, spend time discussing ways in which the press can avoid unfairly damaging people's reputation – and ways for society, within the limits of the First Amendment, to discourage, correct or penalize such stories. We will look at libel laws at the responsibly of the press to correct its own errors – and the errors of other news outlets – and at other remedies. Similarly, we will look at issues of privacy and explore the limitations, if any, on the publication of private "facts."

In other classes we will discuss the need for and problems involved in relying on anonymous sources (which may come from people with special motives) and from using stolen documents. We will look at the role of public relations practitioners. We will spend time on cases of national security and the special laws that apply in such instances. And we will look at the ways in which the subjects of various stories have been and are being covered by traditional media, new media outlets, social media, and by international sources.

Throughout, we will be concerned with issues of fundamental ethics, changing laws, and the ways in which funding of media has had and is having an impact. We will consider media history; comparative international models; and possible changes for the future including the ways in which new media technology – such as cell phones and body cameras and virtual reality– and new apps, such as periscope - are changing or could change the field.

We will ask how a major news outlet such as Rolling Stone could get an important story on rape at UVA so wrong, as well as how the story was corrected, and we will examine how one billionaire was able to destroy Gawker, a thriving website, after it's story on Hulk Hogan. We will explore why and when people chose to file cases in other countries that are less protective of press freedom.

We will debate the cases of whistle blowers, hackers, and those who divulge "national secrets" - from the Pentagon Papers to Julian Assange, Edward

Snowden, Glenn Greenwald and others. How should we think about the role of foreign powers who hack our systems? When should the press publish material gathered for political purposes. If the story is supplied by a vested interest, or is from a hostile power, should the press ever expose a source?

We will look at the coverage of major issues in the news, including the 2016 election and the series of police shootings that have torn communities apart and led to the birth of such groups as Black Lives Matter. We will study the way in which science, medicine and the environment are covered and the surprising number of mistakes that the press makes in those fields. We will consider the role of the media in covering and criticizing the entertainment industry, celebrities and the arts.

We will examine how the press is restricted in other countries - looking at, for example, China, Turkey and Hungary. We will look at the dangers faced by journalists around the world. We will explore the impact of government ownership or funding of the media.

We will also look at the legal and ethical issues involved in real stories covered in docudramas and novels – a field that could be called “the legal and ethical limits of factual misrepresentation” - and whether there should be different standards for those outlets than for the press.

Each class will be enriched by visitors who are great journalists or who have experienced the impact of journalism on their field. Guests in recent classes have ranged from the editor-in-chief of the Los Angeles Times, to Pulitzer Prize winning photographer David Hume Kennerly, to journalist and talk show host Julie Chen, to former CNN White House correspondent Jessica Yellin, to Ezra Edelman who produced the seven hour ESPN series on O. J. Simpson. Hopefully we will also have a chance to take a field trip to watch a preview of a major movie or television show that highlights our areas of concern.

The course will meet from 2-5:20pm each Tuesday and there will also be a weekly 50-minute discussion section. Each class will feature readings, discussions, and special guests.

### **Learning objectives:**

By the end of this course, students should be able to:

- Understand why social responsibility is an inherent journalistic value
- Have a grasp of case studies that exemplify successes and failures of journalistic responsibility
- Understand the ways in which powerful external forces, including governments, have attempted to interfere with freedom of the press
- Analyze ways that journalists might better protect their rights (or the rights of their readers and viewers) and pursue these responsibilities
- Have a working knowledge of the dangers posed to society when the press is not responsible
- Understand the ways in which changes in communication technology, business models of news and changes in social norms create new risks and new opportunities – including those associated with the advent of social media
- Posses a working knowledge of the ways in which those impacted by journalism can enforce or require greater media social responsibility
- Understand how the press relates to such fields as politics, international affairs, business, science, entertainment and the arts.

## Readings:

Readings will include two assigned books as well as essays, court decisions, book chapters and a weekly blog by the instructor. The assigned books are: Kovach and Rosenstiel, "The Elements of Journalism," and Downie and Kaiser, "The News about the News." ***In general, we expect to assign roughly 50 pages of reading per week, along with timely news stories, blog posts, and other content.***

We will look at some of the countless stories about the way in which elections are covered. Each year is, in some respects, unique. By the time the course starts, there will be some terrific autopsies of the role of the press in the 2016 presidential campaign. We will also look at studies from the past and at the instructor's own current book ("Let the People Rule: Theodore Roosevelt and



the Birth of the Presidential Primary”) as well as his articles on presidential primaries.

Readings will include the studies of the Pew Research Center and the American Press Institute. In some cases our readings will include case studies such as the 12,500 report by the Columbia Journalism Review on the Rolling Stone story on rape in 2014, which will be part of weeks 4 and 5 [http://www.cjr.org/investigation/rolling\\_stone\\_investigation.php](http://www.cjr.org/investigation/rolling_stone_investigation.php). We will look at the autopsy prepared by famed lawyer Floyd Abrams of CNN’s false report on Operation

Tailwind <http://www.cnn.com/US/9807/02/tailwind.findings/index.html?iref=allsearch>. We will seek to understand Ferguson and much more – including the piece called “Ferguson before #Ferguson,” as well as the earlier case of Rodney King which will have its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary this spring.

The study of national security and freedom of speech will include readings from the Pentagon papers case, a chapter from “The Day the Presses Stopped,” one of the leading books on the case, as well as a study of the play, “Top Secret: The Battle for the Pentagon Papers,” which has been produced around the world, including two tours in China, and the materials available at [topsecretplay.org](http://topsecretplay.org). To understand the concept that we call “false indictments” we will look at examples such as the Chandra Levy case.

To understand the attacks on Gawker, we will study the Forbes account of “Peter Thiel’s war on Gawker” as well as some of the court papers and court decisions. For the discussion of science, we will look at the study by the American Academy of Arts and Science in “The Public Face of Science.” For human rights, we will look at case studies by Human Rights Watch. For international reporting we will look at the press accounts from media outlets around the world as well as the role of the Voice of America.

For the class on docudramas we will examine current movies, television shows and novels and read the instructor’s article in the Annals on “Legal and Ethical Limitations of Factual Misrepresentations.”

We will seek to understand the changes in the media landscape by reading the reports of the Pew Research Center; the American Press Institute; and the instructor’s article called “Leading the Way to Better News: How the Powers that Be became the Powers that Were.”

## Grading and course requirements:

**PAPERS** (3 @ 25%). Students will write three papers, each about 2,500 words (approximately 8-10 double-spaced pages). The papers are due in class on February 14, March 21 and April 25.

**BLOGS** (10%). Students will write five short blogs on topics that are discussed in the readings and in class. ***Blog posts are due in weeks 3, 5, 7, 9, and 11.***

**EVENTS** (5%). Each student will be expected to attend at least three events from a list distributed by the instructor and to write a brief summary of each.

**CLASS PARTICIPATION** (10%). This covers general class discussion, attendance at community events, and performance in assigned presentations.

**EXTRA CREDIT** – There will be several opportunities for extra credit announced during the term.

## Class Schedule:

*Note: The schedule and topics below are tentative and subject to change. Updates to the syllabus will be announced in class and distributed via email and Blackboard. In general we expect to assign roughly 50 pages of reading per week, along with timely news stories, blog posts, and other content.*

January 10	Introduction: The changing face of the news media
January 17	Elections and Politics – with a focus on the 2016 campaign
January 24	Government (National, State and Local)
January 31	Race, Gender and Identity
February 7	Social Justice
February 14	Criminal Justice



***\*First Paper Due\****

February 21	Business
February 28	National Security and War
March 7	National Security and War
March 21	International Affairs, Human Rights and Corruption

***\*Second Paper Due\****

March 28	Science and Medicine
April 4	Sports
April 11	Entertainment and Celebrity Journalism
April 18	The Arts
April 25	Concluding class

***\*Final Paper Due\****

**Instructor:**



**Geoffrey Cowan** is a USC University Professor, the inaugural holder of the Annenberg Family Chair in Communication Leadership, and director of the USC Annenberg Center on Communication Leadership & Policy. A former director of the Voice of America and dean of the USC Annenberg School, from 2010-16 Cowan was also president of the Annenberg Foundation Trust at Sunnylands, a nonprofit organization that convenes high-level conferences for world leaders to address global challenges.

Sunnylands hosted President Obama's famed summit with Chinese President Xi Jinping in June, 2013. He is on the boards of the Pacific Council on International Policy, Common Sense Media, and the Susan Thompson Buffett Foundation, and is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the American Academy of Political and Social Science.