



**COMM 400: Media in the Global War on Terror**  
**4.0 units**

**Spring 2022, Tuesdays / Thursdays, 12:30-1:50**

**Section:** 20613

**Location:** ANN L116

**Instructor:** Isaac Blacksin

**Office:** ASC 335

**Office Hours:** Thursdays, 2:30-4:30

**Contact Info:** [blacksin@usc.edu](mailto:blacksin@usc.edu)

## **I. Course Description**

This course examines how the ongoing “forever wars” shape - and are shaped by - mass media. Focusing on journalism but with attention to photography, fiction, and film, the course aims for a global account of the ways that representations of the so-called War on Terror reproduce or disrupt societal fears, desires, and fantasies. How is media representation complicit in the expenditure of anti-terror violence? What aspects of war are displaced through normative accounts of conflict? Can an act of depiction reframe understandings of faraway violence? We will explore these questions through analyses of objectivity, trauma, law, and other dynamics relevant to mass media in the post-9/11 era, and we will consider how the “war on terror” might be imagined otherwise.

Weekly themes include mass media’s involvement in making the case for war in Iraq; the effects of the system of media embedding in warzones; depictions of torture and the culture of information-gathering; the politics of death tallies; the limitations of visual representations of suffering; disinformation and misinformation; popular constructions of the Other; the particularity of trauma as a social truth of war; the risks and affordances of fictionalizing conflict; cyber war and information war; the liberatory potentials of material art; and the return of global anti-terror war to a US domestic context. These themes will be addressed through accompanying texts and in-class conversation.

## **II. Student Learning Outcomes**

1. Students will gain familiarity with approaches to the study of global media from across the humanities and social sciences, and will be exposed to major issues in media and culture as they relate to contemporary global conflict.
2. Students will be introduced to a wide array of conceptual tools for analyzing both media and contemporary warfare, master key concepts and analytic frameworks, and develop protocols of critical reading in which texts are situated within historical, political, and cultural contexts.
3. Students will develop skills in expository writing and public presentation, and will develop the ability to formulate clear and coherent theoretical arguments, adhering to standards of evidence and scholarly rigor.

### **III. Policies and Procedures**

Attendance is mandatory, and failure to attend class will affect your grade. Please come to class ready to participate. This course depends, in many ways, on the creation of a shared body of knowledge; in this sense, the presence of each individual is critical for the success of the class as a whole. Absence for reasons of illness, religious holiday, or official university business is excused; please inform your instructor in advance of an absence. The creation of shared knowledge also depends upon a space of mutual respect, a context of collective responsibility, and a willingness to engage the ideas and expressions of your colleagues. We will work together to create an inclusive and accessible classroom environment. Students are encouraged to attend the instructor's office hours, or to contact the instructor by email to arrange a meeting. The instructor will return all emails within 48 hours.

### **IV. Required Readings**

All course texts will be made available to students as PDFs.

### **V. Description and Assessment of Assignments**

#### 1. Class participation (10%)

The course is designed to be participatory. Careful reading of course materials, and preparation for discussion, is thus essential to the collective success of the class. Participation can take a number of forms: close reading of suggestive passages; questions that perpetuate discussion; comments that engage relevant topics without monopolizing the floor. Students are encouraged to keep up with current events through daily reading of a reputable news source throughout the course. Intellectual curiosity and critical thinking are valued.

#### 2. Reading responses and questions (20%)

A reading response will be submitted every Tuesday from Week 2 to Week 14 (with the exception of Week 10). A reading question will be submitted every Thursday from Week 1 to Week 14 (with the exception of Week 10 and Week 12). Reading responses need not offer an argument, but should rather grapple with the assertions, critiques, and interventions offered in a given text. Reading questions can be muddled, insipid, naïve; they must only share a curiosity or a confusion. Reading responses and questions should be posted to the course google doc by 10am of the corresponding due date.

#### 3. Reading presentations (30%)

A 15-minute presentation on the weekly readings will be given by each student during a week of their choosing. These presentations should offer a brief overview of the texts in question and situate them within our course themes and ongoing discussions. The presentation should connect the texts to more general dynamics regarding how war and conflict is represented in mass media. The presenter need not agree with the arguments made in the texts, and can offer both critical appraisal and questions for further consideration.

#### 4. Final media project or essay (40%)

The final assignment for the class can take the form of a media project or an extended analytical essay. The media project should use a media form to engage an issue related to war, conflict, or social struggle. Examples of a media project include: using Storify or a similar digital platform to build an interactive story; shooting and editing a photo-essay; producing an audio podcast; creating a website or writing a blog; coordinating a social media campaign on Twitter; mashing up a YouTube video montage; installing a public art display; creating a short documentary. Alternatively, an 8–10 page essay should utilize a theoretical approach learned in the course toward an analysis of a text of your choosing (a novel, poem, film, videogame, advertisement, legal brief, manifesto, historical work, song). This essay should present an argument, building upon course materials and classroom discussion, about how the chosen media text operates in relation to war, conflict, or social struggle. A 1-page proposal for your project or essay – outlining your ideas for the work and your intended approach – is due on Thursday of Week 12. A short, informal presentation on media projects or final essays will be delivered for the class during Week 15. The final project or essay is due on the last day of Finals Week.

## VI. Assignment format

Assignments are due on the dates specified. Lacking prior discussion and agreement with the instructor, late assignments will receive a failing grade. All written assignments must be submitted as a Word document with doubled-spaced, 12-point type and 1-inch margins. Reading responses and reading questions are to be submitted via the course google doc.

## VII. Course Notes

Students will be graded via standard letter grade.

## VIII. Grading Breakdown

Assignment	Points	% of Grade
Class participation	10	10%
Reading responses and questions	20	20%
Class presentation	30	30%
Final project or essay	40	40%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100%</b>

## IX. Grading Scale

95% to 100%: A	80% to 83%: B-	67% to 69%: D+
90% to 94%: A-	77% to 79%: C+	64% to 66%: D
87% to 89%: B+	74% to 76%: C	60% to 63%: D-

84% to 86%: B	70% to 73%: C-	0% to 59%: F
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## X. Grading Standards

Letter Grade	Description
A	Excellent; demonstrates extraordinarily high achievement; comprehensive knowledge and understanding of subject matter; all expectations met and exceeded.
B	Good; moderately broad knowledge and understanding of subject matter; explicitly or implicitly demonstrates good, if not thorough understanding; only minor substantive shortcomings.
C	Satisfactory/Fair; reasonable knowledge and understanding of subject matter; most expectations are met; despite any shortcomings, demonstrates basic level of understanding.
D	Marginal; minimal knowledge and understanding of subject matter; more than one significant shortcoming; deficiencies indicate only the most rudimentary level of understanding.
F	Failing; unacceptably low level of knowledge and understanding of subject matter; deficiencies indicate lack of understanding.

## XI. Grading Timeline

Students will receive timely feedback; assignments will be returned to students within one week of submission, except in extraordinary circumstances. Students are responsible for notifying the instructor within one week of receiving a grade if that grade is thought to be missing or inaccurate.

## XII. Add/Drop Dates

**Link:** xxx

**xxx:** Last day to register and add classes for Session xxx.

**xxx:** Last day to change enrollment option to Pass/No Pass or Audit for Session xxx.

**xxx:** Last day to purchase or waive tuition refund insurance for spring.

**xxx:** Last day to add or drop a [Tuesday / Thursday] class without a mark of "W" and receive a refund or change to Pass/No Pass or Audit for Session xxx.

**xxx:** Last day to drop a course without a mark of "W" on the transcript for Session xxx. Mark of "W" will still appear on student record and STARS report and tuition charges still apply. [Please drop any course by the end of week three (or the 20 percent mark of the session) to avoid tuition charges.]

**xxx:** Last day to change pass/no pass to letter grade for Session xxx. [All major and minor courses must be taken for a letter grade.]

**xxx:** Last day to drop a class with a mark of "W" for Session xxx.

**xxx:** Last day to change between letter grade or Pass/No pass in a letter graded course for Session xxx

### **XIII. Weekly Schedule**

*Be advised that this syllabus is subject to change based on the progress of the class and the occurrence of world events.*

#### **Week 1: In the Wake of 9/11**

*Tuesday, 1.11*

Introduction to the study of war and media: Triggers, targets, and other homonyms

*Thursday, 1.13*

Read: Talal Asad, *On Suicide Bombing*, “Introduction” and “Terrorism,” pp. 1-38

Submit: A question

#### **Week 2: Media Matters**

*Tuesday, 1.18*

Read: Assorted coverage of the post-9/11 wars from the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and other media outlets

View: Colin Powell’s 2003 speech to the United Nations

Submit: Response paragraph

*Thursday, 1.20*

Read: Samuel Moyn, *Humane: How the United States Abandoned Peace and Reinvented War*, selections

Submit: A question

#### **Week 3: Embedded in Culture**

*Tuesday, 1.25*

Read: Stuart Hall, et al., *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order*, “The Social Production of News,” pp. 53-77

Listen: Music banned after 9/11

Submit: Response paragraph

*Thursday, 1.27*

Read: Barbie Zelizer and Stuart Allen, “Rules of Engagement: Journalism and War,” in *Reporting War: Journalism in Wartime*, pp. 3-22

Submit: A question

#### **Week 4: Torturous Texts**

*Tuesday, 2.1*

Read: Mohamedou Ould Slahi, *Guantanamo Diary*, “Notes” and “Introduction,” by Larry Siems, and “Jordon-Afghanistan-GTMO,” pp. xiii-li, 1-68

View: “Psychologists Open a Window on Brutal CIA Interrogations,” *New York Times*, 2017, and Art from Guantanamo Bay prisoners

Submit: Response paragraph

*Thursday, 2.3*

Read: Mark Danner, *Torture and Truth: America, Abu Ghraib, and the War on Terror*, “Torture and Truth” and “The Logic of Torture,” pp. 1-26

Submit: A question

#### **Week 5: Who Counts?**

*Tuesday, 2.8*

Read: Muhammad Idrees Ahmad, “The Magical Realism of Body Counts: How Media Credulity and Flawed Statistics Sustain a Controversial Policy,” *Journalism* 17: 18–34

View: “The Fallen of World War II”

Submit: Response paragraph

*Thursday, 2.10*

Read: Shannon Pufahl, “Numbering the Dead,” *New York Review of Books*, 1 May 2021

Submit: A question

#### **Week 6: Visualizing War**

*Tuesday, 2.15*

Read: Bernd Hüppauf, “Experiences of Modern Warfare and the Crisis of Representation,” *New German Critique* 59: 41-76

View: *War Photographer* (dir. Christian Frei, 2001), selections

Submit: Response paragraph

*Thursday, 2.17*

Read: Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, "One," pp. 3-17

Submit: A question

### **Week 7: Objectivity's Interests**

*Tuesday, 2.22*

Read: Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective" *Feminist Studies* 14 (3): 575-599

View: Short films from the Abounaddara collective

Submit: Response paragraph

*Thursday, 2.24*

Read: Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," *Critical Inquiry* 7(1): 5-24

Submit: A question

### **Week 8: A New Orientalism**

*Tuesday, 3.1*

Read: Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*, selections

View: "[Collateral Murder](#)," Wikileaks, 2007

Submit: Response paragraph

*Thursday, 3.3*

Read: Samuel Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs*, Summer 1993, pp. 22-49

Submit: A question

### **Week 9: Traumatic Tales**

*Tuesday, 3.8*

Read: Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman, *The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood*, "Introduction," "A Dual Genealogy," "The Long Hunt," and "Conclusion," pp. 1-54, 275-284

View: "[O Say Can You See](#)," Laura Poitras, 2011

Submit: Response paragraph

*Thursday, 3.10*

Read: Roy Scranton, "[The Trauma Hero](#)," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 25 Jan. 2015

Submit: A question

### **Week 10: Fact or Fiction**

*Tuesday, 3.23*

Read: Ahmed Saadawi, *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, selections

View: *Iraq in Fragments* (dir. James Longley, 2006), selections

Submit: Response paragraph

*Thursday, 3.25*

Read: Phil Klay, *Redeployment*, pp. 1-16

Submit: A question

### **Week 11: The Unrepresented**

*Tuesday, 3.29*

Read: Lori Allen, "Martyr Bodies in the Media: Human Rights, Aesthetics, and the Politics of Immediation in the Palestinian Intifada," *American Ethnologist* 36(1): 161-180

View: *The Missing Picture* (dir. Rithy Panh, 2013), selections

Submit: Response paragraph

*Thursday, 3.31*

Read: Allen Feldman, *Archives of the Insensible: Of War, Photopolitics, and Dead Memory*, selections

Submit: A question

### **Week 12: Virtual and Virtuous**

*Tuesday, 4.5.*

Read: Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Cyberwar*, "Introduction" and "Part 1," pp. 1-66

View: "[Mirages](#)" (dir. Emanuel Licha, 2011)

Submit: Response paragraph



*Thursday, 4.7*

Read: James Der Derian, *Virtuous War: Mapping the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network*,  
“After 9/11,” pp. 223-244

Submit: Final project / essay proposal

### **Week 13: Art Amidst Terror**

*Tuesday, 4.12*

Read: Wafaa Bilal, *Shoot an Iraqi: Art, Life, and Resistance Under the Gun*, selections

View: “Shoot an Iraqi” (dir. Wafaa Bilal, 2008) and “How Not to be Seen” (dir. Hito Steyerl, 2013)

Submit: Response paragraph

*Thursday, 4.14*

Read: Laura Poitras et al., *Astro Noise: A Survival Guide for Living Under Total Surveillance*,  
“Introduction,” pp. 24-35

Submit: A question

### **Week 14: The War on Terror Comes Home**

*Tuesday, 4.19*

Read: Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America*,  
selections

View: “[The Police Trainer Who Teaches Cops to Kill](#),” *New Yorker*, 2017

Submit: Response paragraph

*Thursday, 4.21*

Read: Martin Schoots-McAlpine, “Anatomy of a Counter-Insurgency,” *Monthly Review*, 03 July 2020

Submit: A question

### **Week 15: Over the Horizon**

*Tuesday, 4.26*

Student presentations and feedback

*Thursday, 4.28*

Student presentations and feedback

**\* Final project / essay due during finals week**

## **XIV. Academic Conduct and Support Systems**

### 1. Academic Conduct

Plagiarism – presenting someone else’s ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in *SCampus* in Part B, Section 11, “[Behavior Violating University Standards](#).” Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in *SCampus* and university policies on scientific misconduct, [policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct](http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct).

The School of Communication maintains a commitment to the highest standards of ethical conduct and academic excellence. Any student found responsible for plagiarism, fabrication, cheating on examinations, or purchasing papers or other assignments will be reported to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs and Community Standards and may be dismissed from the School of Communication. There are no exceptions to the school’s policy.

In addition, it is assumed that the work you submit for this course is work you have produced entirely by yourself, and has not been previously produced by you for submission in another course, without approval of the instructor.

### 2. Support Systems

*Counseling and Mental Health* - (213) 740-9355, 24/7 on call. [studenthealth.usc.edu/counseling](http://studenthealth.usc.edu/counseling)  
Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention.

*National Suicide Prevention Lifeline* - 1 (800) 273-8255, 24/7 on call. [suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://suicidepreventionlifeline.org)  
Free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

*Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention and Services (RSVP)* - (213) 740-9355(WELL), press “0” after hours, 24/7 on call. [studenthealth.usc.edu/sexual-assault](http://studenthealth.usc.edu/sexual-assault)  
Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender-based harm.

*Office of Equity and Diversity (OED)* - (213) 740-5086 | *Title IX* – (213) 821-8298. [equity.usc.edu](http://equity.usc.edu), [titleix.usc.edu](http://titleix.usc.edu) Information about how to get help or help someone affected by harassment or discrimination, rights of protected classes, reporting options, and additional resources for students, faculty, staff, visitors, and applicants. The university prohibits discrimination or harassment based on the following *protected characteristics*: race, color, national origin, ancestry, religion, sex, gender, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, age, physical disability, medical condition, mental disability, marital status, pregnancy, veteran status, genetic information, and any other characteristic which may be specified in applicable laws and governmental regulations. The university also prohibits sexual assault, non-consensual sexual contact, sexual misconduct, intimate partner violence, stalking, malicious dissuasion, retaliation, and violation of interim measures.

*Reporting Incidents of Bias or Harassment* - (213) 740-5086 or (213) 821-8298, [usc-advocate.symplicity.com/care\\_report](https://usc-advocate.symplicity.com/care_report)

Avenue to report incidents of bias, hate crimes, and microaggressions to the Office of Equity and Diversity |Title IX for appropriate investigation, supportive measures, and response.

*The Office of Disability Services and Programs* - (213) 740-0776. [dsp.usc.edu](https://dsp.usc.edu)

Support and accommodations for students with disabilities. Services include assistance in providing readers/notetakers/interpreters, special accommodations for test taking needs, assistance with architectural barriers, assistive technology, and support for individual needs.

*USC Support and Advocacy* - (213) 821-4710. [uscsa.usc.edu](https://uscsa.usc.edu)

Assists students and families in resolving complex personal, financial, and academic issues adversely affecting their success as a student.

*Diversity at USC* - (213) 740-2101. [diversity.usc.edu](https://diversity.usc.edu)

Information on events, programs and training, the Provost's Diversity and Inclusion Council, Diversity Liaisons for each academic school, chronology, participation, and various resources for students.

*USC Emergency - UPC:* (213) 740-4321, *HSC:* (323) 442-1000, 24/7 on call. [dps.usc.edu](https://dps.usc.edu),

[emergency.usc.edu](https://emergency.usc.edu). Emergency assistance and avenue to report a crime. Latest updates regarding safety, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible.

*USC Department of Public Safety - UPC:* (213) 740-6000, *HSC:* (323) 442-120, 24/7 on call. [dps.usc.edu](https://dps.usc.edu)

Non-emergency assistance or information.

*Annenberg Student Success Fund* - <https://annenberg.usc.edu/current-students/resources/annenberg-scholarships-and-awards>

The Annenberg Student Success Fund is a donor-funded financial aid account available to USC Annenberg undergraduate and graduate students for non-tuition expenses related to extra- and co-curricular programs and opportunities.