



Comm 400, Theories & Methods: Media on Conflict
4.0 units

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

Section: 20614R

Location: ANN L115

Instructor: Isaac Blacksin

Office: ASC 335

Office Hours: Tuesdays, 2:30-4:30, or by appointment

Contact Info: blacksin@usc.edu

I. Course Description

This course offers a practical and theoretical inquiry into the mediation of conflict, from news reporting and marketing to social media and cinema. Utilizing various theoretical paradigms and methodological approaches, we will examine the representation of policing and popular protest; warfare and counterinsurgency; culture war and information war; and conflicts over race, gender, and political identity. Operating at the intersection of critical inquiry and practical application, a primary aim is the development of deeper understandings of the stakes and effects of doing media amidst social struggle. We will investigate how conflict is popularly represented, the limits of this process, and the possibilities for representing conflict otherwise.

The course is designed for both media makers and students of communication. By leveraging theories of representation from across the humanities and social sciences, and by exploring methodological tools central to both the production of media and the study thereof, the course provides a critical entry point for the activity and conceptualization of media on conflict. Weekly themes include the politics of objectivity; the representation of crime and criminality; understandings and depictions of trauma; and the social construction of "the other." These themes will be addressed through accompanying texts – both foundational and newly published – as well as in-class conversation.

II. Student Learning Outcomes

1. Students will be exposed to major issues in media and culture as they relate to conflicts concerning race, class, ethnicity, gender, and political identity, and will gain familiarity with various methods for the representation of conflict and for the study of mass media.
2. Students will be introduced to a wide array of theoretical tools for analyzing both media and contemporary conflict, 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 (15%)

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. Intellectual curiosity and critical thinking are valued. Additionally, a reading response should be submitted every Tuesday from Week 2 to Week 14. Reading responses need not offer an argument, but should grapple with the assertions, critiques, and interventions offered in a given text. Reading responses should be posted to the course Google Doc by 10 a.m. on Tuesdays.

2. Media presentation (20%)

The media presentation is a formal, in-class presentation of 6 to 8 minutes that offers an analysis of a media representation of conflict (broadly construed) using one of the theories explored in the course. The presentation should summarize the media representation in question and provide an argument about how that media represents conflict and to what effect. Further guidelines will be provided during Week 3.

3. Media project (30%)

The media project should use a media form to engage an issue related to conflict (broadly construed). 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. Further guidelines will be provided during Week 7. A short, informal presentation on the media project will be delivered for the class during Week 10.

4. Media essay (35%)

An 8 to 10-page analytic 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 conflict (broadly construed). Further guidelines will be provided during Week 11. A short, informal presentation on final essays will be delivered for the class during Week 15. The final essay is due during Finals Week.

VI. Assignment Submission

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 are to be submitted via the course Google Doc.

VII. Grading Breakdown

| Assignment | Points | % of Grade |
|---|--------|------------|
| Class participation and Reading responses | 15 | 15% |
| Media presentation | 20 | 20% |
| Media project | 30 | 30% |
| Final essay | 35 | 35% |
| TOTAL | 100 | 100% |

VIII. 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 |

IX. 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. |

X. Grading Timeline

Students will receive timely feedback; all 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.

XI. Weekly Schedule

Be advised that this syllabus is subject to change based on the progress of the class and the occurrence of world events. Students should consult the University [Registration Calendar](#) for dates associated with add/drop deadlines, fees, and grading options.

Week 1: Setting In

Tuesday, 8.23

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

Thursday, 8.25

Read: Stuart Hall, "The Work of Representation," in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, pp. 18-63

Week 2: Power and Objectivity 1

Tuesday, 8.30

Read: James Carey, "The Culture in Question," in *James Carey: A Critical Reader*, pp. 308-340

View: *Manufacturing Consent*, selections (1992, dirs. Peter Wintonick and Mark Achbar)

Submit: Reading response paragraph

Thursday, 9.1

Read: Janet Malcom, "The Morality of Journalism," *New York Review of Books*

Week 3: Power and Objectivity 2

Tuesday, 9.6

Read: Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies*

View: *Manufacturing Consent*, selections (1992, dirs. Peter Wintonick and Mark Achbar)

Submit: Reading response paragraph

Thursday, 9.8

Read: Svetlana Alexievich, *Zinky Boys*, "Notes from My Diary" and "The First Day," pp. 10-84

Week 4: Crime and its Discontents 1

Tuesday, 9.13

Read: Allissa Richardson, *Bearing Witness While Black: African Americans, Smartphones, and the New Protest #Journalism*, selections TBD

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

Submit: Reading response paragraph

Thursday, 9.15

Read: Mike Davis, *Set the Night on Fire: L.A. in the Sixties*, "Warden of the Ghetto," pp. 39-49

Week 5: Crime and its Discontents 2

Tuesday, 9.20

Read: Mya Frazier, "Stop Using 'Officer-Involved Shooting,'" *Columbia Journalism Review*

View: Police recruitment advertisements

Submit: Reading response paragraph

Thursday, 9.22

*** Media Presentations**

Week 6: War and Violence 1

Tuesday, 9.27

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

View: *The Dark Knight*, selections (2008, dir. Christopher Nolan)

Submit: Reading response paragraph

Thursday, 9.29

Read: Azmat Khan and Anand Gopal, "The Uncounted," and Azmat Khan, "Hidden Pentagon Records Reveal Patterns of Failure in Deadly Airstrikes," *New York Times Magazine*

Week 7: War and Violence 2

Tuesday, 10.4

Read: Daniel Hallin, *The Uncensored War: The Media and Vietnam*, selections TBD

View: *The Dark Knight*, selections (2008, dir. Christopher Nolan)

Submit: Reading response paragraph

Thursday, 10.6

Read: Mohamedou Ould Slahi, *Guantanamo Diary*, "Jordon-Afghanistan-GTMO," pp. 1-68

Week 8: Conflict and Identity

Tuesday, 10.11

Read: Asad Haider, *Mistaken Identity: Mass Movements and Racial Ideology*, selections TBD

View: "[Psychologists Open a Window on Brutal CIA Interrogations](#)," *New York Times*

Submit: Reading response paragraph

Thursday, 10.13

Read: Rutgers University Initiative on Gender Based Violence, report on gender violence in journalism, selections TBD

Week 9: Data and the Digital

Tuesday, 10.18

Read: Eyal Weizmann, *Forensic Architecture: Violence at the Threshold of Detectability*, selections TBD

View: "[How a US Drone Strike Killed the Wrong Person](#)," *New York Times*

Submit: Reading response paragraph

Thursday, 10.20

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

Week 10: Suffering and the Social 1

Tuesday, 10.25

Read: Samuel Moyn, *Humane: How the United States Abandoned Peace and Reinvented War*, "The Warning" and "Epilogue," pp. 17-46, 313-325

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

Submit: Reading response paragraph

Thursday, 10.27

Media project presentations

*** Media projects due**

Week 11: Suffering and the Social 2

Tuesday, 11.1

Read: Robert Meister, *After Evil: The Politics of Human Rights*, selections TBD

View: *The Act of Killing*, selections (2013, dir. Joshua Oppenheimer)

Submit: Reading response paragraph

Thursday, 11.3

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

Week 12: Trauma Today

Tuesday, 11.8

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: *The Act of Killing*, selections (2013, dir. Joshua Oppenheimer)

Submit: Reading response paragraph

Thursday, 11.10

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

Week 13: Informational Conflict

Tuesday, 11.15

Read: Joseph Bernstein, "Bad News: Selling the Story of Disinformation," *Harpers*

View: *Citizen Four*, selections (2014, dir. Laura Poitras)

Submit: Response

Thursday, 11.17

Read: Brian Winston and Mathew Winston, *The Roots of Fake News: Objecting to Objective Journalism*, selections TBD

Week 14: Constructing the Other

Tuesday, 11.22

Read: Edward Said, *Orientalism*, "Introduction," pp. 1-28

View: *Citizen Four*, selections (2014, dir. Laura Poitras)

Submit: Reading response paragraph

Thursday, 11.24

No Class

Week 15:

Tuesday, 11.29

Student presentations and feedback

Thursday, 12.1

Student presentations and feedback

*** Media essay due Dec. 14th, the last day of finals week**

XIV. Land Acknowledgement

Given the topic of this course, it is especially important to acknowledge that the land upon which we gather was acquired through war and conflict – conflict that remains, in many respects, ongoing. This class is being taught on the unceded territory of the Tongva people and their neighbors, whose ancestors ruled the region we now call Southern California for at least 9,000 years. Indigenous stewardship and rightful claims to these lands have never been voluntarily relinquished nor legally extinguished. On the ingenious history of the USC campus, and the continued land stewardship of indigenous peoples, please see [these details](#).

XV. 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.

The Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism 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. 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
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

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

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, 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

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

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. uscса.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

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, 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
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.