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PSC 342.01: Media and Public Opinion

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MEDIA AND PUBLIC OPINION - PSC 342

Spring 2007

MWF 2:10 – 3:00, 337 Liberal Arts

Professor Christopher Muste

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COURSE DESCRIPTION: This course provides an overview of the news media and public opinion, two of the main dynamic forces in American politics, and explores the critical interaction between news media practices and content, and public opinion formation and expression. The media-opinion interaction is not a one-way street, and while we will focus on the effects of the news media on mass opinion, we will also explore some of the ways in which citizens influence the media, other major political actors, and public policy.

The course is divided into three general sections. The first section focuses on public opinion – how to define it, how to measure it, and some of the fundamental concepts used by scholars to understand public (or “mass”) opinion and its influence on public policy. In the second section we examine the news media’s methods of selecting, gathering, and disseminating news, government policies and other pressures on the media, and the news content that results. The third section explores the interaction between media and opinion, paying special attention to the processes of influence, the different circumstances under which media can influence opinion, and the ways in which the media link or fail to link citizens to politics.

In this course we study theories and concepts about the roles of media and public opinion in a democratic society, as well as the evidence used by social scientists to evaluate those theories and concepts. Students must understand the theories and concepts, understand how evidence relates to those theories and concepts, and learn to apply the theories and concepts to their own use and analysis of news media.

READINGS: There is one textbook for this course, available at the University Bookstore. It is: Jan E. Leighley, *Mass Media and Politics: A Social Science Perspective*, Houghton-Mifflin, 2004 (this is listed as “MM&P” in the readings section below).

The other readings for the course will be available on electronic and traditional paper course reserves at the Mansfield Library, and are listed individually in the “Course Topics and Readings” section below.

Students should also become regular and critically aware consumers of news media and media coverage relating to public opinion. For this reason you should keep up with news coverage in a major newspaper on a daily basis. The *New York Times* and *The Washington Post* are two of the best in news coverage and have free websites (www.nytimes.com, www.washingtonpost.com). The *Wall Street Journal* is also a good news source, but it has less political news and is only available free on Factiva, through the Mansfield Library website.

Other sources of news can provide a useful contrast with and supplement to newspapers and are important to a fuller understanding of media, but they are typically either less timely or complete. These include reading weekly news magazines such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, or *U.S. News*; watching the national news on the major tv networks, CNN, Fox News, or PBS (“The News Hour”); or listening to public radio news (on KUFM, 89.1). In addition, tv public affairs programs such as “Washington Week,” “Meet the Press” and “This Week” are good ways to observe how journalists look at politics and how political leaders try to present their views in ways that appeal to the public. You should keep up with these sources as often as possible, and focus on the national and state news coverage. The Missoulian and local tv news do not have enough coverage of national political news to be very useful in this regard, but provide good examples of local news coverage for our discussions.

ACADEMIC HONESTY:

All students must practice academic honesty. Academic misconduct is subject to an academic penalty by the course instructor and/or a disciplinary sanction by the University.

All students need to be familiar with the Student Conduct Code. The Code is available for review online at <http://www.umt.edu/sa/VPSA/index.cfm/page/1321> .

I take academic honesty very seriously, and will do my utmost to prevent, uncover, and penalize any form of cheating in this course. See p. 21 of the *2006-2007 Catalog*, and the Student Conduct Code on the UM website listed above. Please contact me if you have any questions or concerns about academic honesty

CLASS COURTESY:

In order to have a pleasant and effective learning environment in class, we need to observe a few basic courtesies. This is a small campus, so it is possible to get to the classroom on time from all other campus buildings; arriving late or leaving early disrupts the class and disturbs other students and the instructor. Please turn off all cell phones before class begins. Please don't read a newspaper or other non-course material, or eat during class. If you have a question or comment about the material, please raise your hand instead of discussing it with your neighbor. We'll all benefit if we just keep in mind the reason we're in the room together.

DROP POLICY AND INCOMPLETES:

You can drop classes on Cyberbear until February 9. From February 10 until March 5 you can drop using a drop slip signed by me. After March 5, you must go through the more formal and difficult "late drop" petition process. I will sign late drop petitions for only one week after the midterm exams are graded, and not thereafter except under extraordinary circumstances.

Incompletes will only be permitted when all the conditions set forth in the official University policy are met -- the policy is on pages 20-21 of the *University of Montana 2006-2007 Catalog*.

DSS STUDENTS:

Qualified students with disabilities will receive appropriate accommodations in this course. Students with disabilities requesting accommodations on exams, papers, or other course requirements should contact me as soon as possible, and must contact DSS in order to arrange for and provide me with a letter of approval for accommodations. DSS is in Lommasson Center 154.

EMAIL AND BLACKBOARD

In order to obtain course materials and access your grades and other important course information, you will need to sign into the Blackboard website that has been created for this course. Information on how to access your account is at: <http://www.umt.edu/ce/umonline/students/welcome.htm>

Blackboard uses your official UM email account, so you should check it frequently. I may also send e-mails to your official UM e-mail account. If you use another email account, go into Cyberbear to have your official UM email forwarded to your preferred email account.

GRADUATE STUDENTS

Graduate students taking this course must complete additional graduate-level readings for each course topic as specified by the instructor, and must complete a 20-25 page research paper consisting of a research design and hypothesis, original coding and analysis of multiple criteria of news content, extensive literature review, and an analysis that synthesizes the three components.

4/9 - 13 VIII. Media as Propaganda? Information, Learning and Persuasion

1. Leighley, "The Media, Political Knowledge, and Political Attitudes," Chapter 6 in *MM&P*, pp. 142-174.
2. Zaller, "Information, Predispositions, and Opinion," Chapter 2 in *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, pp. 6-39.
3. Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, "2006 Media Usage and Credibility Study," excerpts.
4. Kull, et al., "Misperceptions, the Media, and the Iraq War," in *Political Science Quarterly* v.118, pp. 569-598.

4/16 - 20 IX. Media Influence: Minimal Effects and More

1. Leighley, "Agenda-Setting, Priming, and Framing," Chapter 7 in *MM&P*, pp. 175-198.
2. Iyengar, "News Coverage of the Gulf Crisis and Public Opinion: a Study of Agenda-setting, Priming, and Framing," in *Communication Research*, pp. 365-383.
3. Gilliam & Iyengar "Prime Suspects"
4. Bosso, "Setting the Agenda: Mass Media and the Discovery of Famine in Ethiopia."
5. Zaller, "Monica Lewinsky's Contribution to Political Science," in *PS: Political Science and Politics* v.31, pp. 182-189.

*** 4/23 (MONDAY): RESEARCH PAPER DUE IN CLASS.**

4/23 - 25 X. Media and Elections: Candidates, Campaigns, and Audience Response

1. Leighley, "The Mass Media and Elections," Chapter 8 in *MM&P*, pp. 199-242.
2. Patterson, "The Miscast Institution," in *Out of Order*, pp. 28-52.
3. Ansolabehere and Iyengar, "The Withdrawal of the Voter," in *Going Negative*, pp. 99-114.

4/27 - 30 XI. Political Elites and the Media

1. Leighley, "Political Institutions and the Mass Media," Chapter 5 in *MM&P*, pp. 104-141.

5/2 - 5/4 XII. Connecting the Dots: The Present and Future of Public Opinion and the News Media

1. Project for Excellence in Journalism, "The State of the News Media 2006."
2. Baum, "How Soft News Brings Policy Issues to the Inattentive Public."
3. Readings on the web, blogs, and news cycles: To Be Determined.

*** 5/8 (TUESDAY): FINAL EXAM, 3:20 – 5:20**