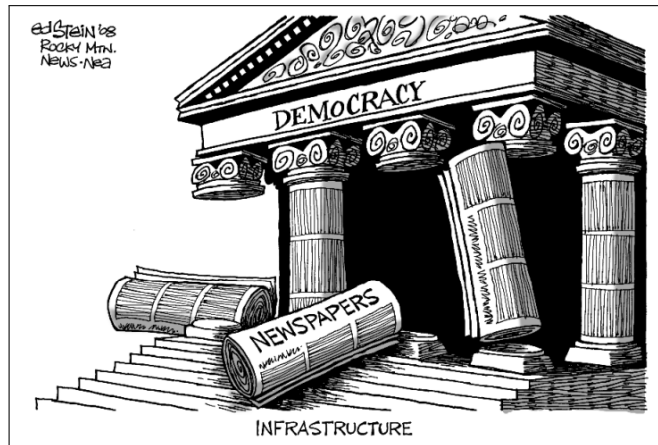


Media and Politics

University of Wisconsin–Madison

Fall 2025



Source: Ed Stein, Rocky Mountain News

Course Information

Designation: POLI SCI 400 (008)
Lectures: Tue/Thu 11:00AM–12:15PM
Location: 4028 Vilas Hall (in-person)
Course Website: [Canvas](#)
Credits: 3.0

Instructor Information

Instructor: Prof. Andrew Trexler
Email: atrexler@wisc.edu
Office: 301 North Hall
Office Hours: Mon 10:30-11:30AM and
Wed 1:30-2:30PM

Course Overview

The modern media environment is rapidly evolving, with major implications for politics. Media institutions serve critical functions in political and democratic processes, shaping the nature and flow of information that citizens, public officials, and civil society need to make decisions in public affairs. This course provides an introduction to the study of media and politics, examining the interactions between political actors, media institutions, and mass publics in a changing information environment, with a primary (but not exclusive) focus on the United States. The course explores the implications of advancing communication technologies, the changing information environment, the evolving nature of news and its consumption, political communication in campaigns and elections, and the role of media institutions in shaping the political agenda, public opinion, information processing, and mass engagement in public affairs.

After completing this course, you should be able to:

1. Describe the functions of media and political communication in a democratic society.
2. Evaluate the performance of media in fulfilling democratic functions.
3. Explain the competing goals and interests that govern interactions between the media, political leaders, and the mass public.
4. Analyze media agendas, news framing, and attention to understand downstream effects on public opinion and politics.
5. Assess the quality of the contemporary political information environment.

The course material will examine political communication and consumer behavior from theoretical and empirical perspectives. Be prepared to dig into graphs and tables, and to conduct some hands-on analysis. I hope you will engage deeply with the material, ask probing questions, find some conclusions surprising and others intuitive, and finish the semester with some new tools for understanding the role of media in shaping politics and vice versa.

This is a 3.0 credit course with an expectation of 135 hours of student engagement in course learning activities, meaning that you should expect to spend about three hours outside the classroom (i.e., on readings, assignments, studying) for every hour in the classroom.

Grading

There are a maximum of 1,000 points that you may earn in this course:

Assessment	Max. Points
Media Diet Self-assessment (due Sep 16)	50
News Story Analysis (due Oct 9)	100
Midterm Exam (Oct 23)	200
News Agendas Report (due Nov 6)	150
Media Poll Investigation (due Nov 20)	100
Final Exam (Dec 12)	300
Attendance & Participation	100
Total	1,000

From your final point total, your final course grade is calculated as follows:

Point Total	Final Grade
930–1,000	A
880–929	AB
830–879	B
780–829	BC
700–779	C
600–699	D
0–599	F

Late Assignments

All assignments are due by class time on the day noted. Assignments will receive a 10 percent penalty for each 24-hour period that they are late (but see Tokens below). No assignment will be accepted more than one week after the original deadline.

Re-grading

Once an assignment or exam has been graded and returned, students are required to wait at least 48 hours before contacting me about their grade. If you feel that the grade you received does not reflect your performance on the assignment or exam, you may contact me by email to request clarification on the feedback you received. You may also request that the assignment or exam be re-graded, but must do so within two (2) weeks of the assignment or exam being returned. This request must be accompanied by a written memo (no more than 500 words) presenting a cogent argument for why your assignment should be re-graded, using evidence from your assignment or exam to support your case, and specifying the grade that you believe your performance merits. If the argument you provide is valid, I will then re-grade the assignment or exam. Note that your grade could improve or decrease once re-graded. All re-grades are final. (*Note: This policy applies to substantive regrading requests. Like everyone, I occasionally make basic arithmetic errors. If your points were simply summed incorrectly, or incorrectly entered into Canvas, please just email me.*)

Tokens

Students often have to balance their coursework with jobs, family responsibilities, health challenges, and other hurdles of life outside the classroom. Sometimes, events outside your control interrupt your learning in sudden and unexpected ways. To reduce stress in these scenarios and create flexibility for students, I use a “token” system that allows students to extend certain deadlines. Each student begins the semester with three (3) tokens, which can each be used to:

- Extend the deadline for any take-home assignment (media diet self-assessment, news story analysis, news agendas report, or media poll investigation) by 24 hours, no questions asked. Multiple tokens may be used for the same assignment.
- Excuse a single class absence, no questions asked. You will receive full attendance credit for the excused lecture or section meeting.

I generally do not allow extensions or excuse absences beyond these three tokens except in extremely extenuating circumstances (e.g., lengthy comas, commencement of nuclear warfare, etc.), so I strongly recommend reserving your tokens for actual emergencies rather than routine procrastination. To use a token, submit a Token form on [Canvas](#).

Note that tokens cannot be used for exams. Exams (the midterm and final) must be taken at the day and time specified in the syllabus. Missing an exam will result in a zero for that exam and place your final grade in serious jeopardy. If you have an unavoidable conflict for either exam (or suffer a dire catastrophe at that time), please contact me as soon as possible.

Assessments

Below is a brief summary of what you will be assessed on. Additional guidance on each assessment (except attendance & participation) will be provided on [Canvas](#) at least two weeks in advance of the due date. All take-home assignments should be submitted through [Canvas](#).

Media Diet Self-assessment: You will assess your own media consumption habits by completing a brief survey. This self-assessment is due by the start of class on September 16 and is worth 50 points.

News Story Analysis: You will choose a recent news story reported on by at least two news outlets and assess the amount and quality of information each source provides, such as the dominant narrative frames each source uses, its engagement with multiple points of view, and how well the coverage fulfills the media's normative democratic functions. This analysis, not to exceed 750 words, is due by the start of class on October 9 and is worth 100 points.

Midterm Exam: The midterm exam will be held in person during class on October 23 and will cover course material up to that point. The exam will be closed-note and conducted the old-fashioned way, with exam blue books and pencils (or pens, if you are feeling confident). If you need accommodations due to a learning disability, see Resources below. The exam will involve a combination of short answer questions regarding key course concepts and brief essay questions that ask you to apply your knowledge from the course. In total, the midterm exam is worth 200 points.

News Agendas Report: You will conduct an analysis of two news sources over three days, identifying top stories published by each source and documenting some information about each story. Using the data that you have collected, you will write a brief report, not to exceed 1,000 words, comparing and contrasting the two sources' agendas and summarizing your findings. This report is due by the start of class on November 6 and is worth 150 points.

Media Poll Investigation: You will identify a public opinion poll recently reported by a media outlet and attempt to identify several key pieces of information about the poll, such as who conducted the poll, what the sample was, and how its questions were asked. A summary of your findings, not to exceed 750 words, is due by the start of class on November 20 and is worth 100 points.

Final Exam: The final exam will be held in person on Saturday, December 13, from 2:45-4:45PM. The final exam may include any material covered in the course (cumulative). The exam will be closed-note and conducted the old-fashioned way, with exam blue books and pencils (or pens if you are feeling confident). If you need accommodations due to a learning disability, see Resources below. The exam will involve a combination of short answer questions regarding key course concepts and brief essay questions that ask you to apply your knowledge from the course. In total, the final exam is worth 300 points.

Attendance & Participation: Attending class, participating in class discussions, and

engaging with the course material during class activities are important parts of the learning process for this course, and are therefore required. Attendance will be tracked for each class. There are 26 class meetings this semester (not including the final exam); each student gets one grace absence (in addition to the Token system noted above) and the remaining 25 class meetings are worth a maximum of 4 points each for a total of 100 points.

Expectations

Alongside the assessments noted above, I have several expectations of you in this course, which if not followed may reflect in your assessments and grades. These include:

1. **Read & take notes:** Readings for this course provide necessary background information about the concepts that we will discuss during class and that you will be asked to apply in your assignments and exams. The readings include a mix of scholarly works (book chapters, journal articles), lighter fare that summarizes scholarship for a broad audience (what academics call “public scholarship”), and exemplars of media content from around the web. All readings are available on [Canvas](#). I expect you to examine these readings carefully before class on the day assigned, take notes, and come to class prepared to discuss—including any questions you may have. You should also take notes during class, though do not feel that you need to copy down everything on the slides: slide decks from class will be provided on [Canvas](#) after each class meeting.
2. **Attend class & participate actively:** We will use class time to cover many things not discussed in the readings and to apply course concepts in breakout sessions and class activities. All of us benefit from a classroom environment that allows each student to share their unique perspective—meaning that *you* have something important to contribute to everyone’s learning (including mine!). I expect you to come to class prepared to listen actively, think critically, and engage with your peers respectfully.
3. **Be a good classmate:** I expect you to contribute positively to an inclusive learning environment for your peers. Politics can be a divisive topic, but differences in perspective can provide opportunities for intellectual growth. We each come to the classroom with our own backgrounds, beliefs, and biases, and sharing our individual perspectives can help everyone learn. I expect, however, that you will be respectful of the contributions and skills of your fellow classmates. While reasoned debates are welcome, disrespectful behavior will not be tolerated. Similarly, I expect you to avoid distracting your fellow students during class. This means arriving on time, staying engaged, and not using technology for things unrelated to class (checking email, scrolling social media, etc.).
4. **All work is your own:** I expect that all work you complete for this course is your own—not the work of another person or the work of an AI. The goal of this course (indeed, much of education in general) is first and foremost to foster your ability to think critically, in this case particularly about media and politics. Every component of the course—the readings, lectures, discussions, your written assignments and exams—are part of that thinking and learning process. Having someone else do your work for

you, whether that someone else is human or artificial, means that you are thinking and learning less. Students are not permitted to use generative AI (such as ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude, LLaMa, Copilot, DeepSeek, or any of the innumerable similar tools) for any purpose in this course, except with written permission from me. Any assignment that uses generative AI at any stage will receive a zero. Similarly, I expect you to adhere to standards of academic integrity and to appropriately credit and cite words, data, and ideas that are not your own. Failure to do so may result in disciplinary action. For more information regarding academic misconduct and how to avoid it, please visit the Office of Student Conduct and Community Standards website here: <https://conduct.students.wisc.edu/academic-misconduct/>.

5. **Keep abreast of current events:** In today's information age, we are confronted with a veritable flood of news information every single day. Keeping up can feel difficult and overwhelming—indeed, we will discuss news avoidance in some depth. But this is a course on media and politics, so I expect to you put some effort into following current events during the semester. I encourage you to check in on a handful of reputable news sources every few days to see what major stories are in the news and how different outlets are covering them. We will regularly dedicate some class time to discussing current events and applying course material to understand them.

Likewise, here is what you can expect from me in this course:

1. **Be accessible:** You can expect me to provide plenty of opportunities to interface with me outside of class. The best way to get in touch with me is to come to my “office hours”—which are really “student hours” that I have specifically set aside in my schedule to meet with you. This semester my office hours are 11:00AM–Noon on Mondays and 1:30–2:30PM on Wednesdays, and my office is 301 North Hall. You can sign up to reserve time with me here: <https://calendly.com/proftrexler/students>, otherwise I will meet with students on a first-come, first-serve basis. If you have a persistent conflict with both of these times (or have a pressing need), you can contact me for a separate appointment. Office hours are an opportunity for a one-on-one conversation about course concepts, an upcoming assignment, how the course is going for you, your goals and aspirations, or challenges you may be facing. I encourage you to attend my office hours at least once—this is a big class, so office hours are one of the best opportunities for us to get to know each other.

Outside of office hours, the best way to reach me is by email at atrexler@wisc.edu. You can generally expect me to respond to emails within 48 hours during the work week (that is, Monday through Friday). Emailing a professor can be intimidating for some students and others may be unaware of common emailing conventions. [Here](#) is some simple but helpful advice about emailing professors, which if followed will likely to get you a faster response from me.

2. **Provide timely feedback:** Just as I expect you to submit your work on time, you can also expect me to return your assignments and exams with useful feedback in a timely manner to help you succeed on subsequent assessments.

3. **My work is my own:** Just as I require that you eschew the use of AI tools, I will not use AI tools to develop course materials (slides, assignments, exams, etc.) or to grade your work.
4. **Give you opportunities for input:** I will survey the class (anonymously) partway through the semester so that you can provide feedback on how the course is going for you. Together, we will work through any major issues identified by a significant number of students. If I am considering changes, I will seek input from students and will not make any major changes to the syllabus (assessments, deadlines, expectations, policies) without the support of a majority of the students engaged in the course.
5. **Timely communication:** I will communicate any pertinent information about assignments, exams, and syllabus updates to you in a timely fashion. I will contact students via the Announcement function on [Canvas](#) and/or by emailing students at their university email address. Students are strongly encouraged to check their email regularly to ensure that no important information is missed.

Resources

McBurney Disability Resource Center: If you have a disability that may affect your learning experience in this course, please contact me within the first two weeks of the semester so that we can discuss accommodations to help you succeed. The McBurney Disability Resource Center can provide official documentation and additional student support. Of note, my office is located on the third floor of North Hall, a historic building with no elevator. For students who are unable to meet with me in my office due to a disability, I am happy to meet at another convenient location on campus. Please contact me to make arrangements.

UHS Mental Health Services: Students often experience stressors that can impact both their academic experience and personal well-being. UHS Mental Health Services provides confidential, no-cost care to students. Students are encouraged to learn about and utilize these services and resources as needed.

The Writing Center: The Writing Center can provide many kinds of support to students, from workshops to individual writing mentorships.

Learning Support: UW-Madison offers a wide range of free tutoring, study skills workshops, and other learning support for students across 15 distinct learning centers.

UW Libraries Research Support: UW Libraries offers a variety of services to assist with student research, from planning and finding information to analysis and reporting your research.

University Policies

You should familiarize yourself with several policies maintained by the University of Wisconsin–Madison, which apply to this course. These include:

- [Academic Calendar and Religious Observances](#)
- [Academic Integrity](#)
- [Accommodations for Students with Disabilities](#)
- [Course Evaluations](#)
- [Diversity and Inclusion](#)
- [Mental Health and Well-Being](#)
- [Privacy of Student Records and the Use of Audio Recorded Lectures](#)
- [Students' Rules, Rights, and Responsibilities](#)
- [Teaching & Learning Data Transparency](#)

Course Schedule

This course schedule is subject to change with notice. Check [Canvas](#) for updates.

Week 0 Introduction

- Sep 4
- Farhi, Paul. 2024. "[TV Still Runs Politics](#)." *The Atlantic*.
 - Mutz, Diana. 2012. "The Great Divide." *Daedalus* 141(4): 83–97.
 - Shearer, Elisa. 2025. "[Most Americans say Republican and Democratic voters cannot agree on basic facts](#)." Pew Research Center.

Week 1 Democratic Functions

- Sep 9
- Iyengar, Shanto. 2023. *Media Politics*. [Chapter 2, 20–30 only]
 - Schudson, Michael. 2017. "How to Think Normatively about News and Democracy." *Oxford Handbook of Political Communication*, eds. Kate Kenski and Kathleen Hall Jamieson. 95–106.
 - Oliver, John. 2016. "[Journalism](#)." *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*. [YouTube]
- Sep 11
- NO MEETING (instructor attending the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association)

Week 2 New Media

- Sep 16
- **Media Diet Self-assessment due****
- Iyengar, Shanto. 2023. *Media Politics*. [Chapter 5]

- Metzger, Miriam. 2017. "Broadcasting versus Narrowcasting: Do Mass Media Exist in the Twenty-first Century?" *Oxford Handbook of Political Communication*, eds. Kate Kenski and Kathleen Hall Jamieson. 795–808.

- Sep 18 - Hindman, Matthew. 2018. *The Internet Trap*. [Chapter 2 & 3]

- Week 3 Media Diets**

- Sep 23 - Iyengar, Shanto. 2023. *Media Politics*. [Chapter 3, 53–71 only]
- Prior, Markus. 2010. "You've either got it or you don't? The stability of political interest over the life cycle." *The Journal of Politics* 72 (3): 747–766.
- Pew Research Center. 2024. "[News Platform Fact Sheet](#)."
- Pew Research Center. 2024. "[Social Media and News Fact Sheet](#)."

- Sep 25 - Guess, Andrew. 2021. "(Almost) everything in moderation: New evidence on Americans' online media diets." *American Journal of Political Science* 65 (4): 1007–1022.
- Toff, Benjamin, Ruth Palmer, and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen. 2023. *Avoiding the News*. [Chapter 1]

- Week 4 Attention & Learning**

- Sep 30 - Zaller, John. 1992. *The Nature and Origin of Mass Opinion*. [Chapter 3]
- Stroud, Talia. 2017. "Attention as a Valuable Resource." *Political Communication* 34 (3): 479–489.

- Oct 2 - Dunaway, Johanna, and Kathleen Searles. 2023. *News and Democratic Citizens in the Mobile Era*. [Chapter 3]
- Trexler, Andrew. 2025. "The Unequal Challenge of Learning from Under-informative News." Working paper.

- Week 5 Framing, Agenda Setting, Routines**

- Oct 7 - Iyengar, Shanto. 2023. *Media Politics*. [Chapter 3, 73–92 only]
- Patterson, Thomas. 2017. "Game versus Substance in Political News." *Oxford Handbook of Political Communication*, eds. Kate Kenski and Kathleen Hall Jamieson. 377–390.

- Oct 9 **News Story Analysis due**

- Boydston, Amber. 2013. *Making the News*. [Chapter 2]
- Nelson, Jacob, and Edson Tandoc Jr. 2019. "Doing 'Well' or Doing 'Good': What Audience Analytics Reveal About Journalism's Competing Goals." *Journalism Studies* 20 (13): 1960–1976.

Week 6 Bias

- Oct 14
- Ad Fontes Media. 2025. "[Media Bias Interactive](#)."
 - Pew Research Center. 2025. "[News Media Tracker: How Americans Use and Trust News Sources](#)."
 - Benkler et al. 2017. "[Study: Brietbart-led right-wing media ecosystem altered broader media agenda](#)." *Columbia Journalism Review*.
 - Hassell et al. 2020. "[Claims of ideological bias among the media may be overblown](#)." *The Conversation*.
- Oct 16
- Deutch, Gabby. 2019. "[In the 'Year of the Woman,' Many Were Missing from International Reporting](#)." *The Atlantic*.
 - Jang, Heesoo, and Daniel Kreiss. 2024. "Safeguarding the Peaceful Transfer of Power: Pro-democracy Electoral Frames and Journalist Coverage of Election Deniers during the 2022 U.S. Midterm Elections." *International Journal of Press/Politics* 30 (3): 775–796.

Week 7 Media Regulation

- Oct 21
- Iyengar, Shanto. 2023. *Media Politics*. [Chapter 2, 30–50 only]
 - Napoli, Philip. 2023. "What is Media Policy?" *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 707 (1): 29–45.
- Oct 23
- **Midterm Exam****

Week 8 Surveillance, Propaganda, Censorship

- Oct 28
- Tripodi, Francesca. 2022. *The Propagandist's Playbook*. [Chapter 5]
 - Gunitsky, Seva. 2015. "Corrupting the Cyber-Commons: Social Media as a Tool of Autocratic Stability." *Perspectives on Politics* 13 (1): 42–54.
 - Morozov, Evgeny. 2011. "[The Internet in Society: Empowering or Censoring Citizens?](#)" [YouTube]
- Oct 30
- Dai, Yaoyao, and Luwei Luqiu. 2020. "Camouflaged propaganda: A survey experiment on political native advertising." *Research & Politics* 7 (3).

- Gault, Matthew, and Joseph Cox. 2022. “[Facebook and Twitter Take Down a U.S. Propaganda Operation Targeting Russia, China, Iran.](#)” *Vice*.

Week 9 Fake News & Misinformation

- Nov 4
- Schiff, Kaylyn Jackson, Daniel Schiff, and Natália Bueno. 2025. “The Liar’s Dividend: Can Politicians Claim Misinformation to Evade Accountability?” *American Political Science Review* 119 (1): 71–90.
 - Guay et al. 2025. “Examining Partisan Asymmetries in Fake News Sharing and the Efficacy of Accuracy Prompt Interventions.” Forthcoming at *The Journal of Politics*.

Nov 6 ***News Agendas Report due***

- Budak et al. 2024. “Misunderstanding the harms of online misinformation.” *Nature* 630: 45–53.
- Maheshwari, Sapna. 2016. “[How Fake News Goes Viral: A Case Study.](#)” *The New York Times*.
- Wong, Chun Han. 2020. “[China’s Virus Censorship and Propaganda Draw Backlash.](#)” *The Wall Street Journal*.

Week 10 Media & Public Opinion

- Nov 11
- Iyengar, Shanto. 2023. *Media Politics*. [Chapter 8]
 - Thorson, Emily. 2024. *The Invented State*. [Chapter 1]
 - Graham, Matthew, Sunshine Hillygus, and Andrew Trexler. 2024. “Misleading Polls in the Media: Does Survey Clickbait Have Social Consequences?” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 88 (2): 315–336.

- Nov 13
- Krupnikov, Yanna, and John Barry Ryan. 2022. *The Other Divide*. [Chapter 8]
 - Furnas, Alexander, and Timothy LaPira. 2024. “The People think what I think: False consensus and unelected elite misperception of public opinion.” *American Journal of Political Science* 68: 958–971.

Week 11 Election Media

- Nov 18
- Farris, Timothy. 2017. “Political Advertising.” *The Oxford Handbook of Political Communication*, eds. Kate Kenski and Kathleen Hall Jamieson. 147–164.

- Hall Jamieson, Kathleen, and Eunji Kim. 2020. "Political Advertising and Media." *The Oxford Handbook of American Political History*, eds. Paula Baker and Donald Critchlow. 265–277.

Nov 20 ****Media Poll Investigation due****

- Messing, Solomon. 2018. "How election forecasts confuse Americans—and may lead them not to vote at all." *The Washington Post* Monkey Cage.
- Morrison, Sara. 2020. "Why are you seeing this digital political ad? No one knows!" *Vox*.

Week 12 Entertainment Media

- Nov 25 - Kim, Eunji. 2025. *The American Mirage*. [Chapter 3]
 - Davey Alba et al. 2025. "The Second Trump Presidency, Brought to You by YouTubers." *Bloomberg*.

Nov 27 NO MEETING (Thanksgiving Recess)

Week 13 Local News

- Dec 2 - Hayes, Danny, and Jennifer Lawless. 2021. *News Hole*. [Chapter 2]
 - Pew Research Center. 2022. "Local Newspapers Fact Sheet."
 - Pew Research Center. 2023. "Local TV News Fact Sheet."
- Dec 4 - Usher, Nikki. 2021. *News for the Rich, White, and Blue*. [Chapter 5]
 - Dolan, Eric. 2024. "Free newspaper subscriptions were offered to thousands. The results were stunningly bleak." *PsyPost*.
 - Rainey, James. 2023. "The California newspaper that has no reporters left." *The Los Angeles Times*.

Week 14 Loose Ends

- Dec 9 - Iyengar, Shanto. 2023. *Media Politics*. [Chapter 10]

Dec 13 (Sat) ****Final Exam****
 2:45 - 4:45PM

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to many scholars, including Barry Burden, Robyn Caplan, Jon Green, Sunshine Hillygus, Mike Munger, Phil Napoli, Matt Pietryka, Ellie Powell, Mallory SoRelle, and Dom Stecula, for making course syllabi and other teaching materials available that helped me develop this course.