**COM 374 – News Literacy: Critical Perspectives**



Instructor: Dr. John Huxford

Fall 2019

Tues/Thurs: 2.00pm-3.15pm

Fell Hall 180

OFFICE HOURS

Tues/Thurs: 12.15pm-1.45pm

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**COURSE DESCRIPTION**

News is everywhere - from eye-witness reports on cable TV and the headlines of the *New York Times* through to Internet news sites and the tawdry tabloids awaiting us at the supermarket checkout. In recent times the deluge has grown dramatically. Blogs, tweets and messages from “friends” on Facebook now vie with traditional news outlets for our attention. As news-consumers – or even news-writers - how do we handle this continual bombardment? How do we distinguish between information and innuendo, hard fact and hype, reality and rumor?

This course aims to help students to develop a critical understanding of this rip-tide of daily messages, and of the practices and processes that help to shape the news that fills our lives. Focusing on the concept of News Literacy, the course combines theoretical perspectives on the news from sociological, semiotic and cultural communication perspectives with insights from the journalists, broadcasters and editors who produce it. Students will analyze research material on journalism alongside articles and columns appearing in the daily press, as well as examining news-making on television, the Internet and a range of new media platforms.

The aim is for students to become not just intelligent producers and consumers of news, but better-informed citizens who are more able to play their civic role in society.

**COURSE OBJECTIVES**

This class aims to promote and develop the following key skills:

1. To understand the traditions, codes of conduct, rules of ethics and working practices within which journalists operate.

2. To recognize the differences between journalism and other kinds of information.

3. To “deconstruct” news reports from a series of critical perspectives, including cultural, semiotic and linguistic analysis.

4. To develop critical thinking abilities that will allow the student to distinguish between real news and “fake news”, assertion and verification, evidence and inference, media bias and *audience* bias.

5. To understand and to view critically the way sources and statistical reports are used.

**REQUIRED READING**

The following course text is available from the campus bookstore:

*Why Journalism Still Matters* (2018), by Michael Schudson.

Other assigned articles can be found under “Resources” on the ReggieNet site.

**ASSIGNMENTS**

There will be three main papers, each aimed at helping the student to develop their critical understanding of journalism and news construction. The course will also include in-class exercises, regular quizzes, a group presentation and a final exam. The in-class exercises will be graded on a pass/fail basis, with those students who miss these losing points. NOTE: Failure to complete any assignment/paper satisfactorily may incur an additional penalty, as well as the loss of the percentage points allocated here.

**GRADING**

Paper #1 20% of grade

Paper #2 20% of grade

Group paper/presentation 10% of grade

Quizzes (total) 15% of grade

Reflection paper 5% of grade

Final Exam 30% of grade

**COURSE POLICIES**

*REQUIREMENTS*

Reading a daily newspaper and watching TV news are a necessary part of this course, and your knowledge of current events will be tested through regular news quizzes. Assigned readings should be read BEFORE class discussions, so as to facilitate student participation. Class attendance and participation are both expected and required. Students missing more than three classes without a satisfactory explanation will receive a grade penalty, as will students who repeatedly come late. Assignments must be completed and turned in at the beginning of the class period on the date they are due. If you turn in an assignment late you will receive a zero for that assignment unless an alternate due date has *previously* been approved. Penalty points may also be taken from your overall score.

*LAPTOPS AND OTHER ELECTRONIC DEVICES*

When in class, students should be *engaged* with the discussion. To this end, cell phones and other devices should be turned off. Note that the most efficient way to take notes is NOT by laptop, and the use of computers to surreptitiously surf the Web during class seriously impairs your ability to learn. Consequently the use of laptops in class is not recommended, although they may be used for the sole purpose of taking down notes offered on the board at the beginning of each class. Ten minutes will be allowed for this, after which time laptops must be closed and notes then taken by pen and paper for the remainder of the class. The use of cameras and other recording devices in class is **strictly prohibited**, as is the use of Google Glass.

*CLASS BEHAVIOR*

I take education seriously and expect students to offer the sort of attention and respect that helps to create a thoughtful, learning environment. Consequently, penalties will be levied against those who repeatedly play with their iPhone, or who repeatedly disrupt teaching by chatting/giggling with their neighbors, or through other infractions.

*ACADEMIC INTEGRITY*

Students are expected to accomplish their own work and submit work that is original for this class. All students are also responsible for reading and understanding the university’s position on academic integrity as outlined in the ISU Student Code of Conduct as found in the Student Handbook, Policy IIIB. If a breach of academic integrity is discovered, I will assign a penalty appropriate to the severity of the offense. Such penalties may include: completing the assignment again, a point penalty on the assignment, a score of zero on the assignment, failing the entire course, and/or reporting the incident for resolution at the university level.

*ASSISTANCE*

Students who are having difficulty with readings, class material or assignments are encouraged to talk to me at the earliest opportunity. Time will be set aside in class for question and answer sessions, and I will be available to discuss questions or difficulties either after class, during office hours or by e-mail. If you’re feeling stressed, overwhelmed, lost, anxious, depressed or are struggling with personal issues, do not hesitate to call or visit [Student Counseling Services](https://counseling.illinoisstate.edu/) (SCS). These services are free and completely confidential. Website: Counseling.IllinoisState.edu or call (309) 438-3655.

Any student needing to arrange a reasonable accommodation for a documented disability and/or medical/mental health condition should contact Student Access and Accommodation Services at 350 Fell Hall, (309) 438-5853, or visit the website at StudentAccess.IllinoisState.edu.

**SYLLABUS**

PART ONE: NEWS AS CONCEPT

*We examine the ideas, traditions, values and models that shape journalistic practice. Where do they originate? What are their strengths and weaknesses? How may they introduce bias?*

**WEEK ONE: Introduction**

8/20 Course Introduction

8/22 Journalism and Democracy

Reading: WJSM textbook - Introduction

**WEEK TWO: History of Journalism**

8/27 Journalism History: Early Beginnings to the Penny Press

Reading: WJSM textbook – Ch 1

8/29 Journalism History: Muckrakers to Digital News

Reading: Class Handout: Timeline

**WEEK THREE: Conceptualizing the News**.

9/3 Functions and Attributes

Reading: “Hardwired for News”

9/5 News Values II

Reading*:* WJSM textbook –Ch 6

*Paper 1 assigned*

**WEEK FOUR**: **Models of Journalistic Practice**

9/10 Neutral, Advocacy & Investigative Journalism

Reading*:* WJSM textbook – Ch 3

9/12 Literary, Public & Ritual Journalism

Reading*:* Class handout: “Journalists’ Objectivity Needs Balance of Truth”

PART TWO: NEWS AS PROCESS

*This section focuses on the way journalists’ working practices shape the news product.*

**WEEK FIVE**: **Social Control and Construction**

9/17 Social Control in the News Room

Reading: "Social Control in the Newsroom: A Functional Analysis.”

9/19 News Selection & Agenda-Setting

Reading: " Gate Keeper – A Case Study in the Selection of News”

**WEEK SIX: The Demands of Coverage**

9/24 News Work

Reading: "Making News by Doing Work”

9/26 Managing Resources

Reading*:* WJSM textbook *– “*News Production in Transition, pp. 122-133”

**WEEK SEVEN: Practices of Verification I**

10/1 Evidence and Verification

Reading*:* WJSM textbook - Ch. 5

10/3 Statistics and Surveys

Reading*:* WJSM textbook – Ch. 9

*Paper 2 assigned*

**WEEK EIGHT: Practices of Verification II**

10/8 Sources & Emotional Labor

Reading*:* “Gathering Emotion”

*Paper 1 due*

10/10 Sourcing Practices I

Reading: "Sources Make the News"

PART THREE: NEWS AS PRODUCT

*The focus moves to studying the ways in which news is embodied in text and image.*

**WEEK NINE: News and Narrative**

10/15 News and Performance

Reading: “When Technology Fails: The Drama of Airline Crashes”

10/17 News and Narrative

*Group paper assigned*

**WEEK TEN: News and Language**

10/22 News and Critical Linguistics

Reading: Understanding News - Hartley

10/24 Deconstructing News Language

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**WEEK ELEVEN: News and Semiotics**

10/29 Denotation v Connotation

Reading: "The Determinations of News Photographs"

10/31 News Images

Reading: "Beyond the Referential”

PART FOUR: JOURNALISM & ITS AUDIENCES

*How do journalists interact with their audiences? What are the journalist’s responsibilities in this regard, and what issues may arise?*

**WEEK TWELVE: Journalistic Authority**

11/5 Journalistic Authority

Reading: “On Journalistic Authority: The Janet Cooke Scandal

11/7 Alignment with Cultural Values

Reading*:* WJSM textbook – Ch. 8

**WEEK THIRTEEN: Journalistic Ethics**

11/12 Ethical Decision-Making

*Paper 2 due*

11/14 Case Studies

Reading: WJSM textbook - Ch. 10

**WEEK FOURTEEN: Digital Audiences**

11/19 The Citizen Journalist

Reading: “[Thinking About Citizen Journalism”](http://www.amazon.com/Citizen-Journalism-Global-Perspectives-Crises/dp/1433102951/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1263191105&sr=1-1)

11/21 Internet Journalism

**WEEK FIFTEEN: Thanksgiving Break**

No Classes

PART FOUR: THE DIGITAL REVOLUTION

**WEEK SIXTEEN: Group Presentations**

12/3 Presentations and Group Papers

12/5 Presentations and Group Papers

**WEEK SEVENTEEN: FINAL EXAM**

Date and time to be confirmed