



Lakehead
UNIVERSITY

POLI 2410/MDST 2411

Mass Media and Politics

Winter 2025

Mondays & Wednesdays 10:00-11:30 am via Zoom

Instructor: Dr. Catherine Mathie

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Office Hours: Tuesday noon - 1:30 pm (via Zoom), or by appointment

Course Description

In this course, we will explore the relationship and interaction between mass media and politics with a focus on the democratic politics and culture of Canada and the United States. In the first part of the course, we will examine how different forms of mass news media have evolved over time and the functions (and dysfunction!) of the press and media in North American politics and society throughout history and especially today. In the second part of our course, we will turn to an examination of "mass media" understood more broadly as all of the technological channels through which information, ideas, etc. are disseminated within a culture (and between cultures) and we will closely study a number of important theories about the ways that human life and the political community, especially in modern democratic societies, are transformed by these media.

We will study a wide variety of sources in this course - including scholarship from various disciplines as well as journalistic sources - and these sources will feature varied and often conflicting perspectives on media, technology and politics. As we engage with these sources and the ideas and debates they raise on the subject of political and social communication, a key practical objective of this course will be the development within our classroom of thoughtful dialogue by which students can actively think through the questions raised in this class together and also discuss points of disagreement in a fruitful and respectful manner. Because of this learning objective, your active participation is an important requirement in this Zoom class. You will need to have a working webcam enabled during class to make this possible.

Course Requirements

Required Learning Materials and Costs: For this course, there is no required textbook to be purchased. Instead, the course relies on Open Educational Resources, which will be made available to you for free through the course website. All of the required readings are listed in the Course Outline and will be found in the Content section of our course site. All students are expected to either print out these readings or else use an e-reader, smartphone or other digital device to download them such that they can be read carefully prior to our seminars and consulted throughout our class discussions without disrupting your access to our zoom seminar.

As a webcam is a required item for the course, if you do not have one that works on the device through which you access our Zoom sessions, you will need to purchase one. There are numerous well-reviewed options available for purchase online within the \$30-\$40 range.

Grading:

Assignment 1: 8%

Paper: 25%

Midterm: 25%

Final Exam: 30%

Participation and Attendance: 12%

Assignment 1: This is a 2-3 page written assignment due February 1st by 11:59 pm reflecting on the work of a journalist whom you admire. Instructions will be provided on d2l on January 8th. Late assignments will see a grade deduction of 2% per day. If your grounds are reasonable, an extension may be approved well in advance of the due date, but not afterwards.

Papers: Papers will be 7-9 pages in length. Your paper topics and instructions will be provided on d2l on February 28th. Papers will be due by 11:59 pm on April 4th. Late assignments will see a grade deduction of 2% per day. If your grounds are reasonable, an extension may be approved well in advance of the due date, but not afterwards.

Participation and Attendance: All students are expected to:

- 1) Read assigned material carefully.
- 2) **Have working Zoom cameras and turn them on throughout the entirety of our class sessions.**
- 3) Be prepared to discuss the readings and answer questions about them over Zoom.
- 4) Have printed or digital copies (on an alternate device) of the readings with them during the Zoom seminar.
- 5) Avoid: (a) excessive absences from or lateness to our seminars; (b) being or appearing inattentive to seminars; (c) engaging in conversations with others outside of the Zoom seminar during class time.

Participation marks are not free:

- Consistently meeting these expectations will earn a mark in the B range (70-79%).
- Consistently meeting these expectations AND regularly participating thoughtfully in our discussions will be required for a mark in the A range (80-100%).
- Failure to follow even one of the expectations may result in an extremely low grade.

Academic Honesty: Academic honesty is expected of all Lakehead University students. It should go without saying that cheating, collusion, and plagiarism will not be tolerated. Students are expected to make themselves fully familiar with Lakehead's policies in this area. Although all these policies will be enforced in full, it is worth emphasizing the following:

PLAGIARISM INVOLVES PRESENTING ANOTHER'S WORK, IDEAS, THEORIES, OR INTERPRETATION AS ONE'S OWN.

To avoid plagiarism, always:

1. Put quotation marks around any words taken from sources.
2. Paraphrase material completely; do not simply rearrange words from a source or change them using a thesaurus, etc.
3. Whether it is being quoted or paraphrased in your work, always give accurate and complete citations for all material that comes from another source.
4. Avoid borrowing entire arguments or ideas from another writer. Your arguments should be original to you.

Generative AI Use Prohibited: Generative artificial intelligence (Generative AI or GenAI) is a category of AI systems capable of generating text, images, or other media in response to prompts. These systems include ChatGPT and its variants Bing (built by OpenAI) and Bard (built by Google) among several others. Other Generative AI models include artificial intelligence art systems such as Stable Diffusion, Midjourney, and DALL-E.

Any use of GenAI systems to produce assignments for this course is not permitted. All work submitted for evaluation in this course must be the student's original work. The submission of any work containing AI generated content will be considered a violation of academic integrity ("Use of Unauthorized Materials").

Academic Accommodations: Lakehead University is committed to achieving full accessibility for persons with disabilities/medical conditions. Part of this commitment includes arranging academic accommodations for students with disabilities/medical conditions to ensure they have an equitable opportunity to participate in all of their academic activities. If you are a student with a disability/medical condition and think you may need accommodations, you are strongly encouraged to contact Student Accessibility Services (SAS) and register as early as possible. For more information,

please email sas@lakeheadu.ca or visit <https://www.lakeheadu.ca/faculty-and-staff/departments/services/sas>.

Course Outline

NOTE: Readings and schedule may be adjusted as necessary at my discretion. As Zoom discussions can sometimes pose special challenges, as we proceed with the seminar, I may make some changes to the structure of our class discussions. I greatly appreciate your flexibility and understanding.

Introduction

Jan 6 Introduction to the course and review of syllabus and course expectations

Jan 8

- Tocqueville. *Democracy in America*, excerpts on the relationship between the free press and democratic life

Part I: The News Media

Jan 13 Current data on the state of news media in North America

- Canada: 2024 Reuters Digital News Report for Canada
- United States: Pew Research on the state of journalism and media in the United States

Jan 15 Commentary on the state of the press

- Fink, Katherine. "The biggest challenge facing journalism: A lack of trust." *Journalism*, 2019.
- Schudson, Michael. "Where We Are and Whither We Are Tending." *Journalism*, 2019.
- Stephens, Mitchell. "Beyond News: The Case for Wisdom Journalism." Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, June 2009.

Jan 20 Defining journalism and the role of journalists

- Zelizer, Barbie. "Definitions of Journalism," in *Institutions of American Democracy: The Press* (2005).

Jan 22 Ideology in the press

- Rosen, Jay. "Clowns to the Left of Me, Jokers to the Right: On the Actual Ideology of the American Press." *Pressthink.org*, June 2010.
- Groseclose and Milyo. "A Measure of Media Bias." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, November 2005.

Jan 27 & 29 Digital & social media

- Rosen, Jay. "The People Formerly Known as the Audience," in *The Social Media Reader* (2012).

- Sunstein, Cass. "Neither Hayek nor Habermas." *Public Choice* (2008).
- Stalder, Felix. "Between Democracy and Spectacle: The Front-End and Back-End of the Social Web," in *The Social Media Reader* (2012).
- Applebaum, Anne & Pomerantsev, Peter. "How to Put out Democracy's Dumpster Fire." *The Atlantic*, April 2021.

Feb 3 Media freedom and restrictions in the United States

- Anastaplo, George. "The Pentagon Papers and the Abolition of Television," in *The American Moral* (1992).

Feb. 5 Freedom of expression and the press in Canada

- *Charter* provisions on freedom of expression and the *Oakes* Test
- Selection on freedom of expression from *The Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, 6th ed. by Robert J. Sharpe and Kent Roach (2017).
- Cameron, Jamie. "Section 2(b)'s Other Fundamental Freedom: The Press Guarantee, 1982-2012," in *The Unfulfilled Promise of Press Freedom* (2016).

Feb 10 Journalism, publicity and the creation of pseudo-events

- Boorstin, Daniel. Excerpts from *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, 1992.

PART II: Mass Media and Political and Cultural Transformation

Feb 12 Television and declining social capital in the USA and Canada

- Putnam, Robert. "Tuning In, Tuning Out: The Strange Disappearance of Social Capital in America." *Political Science in Politics*, December 1995.
- *New York Times Podcast*: "The Interview: Robert Putnam Knows Why You're Lonely," July 13, 2024.

Feb 17 - 21 Winter Study Week - No Classes

Feb 24 MIDTERM

Feb 26 How different media forms transform politics and society

- Innis, Harold. Excerpts from *The Bias of Communication* (1951).

Mar 3 - 12 The medium is the message

- McLuhan, Marshall. Excerpts from *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964).
- McLuhan, Marshall. Video selections.

Mar 17 - 19 The medium is the metaphor

- Postman, Neil. Excerpts from *Amusing Ourselves to Death*.

- Postman, Neil. Video Selections.

Mar 24 - April 2 Mass media and propaganda

- Ellul, Jacques. "Information and Propaganda." *Diogenes* (1957).
- Ellul, Jacques. Selections from *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* (1965).