# GOV 2070
# Mass Media in American Politics
### Fall 2025

| MW |
|---|
| 1:15-2:40pm |
| Druckenmiller Hall - 004 |

| Instructor: Michael Franz | Office Hours: |
|---|---|
| Email: mfranz@bowdoin.edu | Tuesday, 10am-12pm |
| Phone: 207-798-4318 (office) | Book an appointment in Canvas; |
| Office: 200 Hubbard Hall | Or email about a different time as needed |

This course examines the role of the mass media in American politics. *This is not a course on how to be a journalist or how to cover the news*. It is a political science course that investigates and analyzes the media in American political life. The course is split into four main sections. **First**, we consider the media as an institution, as the so-called "fourth branch" of government. We ask: how has the media changed over the course of American political development, and specifically with the rise of the Internet? **Second**, we examine the relationship between media and elites. How do candidates engage with the media when running for office, for example? **Third**, we look at contemporary controversies in media politics, including the importance of local news and the role of diversity in journalistic coverage? **Finally**, we investigate media effects. What are the effects of media coverage on citizens—more specifically on citizens' trust in government and voting behavior? How do citizens respond politically to the nature of news coverage? Is the media politically biased? What is the prevalence of fake news? Throughout the course we will spend considerable time discussing the impact of different media forms—for example, social media, cable news, mainstream print, and television news.

## Learning Goals
At the end of this course students should be able to:

| | **The following parts of the course will address this outcome** |
|---|---|
| Explain and evaluate the changing role of the news media in the U.S. | Part 1 (Media as an Institution) |
| Understand and explain contemporary controversies in media politics, including declining trust | Part 1 |
| Analyze the interaction of the news media and politicians/campaigners | Part 2 |
| Consider the role of local news coverage | Part 3 |
| Understand and explain the effects of the news media on the public | Part 4 |
| Consider the prevalence of media bias and misinformation in news coverage | Part 4 |
| Evaluate the scientific methods of researching/studying media politics | Throughout the course |

## Course Requirements

There are six major components to your grade:

1.  **Four reading reactions** (10 points; each worth 2.5 points)—these are short reactions of about 2 pages (double-spaced).   I will evaluate these based on how well you react to the readings (namely, originality of thought and conciseness). There are no right or wrong answers, but I will challenge you to think logically. These papers are due **by the start of class** on Monday or Wednesday, and they should focus on the readings <u>for that day</u>. Because there are only four of them, you can choose when to complete them.  To hand in a reaction paper, see the "Assignments" link on the left-side menu of our Canvas page.  I will grade and return the papers to you via Canvas.  You can only do one reaction paper per class.

2.  **Participation** (10 points)—this includes attendance AND class participation.  Attendance is REQUIRED, and I will take regular note of who is and who is not in class.  I understand that people get sick, have doctor's appointments, and so on, but I only grant excused absences in rare circumstances.  Be advised, simple attendance is not sufficient.

3.  **Weekly Quizzes\*** (15 points)—there is a possibility of a quiz on any class day that will deal with the readings for that specific day. It will consist of 2-3 very short questions on the readings.
    *\*You are exempt from the quiz if you do a reading reaction on that day.*
    *\*I do not do make-up quizzes.  If you miss the quiz for an excused absence, that quiz will not count for you.*

4.  **First Exam** (20 points)—scheduled for ***Wednesday, October 8th***.  This is an in-class exam. The format will be short answers and essays, and both will be derived from readings and lectures.  We will discuss the format in more detail in the early part of the semester.

5.  **Second Exam** (20 points)— scheduled for ***Wednesday, November 19th***.  The format is the same as the first exam and will focus on the material after the first exam.

6.  **Final Paper** (25 points)—See the details at the end of the syllabus.

## Readings

There are two books for this course, and several outside articles.  Both books are available through the campus e-bookstore, and all of the outside readings can be accessed through Canvas.

1.  Johanna Dunaway and Doris Graber.  *Mass Media and American Politics*.  11th Edition. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.

2.  Nikki Usher.  *News for the Rich, White, and Blue: How Place and Power Distort American Journalism*.  New York: Columbia University Press.

## Other Issues

1.  I expect all students to abide by the Bowdoin Academic Honor Code, which can be accessed online at: https://www.bowdoin.edu/dean-of-students/ccs/community-standards/the-codes.html. If you have any concerns or questions about how to cite work appropriately, please consult a reference librarian or me.

2.  If you have chosen to take the class as Credit/D/F, I will only grant a Credit grade if the student has completed all the work for the class.

3. Cite your sources in submitted reaction papers.  Talk with me about proper citation if you have any questions.  I'm open to any approach you take, so long as it is consistent and generally well-regarded.  Consider the Chicago Style, as I'm partial to that one.

4. I <u>am</u> allowing the use of laptops during class time.  I strongly recommend, however, that you resist using your laptop for checking email or sending/reading messages.

5. Generative AI websites, such as ChatGPT, are not needed for this class.

# Part 1 – Media as an Institution

## <u>Week 1</u>

September 3: Introductions and Expectations
- "As the Press Weakens, So Does Democracy," by Charles Blow, *New York Times*, 7/18/21
- "A Free People Need a Free Press," by A.G. Sulzberger, *New York Times*, 5/13/25
- "The 'Mainstream Media' Has Already Lost," by Helen Lewis, *The Atlantic*, 12/5/24

## <u>Week 2</u>

September 8: The Role of Media in American Politics
- Dunaway and Graber, Chapter 1
- Stephanie Ternullo. 2022. "'I'm Not Sure What to Believe': Media Distrust and Opinion Formation during the COVID-19 Pandemic," *American Political Science Review*. 116(3).

September 10: Ownership and Regulation of Media
- Dunaway and Graber, Chapter 2
- "Maine Is Becoming a Laboratory for Nonprofit News," by Jon Marcus, Nieman Reports, 3/4/25

## <u>Week 3</u>

September 15: News-Making and the Routines of the Press
- Dunaway and Graber, Chapter 3

September 17: Old Media, New Media, and Changing Habits of Citizens
- Dunaway and Graber, Chapter 4

# Part 2 – Making the News

## <u>Week 4</u>

September 22: President, Congress and the Courts
- Dunaway and Graber, Chapters 5 and 6

September 24: Foreign affairs
- Dunaway and Graber, Chapter 8

**<u>Week 5</u>**

September 29: Local Politics
- Dunaway and Graber, Chapter 7
- Erik Peterson, Joshua P. Darr, Maxwell B. Allamong, and Michael Henderson. 2025. "Can Americans' Trust in Local News be Trusted? The Emergence, Sources, and Implications of the Local News Trust Advantage," *American Journal of Political Science.*

October 1: Class visit with Jim Bleikamp of WCME (Radio Midcoast), Brunswick, ME

**<u>Week 6</u>**

October 6:  Review for exam

October 8: **First exam**

**<u>Week 7</u>**

October 13: No class—Fall Break!

# Part 3 – Location, Place, and Diversity in News

October 15: Diversity and Inclusion in News Media
- Dunaway and Graber, Chapter 9

**<u>Week 8</u>**

October 20: The Power of Place in Journalism
- Usher, Introduction and Chapters 1-2

October 22: Journalism and the "Big Sort"
- Usher, Chapters 3-4

**<u>Week 9</u>**

October 27: Digital Advertising and Philanthropy in Local News
- Usher, Chapters 5 and 7 and Conclusion
- [*You can skim Chap 6 if you like, but it is not required*]

# Part 4 – Media Effects

October 29: Introduction to Media Effects
- Dunaway and Graber, Chapter 10-11

**<u>Week 10</u>**

November 3: Agenda-setting, Priming, and Framing
- Dunaway and Graber, Chapter 13

November 5: Bias
- Dunaway and Graber, Chapter 12
- Karolin Soontjens and Patrick F.A. van Erkel. 2020. "Finding Perceptions of Partisan News Media Bias in an Unlikely Place," *The International Journal of Press/Politics*. 27(1).

## **Week 11**

November 10: Bias, cont.
- David Broockman and Joshua L. Kalla. 2025. "Consuming Cross-Cutting Media Causes Learning and Moderates Attitudes: A Field Experiment with Fox News Viewers," *The Journal of Politics*. 87(1).
- Diana Mutz. 2007. "Effects of "In-Your-Face" Television Discourse on Perceptions of a Legitimate Opposition," *American Political Science Review*. 101(4).

November 12: Class visit with Steve Robinson of the MaineWire

## **Week 12**

November 17: Review for exam

November 19: **Second Exam**

## **Week 13**

No class—Thanksgiving!

## **Week 14**

December 1: Misinformation and Fake News
- Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy, Sinan Aral. 2018. "The Spread of True and False News Online," *Science*. 359.
- David Rapp and Nikita Salovich. 2018. "Can't We Just Disregard Fake News? The Consequences of Exposure to Inaccurate Information," *Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences*. 5(2).

December 3: Misinformation and Fake News, cont.
- Emily Kubin and Christian von Sikorski. 2021. "The Role of (Social) Media in Political Polarization: a Systematic Review," Annals of the International Communication Association. 45(3).

## **Week 15**

December 8: What's Next in Media and Media Politics?
- **Final Papers due**

December 10: In-class discussion of final papers

# Outline of Final Paper

You will write a 10-page paper (double-spaced) on one of the following topics:

1. Talk to family members, mentors, neighbors, or older family friends about their experience reading the news. I recommend interviewing two people for this paper. The key to the paper is to connect what you learn from your discussions with the concepts we covered in class. Do your interview subjects think the media is biased? What media do they consume? How has it changed over the course of their life? How much national news do they consume compared to local news? What local news is available where they are? How has that changed? These are some of the questions you might consider. Consider also the framework outlined in the Ternullo paper from the start of the semester. What you cover is up to you, but stronger papers will consider a range of course readings and concepts from across the semester.

2. Follow the MaineWire news coverage over the course of the semester. You should do this either by visiting the site online and/or following its Facebook page. What topics do they cover? What is the coverage mix of national, state, and local topics? Is the coverage biased, in your view? How? Stronger papers will consider a range of course readings and concepts from across the semester and put the news tracking you do in the context of those readings and concepts.

3. Do the same as #2, but for Radio Midcoast/WCME. For this, you might consider listening to the radio at various times throughout the semester (via the radio itself or through the station's Android app or web link) but also tracking the coverage via the news station's Facebook page. The station's Facebook page is particularly useful, since Jim Bleikamp of WCME posts very frequently.