“Our liberty depends on the freedom of the press, and that cannot be limited without being lost.” -- Thomas Jefferson

We are saturated as a culture with information. Untrained, unaccountable and unprofessional peddlers of “news” fill the blogosphere, Twitterverse, Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram and the airwaves. Think about some of the items that may have hit your social media news feeds recently: fake photographs, viral videos, innuendo about politicians and celebrities, and hoaxes of every kind.

We have more sources of information than ever before and more ways to find out what we think we want to know. But in some ways, this is all like that old Bruce Springsteen song: There’s 57 channels and nothing on.

Here’s the bottom line: we need news, maybe now more than ever. We need sources of reliable, accurate information that requires more work to gather than sticking a hashtag on a catchy phrase. In an election year, this takes on even more urgency. News matters, and the impact of that news on society makes a difference in our culture.

During this semester, we'll explore the foundations of the news industry and look at the changes in the media landscape. We’ll talk about why it’s important to be a good news consumer and how being informed will help you to be a better participant in society. Consider, too, that employers are increasingly adding awareness of current news and events to what they seek in prospective employees.

Required texts

- UnSpun, Jackson and Jamieson
- The Elements of Journalism, Kovach and Rosenstiel
- Blur, Kovach and Rosenstiel
- League of Denial, Fainaru-Wada
- Betrayal, Boston Globe’s investigative staff
Daily media

The New York Times will be our consistent source for current events. You will need to subscribe to the digital edition (make sure you get the student discount) and sign up for the daily email headline service and various news alerts. I'll show you how to do this in class.

However, as we will discuss, it is never a good idea to be a one-source news consumer. Each week we will also focus on a different news outlet as a way to expand your exposure to today’s news media, exploring changes in the news industry and the variety of ways news is now gathered and disseminated. This will include several comedy-based shows that have become leading news sources in recent years for viewers under 40.

This level of daily news consumption is likely to be a change for many of you and you may find it intimidating to start. Stick with it and you will soon see how to make it a reasonable part of your daily routine. Besides, if you do, you will seem smarter to other people, including other professors.

Invest yourself in the news and you also will see that investment pay off in better quiz grades.

Deadlines

Make your deadlines. I do not accept late assignments. A late assignment without prior approval is a zero.

Grading

30 percent – current events quizzes, always weekly, sometimes more
40 percent – tests on books, and other reading assignments
20 percent – final project (more details to follow)
10 percent – participation, which includes written class assignments

Percentages are approximate and subject to revision. We will discuss details of each assignment before it is due. FYI, I don’t give grades – you earn them.

Grading scale

A+: 98-100; A: 93-97; A-: 90-92; B+: 88-89; B: 83-87; B-: 80-82; C+: 78-79; C: 73-77; C-: 70-72; Do you really need to know what comes after this?
Extra credit

You can earn 10 quiz points if you attend a news event on or off campus and produce a well-written, 750-word article about it. You can earn 10 points if you take a national story and localize it for possible use in The Collegian. You can also earn 10 quiz points for attending a cultural event and writing a one-page summary about it. You can do any of those for a total of 30 extra credit quiz points. Check with me before embarking on any of those adventures.

The final project

The final project is to produce a media analysis paper that examines how a specific news topic is covered by various forms of journalism. Look for more details to come on this through a separate handout.

Participation

Come to every class ready to discuss news. Come to every class prepared to talk about the text readings. I will call on you randomly and I expect you will be able to contribute well to whatever discussion we’re having. Participation makes up 10 percent of your total grade, which could mean a letter grade difference at the end of the term.

Attendance is not optional. If you miss, you will fall behind. Here are some incentives: If you don’t miss any classes, I will drop your two lowest quiz grades; if you miss no more than two classes, I will drop your lowest quiz grade. If you have five unexcused absences, you will fail the course.

Honor code and plagiarism

Do your own work unless I tell you otherwise in the case of group or team projects. Carefully attribute information that comes from other sources. Ask me if you’re not sure about something. Presenting fictional interviews, quotes, etc., as factual is an honor code violation, as well as a grave breach of trust. Plagiarism is grounds for failure in this course and possible university sanction.
Office hours, email, etc.

Please let me know if you have questions about something we discuss in class or are having trouble with any of the material. I am usually pretty flexible and we can discuss things in person, by phone or through email at all reasonable hours.

Out of class expectations

Please note: To be successful in this course, expect to devote an average of 10 to 14 hours each week to preparing for class, participating in class sessions, studying course-related materials and completing course assignments.

Tentative class schedule

This could change as the semester progresses depending on news events and other possibilities. We may move faster or slower or adjust for guest speakers as needed.

Week 1: Introduction, value of media, journalism basics, news controls
Week 2: “UnSpun,” source control, spin examples
Week 3: “UnSpun, “Thank you for Smoking,” spin exercise
Week 4: Social control, first test
Week 5: “Elements of Journalism,” internal control
Week 6: “Elements of Journalism,” news decision-making exercises
Week 7: “Elements of Journalism,” “State of Play”
Week 8: (Fall Break week) — second test
Week 10: “Blur,” government control
Week 11: “League of Denial”
Week 12: “League of Denial”
Week 13: “Betrayal”
Week 14: “Betrayal”
Week 15: Review, third test