

Comm302: Foundations of Mass Communication Spring 2012

Instructor: Emily Vraga, Ph.D.
Office: Robinson 329
Office Hours: MW 1:30-2:30 or by appointment
Email: evraga@gmu.edu

Classroom: Sandbridge Hall 107
Course Time: W 4:30-7:10 p.m.
Phone: 703-993-1099

Course Description:

The media form an integral part of our everyday experiences, but how often do we critically think about the role that media play in shaping our lives and our society more broadly? This class is designed to do that: to become critical consumers of media content, to consider the role that media plays in individual decision-making and democratic processes, to explore the differences in media formats and contexts, and to understand the structural constraints and goals that shape media messages.

In doing so, this course will introduce key theories to understanding communication processes, explore their connections and their limitations, and apply these theoretical concepts and models to real-world contexts and examples. This course places special emphasis on understanding media effects, and in particular how institutional, social, and psychological processes contribute to or limit these effects.

This course is designed to encourage interaction among all the class members, and student participation is an important component of the experience. Students are encouraged to critically evaluate media concepts and theories presented in class and to bring in their own examples from the current media environment that relate to these arguments.

Students should emerge from this course with (1) a deeper understanding of the ways the mass media can affect their audiences, including its cultural and political implications, (2) an awareness of how forces outside the media shape these effects, especially the role of the audience and the structure of the media system, and (3) the tools to critically evaluate the role media play in their own lives and in democratic society.

Required Texts:

Bryant, J., Thompson, S., & Finklea, B. W. (2012). *Fundamentals of Media Effects, 2nd edition*. Waveland Press, Inc.

Other course readings will be posted on Blackboard.

Blackboard use:

Visit MyMason page at <http://myMason.gmu.edu>. Log in using your Mason ID and password. After that, click on the "Courses" tab on the upper right corner of the page. COMM302 should show up on the

course list. Please visit Blackboard on a regular basis. The supplemental readings will be posted one week before their due date. Your assignments and grades will also be available through Blackboard.

Class Format

The course is organized as a seminar-style class, running for two hours and 40 minutes once a week. Typically, this time will be broken up into roughly three segments:

Lecture: The first hour and a half (roughly) of each class period will be devoted to lecture material. I will use this time to introduce the theories and arguments that address that week's topics. While there may be some overlap with the week's readings, I will also be bringing in relevant arguments and ideas from a variety of sources. Students are expected to come prepared by reading the course material *before* the class period as listed on the syllabus. While I will be doing most of the talking during the lecture portion of the class, there will also be discussion questions posed to the class about the materials, and students are expected to be active participants in the materials. Students are also encouraged to ask questions and to bring up examples from their own experiences and the media environment to contribute to the learning environment.

Break: After the lecture portion of the class, we will take a 10 minute break. Students are invited to bring snacks, stretch their legs, etc. before the class reconvenes. However, students must return promptly and be on time for the second portion of the class, or this break period will be removed.

Discussion: The final hour of the class will largely be devoted to application and discussion in small groups about the week's topics. We will usually begin by discussing the supplemental reading(s) (please see the syllabus), which generally will demonstrate the applicability of the theories in real-world situations. Next, we will break into group discussion and activity, led by each group's discussion leader, who is tasked with guiding the discussion, keeping the group on-topic, and taking notes on the key points of the discussion to be shared with the class and me. The class will conclude with presentation and discussion of main ideas from these group interactions.

Grade Distribution Overview	Points
Midterm #1	20
Midterm #2	20
Final Exam	40
Discussion Leadership (2)	20
Theoretical Critiques (3)	30
Attendance	10
Participation	20
Annotated Bibliography	10
Final Group Outline	10
Final Group Presentation	20
Total Points in Class	200

Grade Breakdown:

1. *Tests (80 pts. total)*

The two midterms will cover the readings from Weeks 1-5 and the readings from Weeks 6-9 of the course, respectively. The final exam will be cumulative, but special emphasis will be placed on material from the final third of the class (e.g., the material not covered by the midterm exams). You will need to bring Scantron #882 or #8000 for each exam (Scantron forms can be found at the GMU bookstore by the checkout stand). The exams will consist of both multiple choice and short-answer questions, including some short essays that require students to integrate multiple arguments and themes from the course.

2. *Discussion Leadership (2 x 10 pts each = 20 pts)*

A major component of this introductory class is the opportunity to engage with the topics covered in the readings and lectures through discussion. At the beginning of the course, students will divide themselves into groups of 5 as discussion groups for the remainder of the semester. Each discussion will be led by one of the students in the group and will emphasize drawing comparisons between topics covered in the lectures and readings, applying these theories to real-world examples, and reflecting on their importance to society.

Each student will serve as group discussion leader for 2 discussions. The discussion leaders' main tasks are:

- a. Completing the discussion leadership assignment turned in before the week's class period (Described below)
- b. Keeping the group on task throughout the discussion period;
- c. Carefully review the week's readings and lecture material to come up with critical questions to pose to the group. These questions can seek clarification, ponder the limitations, or compare ideas from the various course materials;
- d. Ensuring all members of the group have the opportunity to contribute to the discussion;
- e. Taking notes of the main points discussed, including the questions that you posed to the groups and the group's responses;
- f. Reporting back to the class at the end of the period the main ideas and arguments your group discussed.

As discussion leader, you are also responsible for submitting your assignment on the week you are discussion leader to Blackboard by that Wednesday at **noon** (e.g., **before** the class period in which you are discussion leader). In this assignment, you will be responsible for finding **two** contemporary media examples representing the key concepts from that week's readings. These media examples can include news coverage (including blogs or commentary), entertainment content (e.g., movie trailers), or promotional content (e.g., advertisements, promotions). For each example, you need to include a brief one-paragraph summary (4-5 sentences) explaining what the example is and why it is relevant to that week's materials, followed by at least 3 questions that you can use to spur discussion about the clip.

As an example (you may not use this example yourselves!), I will be showing a clip of a baby dancing to Beyonce in class. If I were discussion leader and this were my example, my assignment might read:

A) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kU9MuM4IP18>

B) This clip shows a baby dancing along to Beyonce's music video, "If you like it then you should have put a ring on it." This is a good example of modeling behavior, as the baby is practicing its motor reproductive abilities, having clearly demonstrated that they have the attention and motivation to engage in this behavior. Finally, it also demonstrates that social learning theory is powerful at even a very young age, as children learn about the world and learn how to perform certain behaviors (like dancing). However, this is not an example of abstract modeling, as the baby is attempting to follow Beyonce's steps directly (imitating). It would be interesting to see if the baby could reproduce these behaviors in other contexts, demonstrating that abstract modeling is taking place.

C) What do you think the baby's motivation for engaging in this behavior is? Does motivation need to be conscious? What abstract modeling skills is the baby learning? How might this modeling apply in other situations?

Finally, the discussion leader should also be an expert on the weeks' readings (both textbook and supplemental). They should feel comfortable guiding discussion on these readings, relating them to course materials, and applying them in outside contexts.

3. *Attendance (10 pts)*

Attendance to the class is mandatory. The topics covered in this course are all interrelated and missing out on one topic will make it harder to understand subsequent topics. Further, class is designed to encourage group interaction and development. If a group member consistently misses class, it makes it harder for the group to succeed. You are allowed **one** excused absence from the class for any reason; each subsequent absence will cost two attendance points until you have reached zero points. Please contact me in advance if you know you have to miss class; however, emailing me your reason is not enough to make the absence excused.

If you miss a class, you are responsible for finding out what went on in your absence and getting pertinent assignments, materials, notes, etc. You are required to have completed the assigned readings in advance of each class period and be prepared to answer questions and discuss the readings during the lecture period.

4. *Participation (20 pts)*

This class is designed to encourage critical engagement and discussion with the topics covered. Each student is expected to come prepared to every class period having completed the readings and ready to discuss their implications.

Participation is particularly important during the designated discussion periods each week. Even when you are not serving as discussion leader, you are required to read the assigned texts and reflect on their meaning. You should be prepared to contribute to the discussion, especially through responding to and extending the discussion leader's questions to the group.

Further, active engagement is necessary for the collaborative group final paper. Each group member is expected to contribute equally to the project.

To ensure each group member's participation, at the end of the semester groups will evaluate each of their peers for their contribution to the group, both in discussion and for the final paper. These evaluations will be kept confidential but will form a large basis of the final participation grade for the course. However, I will also be doing an independent evaluation of each person's participation in the class that may differ from the group's evaluations.

Basically, you ensure a good participation grade through engagement with the class and with your peers. Your peers will be evaluating your performance in their group discussion and I will be taking my own notes that will supplement the peer evaluations in determining the final participation grade.

5. *Theoretical Critiques (3 x 10 pts each = 30 pts)*

At three points throughout the semester, you will be required to write a 2-3 page (double-spaced) critique of the week's readings materials. These response papers should provide a critical evaluation and reflection on the key components of these chapters: what are the strengths and limitations of their argument, how does it fit with previous information from the class, and how well does it relate to your understanding of real world circumstances. These are meant to be analytic arguments, and summary of the readings should be limited to demonstrating that you understand the material and advancing your own argument.

Each student is allowed to pick the weeks for which you want to turn in a theoretical critique, starting after the first week of course material. I encourage students to space their writing assignments throughout the semester. In particular, I strongly advise against doing all three theoretical critiques in the final weeks of class; you will be busy working on the final course paper and may not have sufficient time to devote to these assignments.

The goal of this assignment is to show that you have thought about how the readings relate to one another and improve your understanding of the world. As no theory is unequivocally "right," focus on producing a well-reasoned and innovative argument supported by clear examples drawn from the readings and from your experiences, both inside the classroom and out. These papers will primarily be graded on the quality of the argumentation, but should also be written in a clear manner, free from grammatical errors.

The best papers will bridge multiple concepts or arguments presented in multiple sources – both from the course materials and from outside the course. You are strongly encouraged to relate the focus of the week's readings to previous course materials (for example, if you are write a critique of Week #5's readings on cultivation and stereotypes, you might relate it to materials on social learning and violence). You are also encouraged to use specific examples from your personal experience – particularly with the media – in your paper.

The theoretical critiques will be due to Blackboard by 4:00 p.m. on each Wednesday for that week's readings. Your theoretical critiques are always based on the upcoming week's readings and topic (e.g., for Week #2, the topic would be Media and Persuasion).

6. *Final Group Project (40 pts)*

With your discussion group, you will select a topic of interest to you from the course materials and prepare a 10-minute presentation on the topic, coupled with a presentation outline that expands on the linkages between your argument and your theoretical evidence. Additionally, each group member will be responsible for finding two unique outside academic articles and writing an annotated bibliography of their key findings and contributions to the group's project (more details on the annotated bibliography will be provided closer to the final project). Each group member is expected to contribute equally and substantially to the group effort to avoid losing participation points in the class. In this project, you will bring together multiple theories from the class (e.g., topics from at least two separate weeks of the course) to explain a current event or topic, emphasizing both the media message itself as well as interpreting its possible effects on the public. More details on the paper will be available after the first midterm exam.

Grades:

Your final letter grade will be assessed based on the weighted total points you have accumulated through completing exams and assignments:

	A	93-100	A-	90-92
B+	B	83-86	B-	80-82
C+	C	70-76		
D	F	59 or less		

Course Schedule (Subject to Change)

Week	Date	Topics	Readings & Assignments
Week 1	1/23	Introduction to the Class Understanding Media Effects	Textbook: pp. 3-9, 21-41
Week 2	1/30	Media and Persuasion <i>Discussion 1: Is there a difference between persuasion and propaganda? What are the ethics of persuasion? Can persuasion be valuable or is it inherently manipulative?</i>	Textbook: Chapter 10 How companies learn your secrets
Week 3	2/6	Social Learning and Violence <i>Discussion 2: How does media coverage of violent crimes impact our perceptions of the effects of media? How concerned should we be about violent video games?</i>	Textbook: Chapter 4, pp. 166-176 Wikipedia: Video Game Controversies Reality Bytes: Eight Myths about Video Games Debunked
Week 4	2/13	Cultivation and Stereotypes <i>Discussion 3: How do media portrayals of groups in society alter how we interact with other groups? What are some ways in which media can limit stereotypical portrayals?</i>	Textbook: Chapter 8 Feiler, B. (2011, Jan. 21). What "Modern Family" Says About Modern Families. <i>The New York Times</i> . Levs, J. (2012, Jun. 15). No more dumb old dad: Changing the bumbling father stereotype. <i>CNN.com</i> (2012, Sept. 12). Study: Non-Latinos Buy Into Stereotypes About Hispanic Americans. <i>Huffington Post</i> .
Week 5	2/20	The Role of the Press <i>Discussion 4: What is the responsibility of the news media in delivering information? Can we bridge the knowledge gap?</i>	DeFleur: Chapter 11 Cunningham (2003): Rethinking Objectivity

Week 6	2/27	EXAM #1 Agenda-Setting and Priming	Textbook: Chapters 5-6 PEW (2011): Press coverage and public interest PEW (2012): Year in review
Week 7	3/6	Framing <i>Discussion 5: What are the implications of agenda-setting, priming, and framing for political discourse and decision-making? Do these effects favor particular groups over others?</i>	Textbook: Chapter 7 Petchesky, B. (2012, Oct. 15). Inside a secret NHL focus group: How a GOP strategist is helping hockey owners craft their lockout propaganda. <i>Deadspin.com</i> Sides, J. (2012, Dec. 14). Changing frames and changing public opinion about gun laws. <i>The Monkey Cage</i> .
SPRING BREAK			
Week 8	3/20	Media and Politics <i>Discussion 6: How do media and politicians interact to shape political discourse? Are political advertisements more helpful or harmful? What steps could we take to improve their quality?</i>	Textbook: Chapter 14 Baum, L. (2012, Oct. 24). 2012 shatters 2004 and 2008 records for total ads aired. <i>Wesleyan Media Project: Political Advertising Analysis</i> .
Week 9	3/27	Uses and Gratifications <i>Discussion 7: Are people conscious of their desires when selecting media? What is your media diet and how does it fit your needs and preferences?</i>	Textbook: Chapter 9 The VALS survey approach: http://www.strategicbusinessinsights.com/vals/presurvey.shtml
Week 10	4/3	MIDTERM #2 Social Pressures and Interpersonal Influence <i>Discussion 8: How does conversation help spread news and information? How can marketers use interpersonal discussion to better advance their ideas?</i>	Severin & Tankard: Chapter 10 Nielson: Global trust in advertising

Week 11	4/10	<p>Motivated Reasoning and Selective Exposure</p> <p><i>Discussion 9: How do we encourage people to reconsider their opinions? What are the implications for policy when people are entrenched in their opinions?</i></p>	<p>Tarvis & Aronson (2008): Chapter 1</p> <p>Ideology clouds how we perceive temperatures</p>
Week 12	4/17	<p>Media Ownership & Conglomeration</p> <p><i>Discussion 10: What are the benefits and drawbacks of conglomeration? Is conglomeration in the mass media more worrisome than other forms of conglomeration?</i></p>	<p>Turow: A world of blurred media boundaries (pp. 156-191)</p> <p><i>The Economist</i> (2002, May 23). Media conglomerates: Tangled webs.</p> <p>Anderson: The long tail.</p>
Week 13	4/24	<p>The Digital Age and The End of Mass Media</p> <p><i>Discussion 11: What is the future of the media? Are new media structures fundamentally changing society?</i></p>	<p>Chadwick (2011): The Political Information Cycle in a Hybrid News System</p> <p>Huffington Post: Twitter Still Dominated By Noisy Minority</p> <p>Pew: What Twitter & Facebook mean for news</p>
Week 14	5/1	Final Presentations	
		Final Exam	

General Notes:

Possible Changes to the Syllabus

This course schedule is meant to provide you with a sense of the topics that will be covered in the class. Depending on time constraints, on feedback from the students, and on the availability of potential guest lecturers, I may have to adjust the lecture topics, readings, and assignment due dates in the syllabus. You will receive advance notice of any changes to the course plan as soon as possible.

Attendance and Participation

As noted earlier, 5% of your final grade will come from your attendance record. Each person will be allowed two “free” unexcused absences from class with no penalty, although these absences can only be taken on regular lecture days (e.g., cannot occur during in-class work days or exam periods). These free absences should not be taken lightly – they are designed to account for unexpected illness, family and work obligations, etc. Beyond these two free absences, each absence from class will cost you 1% of your participation grade until you have lost the entire 5%. All additional excused absences from class must be 1) cleared with me in advance and 2) will require additional documentation as appropriate (e.g., a doctor’s note, etc.). While it is required that you contact me in advance if you are requesting additional excused absences, I encourage you to let me know whenever you will miss class.

Consistent late arrival to class or long absences during the lecture will also count against your participation grade. You are expected to be present in the classroom for the entirety of the period and engaged in the classroom activities.

If you miss a class, you are responsible for finding out what went on in your absence and getting pertinent assignments, materials, notes, etc. I am happy to answer any specific questions you have about lecture notes, the textbooks, or assignments, but I will not be reviewing the entire lecture.

You are expected and encouraged to participate in class discussions **actively**. Asking questions, making observations, or introducing issues for debate are all great ways to start. Your experiences with this course in a large part depend on your participation.

Classroom Atmosphere

This class is designed to promote an engaging and informative environment. Part of that is respectful behavior on the part of all the members of the class. Please avoid engaging in any activities that are distracting or disrespectful to your peers or to the instructor. This includes arriving late to class, packing up early, texting or answering the phone during class, talking noisily with peers, or using your laptop for non-classroom related activities (e.g., Facebook, YouTube, etc.).

As part of the class, you are encouraged to engage with your peers and with me. However, this must be done in a respectful and civil manner. Anyone engaging others in a disrespectful tone (including name-calling, derogation of others’ opinions, etc.) will be asked to leave the classroom and will lose points from their participation grade.

Readings

It is important to keep up with the readings in this course. The lectures are designed to supplement, not to replace, the readings. Readings are to be completed before the date listed in the Course Schedule. You should be familiar with the key issues, terms, and methodologies discussed in the readings, and please do not hesitate to ask if you find a concept or argument in the readings unclear.

In addition to the readings on the syllabus, I may assign short supplemental materials. These readings generally will be taken from current mass media content (e.g., news articles, entertainment clips) and will be designed to demonstrate course concepts and spur discussion during Thursday's class. These supplemental readings are also mandatory for all students.

Communication about Grades

If you have questions or concerns with a grade given in the course, you should contact me for more information.

If you have a question about how an assignment is graded, you are welcome to stop by office hours or make an appointment to talk with me during the next week. These questions may not be sent via email, nor will I answer questions about an assignment or exam immediately following the class period.

To appeal your grade, you must: (1) wait 24 hours to contact me (e.g., I will not be answering questions about grades immediately after an assignment or exam has been returned); (2) **email** me the specific reason you would like to question or appeal your grade; and (3) return the graded assignment (with my notations) to my mailbox. In this email, you should include an argument for why you believe your work should be reviewed. It is not sufficient to say "I think my paper is better than this grade indicates" – instead, you must point to specific examples that you think should be reviewed and provide evidence to support your claims that the grade is too low.

To appeal your grade, must contact me **within one week** of receiving your grade. I will not review grades re-submitted after this time period has elapsed.

After I receive your email appealing your grade and the marked-up version of your assignment, I will review your assignment and provide a new grade.

Makeup Exams

Only in extreme circumstances (e.g., verified illness, death in the family) can exams be "made up" without prior arrangements.

Late Assignments

Assignments turned in late will be penalized by deducting 5% from the total points for each day it is late. Assignments will no longer be accepted one week past the due date.

Early Read of Assignments

As a class policy, I do not read a student's assignment until he or she formally submits it for grading. I would be happy to address any specific concerns or questions regarding the assignment prior to the submission during office hours.

Email Use

Email is a great way to stay in touch even after school hours. I encourage you to use email to communicate with me. However, when you email me, please make sure that you identify yourself clearly using both your **full name** and the **course number**. I will only answer **specific** questions about assignments, lectures, or papers via email. If you have more detailed questions about critical concepts or wish to discuss your paper or assignments, you should schedule an appointment to meet with me or come to my office hours. I also will not answer questions if the answer is available in content posted online (e.g., due dates, syllabus readings, etc.)

While I will do my best to promptly reply to any emails received, please allow at least 24 hours for a response. I will let you know in advance if I will be unavailable via email for an extended period of time.

Please be aware that I only have your GMU email address. All my emails will be sent to your GMU account. It is your responsibility to check your email on regular basis and make sure it is working!

Honor Code

George Mason University students are expected to adhere to the Honor Code; please familiarize yourself with the Honor Code if you have not already done so. All papers, projects, and exams are to be original and prepared for this class. Papers and projects for this class may be related to a task in another class, but you must get specific permission from both instructors. While hired typists and proofreaders are permitted, your exams, papers, and projects must be your own work.

Link: <http://www.gmu.edu/academics/catalog/9798/honorcod.html>

Student Notification of Grades

Grade reports are not automatically mailed to students at the end of the term. Instead, students may access their grades by calling 4GMU (703-993-4468) or by checking <http://webGMU.gmu.edu> for the grade report.

Incompletes or Withdrawals

The situations in which an incomplete can be given are specified very clearly in the university catalogue, which indicates that such a grade may be given to a student who is passing a course but who may be unable to complete scheduled course work for a cause beyond reasonable control. Along the same lines, the policies regulating withdrawal are clearly specified in the catalogue, but they are granted **ONLY** for non-academic reasons.

Reasonable Accommodation

Any student in this course who has a disability that may prevent him or her from fully demonstrating his or her abilities should contact the instructor or the course directors as soon as possible so that the necessary accommodations can be made to ensure full participation and facilitate the student's educational opportunities. A Disability Support Services office is available on campus to assist students with special needs. If you have a disability or suspect you might have a disability, contact this office at 703-993-2474. If you have a disability that will require assistance, let your instructor know within the first two weeks of this course.

The GMU Writing Center

The Writing Center provides free tutorial sessions for all students needing help with any writing project from freshman essays to scholarly publications. It is best to make an appointment to ensure seeing a Writing Center consultant at a specific time; however, walk-ins will be accepted if there are openings. The GMU Writing Center is located at UWC: Robinson A114. Phone: 703-993-1200. Web page: www.gmu.edu/departments/writingcenter

The Writing Center is a great resource for students. It offers an opportunity for students to refine their ideas before drafting an assignment and provides another set of eyes to review core components after written. I encourage students to take advantage of this resource in their written assignments for this class.