

**NOTE: This syllabus is from spring 2024; there will be some changes, likely minor, for the next iteration.**

**News, Media and American Democracy  
History 2158-301**

Spring, 2024  
Tues. 3:30-6:30  
Williams Hall 318  
Office Hours: Thurs. 4-5 & by appointment

Bruce Lenthall  
Office: Van Pelt 145  
e-mail: lenthall@upenn.edu  
Phone: 215-898-4170

At separate moments, Thomas Jefferson famously declared both that newspapers were crucial to sustain a nation *and* that a person who never looked at a newspaper was better informed than a regular reader of the press. The ideal of an informed citizenry communicating with one another occupies a central spot in our understanding of the democratic project in the United States, and, consequently, the news and the media play a vital role. But the news can manipulate and distort as well as inform and deliberate. As Americans on both the Left and Right wonder today, how does media support or imperil our democratic prospects?

In this course we will consider how the changing ways Americans have learned about the world have shaped how they have engaged with it. We will explore the shape, role and impact of media in the United States from the 18th to the 21st centuries. As we examine evolving forms of print, film, radio, television and internet we will consider how Americans have integrated media into their lives, and the contested nature of news, citizenship and democracy. We will explore the importance of the different media that conveyed news in the past – and think about what that means for us in the present moment as news travels through new channels.

Throughout, we will also explore some of what it means to think historically: to consider how we draw our own conclusions from historical sources, to understand perspectives other than our own, and to bring the past to bear to better understand the present. Beyond content, this course has two major goals. It aims to help you develop your own voice – to decide what you have to say, to practice questioning your ideas yourself and voicing them. And it aims to help you develop your abilities to understand the viewpoints of others. By studying the past, we can think beyond ourselves, consider experiences and views other than our own. Doing so, in this case, can help us imagine alternatives to our own news structures. To do both of these things, your active participation is essential.

**Course Schedule:**

Jan. 23: Introduction

Jan. 30: Colonial Communications: Oral and Print Media

- Richard Brown, *Knowledge is Power*, chapters 1-2 (Canvas)
- Paul Starr, *The Creation of the Media*, pages 23-25, 47-71 (Canvas)

- Richard Brown, *The Strength of a People*, chapter 3 (Canvas)
- Thomas Leonard, *The Power of the Press*, chapter 2 (Canvas)

Feb. 6: Spreading the News in the Early 1800s: the Mails as Media

- Thomas Leonard, *News for All*, “Antislavery and Incendiary Publications” (Canvas)
- Paul Starr, *The Creation of the Media*, pages 83-94 (Canvas)
- Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, “Of the Relations Between Associations and Newspapers” (Canvas)
- Richard Kielbowicz, *News in the Mail*, chapters 1, 3-6, 8, 10 (Canvas)

Feb. 13: The Transformation of the Press

- Brown, *Knowledge is Power*, chapter 10 (Canvas)
- Daniel Czitrom, *Media and the American Mind*, chapter 1 (Canvas)
- Michael Shudson, *Discovering the News*, chapter 3 (Canvas)
- George Douglas, *The Golden Age of the Newspaper*, chapter 8 (Canvas)
- Paul Starr, *The Creation of the Media*, pages 250-260 (Canvas)

\*\* Feb. 15, 5:00: Media and democracy paper #1 due \*\*

Feb. 20: Race and the Birth of Mass Media

- Melvyn Stokes, *D.W. Griffith's "The Birth of a Nation,"* Intro., chapters 1, 5 (Canvas)
- Melvin Ely, *The Adventures of Amos 'n' Andy*, chapters 1, 5 (Canvas)
- Michelle Hilmes, *Radio Voices*, chapter 3 (Canvas)
- “Amos ‘n’ Andy,” June 9, 1929 (radio program)  
<https://www.olderadioworld.com/media/Amos%20n%20Andy%201929-06-09%20Writing%20a%20Letter.mp3>
- *Birth of A Nation* (film)

Feb. 27: Not-so Mass Media: the African-American Press

- Roland Wolseley, *The Black Press, U.S.A.*, chapter 3 (Canvas)
- Patrick Washburn, *The African American Newspaper*, Introduction (Canvas)

\*\* Primary Source Project, in class: African-American Newspapers \*\*

Mar 5 – spring break

Mar. 12: Commercial Control and the Rise of Broadcasting

- Susan Smulyan, *Selling Radio*, skip chapter 4

Mar. 19: Media Master, Media Critic: Orson Welles

- “War of the Worlds” (radio program – <http://www.mercurytheatre.info/>)
- *Citizen Kane* (film)
- Robert Brown, *Manipulating the Ether*, chapters 10-14 (Canvas)
- Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front*, pages 384-394 (Canvas)

- John O'Hara, Genee Lesser, Cedric Belfrage, Andre Bazin, in *Perspectives on Citizen Kane* (Canvas)

\*\* Mar. 21, 5:00: Final date to get research topic approved \*\*

Mar. 26: TV Nation: Political Authority and the New Medium

- Thomas Doherty, *Cold War, Cool Medium*, chapters 1-2, 4-6, 8-9

\*\* Mar. 28, 5:00: Media and democracy paper #2 due \*\*

Apr. 2: Manipulation and/or Participation

- Susan Douglas, *Where the Girls Are*, Introduction, chapters 1, 3-4, 6, 8-9, Epilogue

Apr. 9: The Media Triumphant? Reporting the News or Making It?

- David Hallin, *The Uncensored War*, skip chapter 2, pages 90-101

\*\* Apr. 11, 5:00: Research component 1 due\*\*

Apr. 16: Contraction and Fragmentation

- Kevin Kruse and Julian Zelizer, *Fault Lines*, chapter 7 (Canvas)
- Julian Zelizer, "How Washington Helped Create the Contemporary Media" (Canvas)
- Eric Klinenberg, *Fighting for Air*, Introduction, chapters 1-3, 5

\*\* Apr. 18, 5:00: Research component 2 due \*\*

Apr. 23: Democracy in the Age of the Internet

- Tim Wu, "Is the First Amendment Obsolete?" (Canvas)
- Cass Sunstein, *#Republic*, chapter 1 (Canvas)
- Victor Pickard, *Democracy without Journalism*, Conclusion (Canvas)

\*\* Apr. 25, 5:00: Media and democracy dialogue due \*\*

Apr. 30: News, Truth and Democracy

- Sophia Rosenfeld, *Democracy and Truth*, introduction, chapters 1, 4
- Zac Gershberg and Sean Illing, *The Paradox of Democracy*, Introduction (Canvas)

\*\* May 7: Research essay due by 5:00 \*\*

### **Class Expectations and Your Success:**

**I am committed to your learning and engagement** in this class. Everyone approaches our material and course aims – to help us better define, test and communicate our ideas; and to help us better understand perspectives other than our own – from different vantage points. Please let me know how I can help you to learn in the context of this course. My

office hour is available for drop ins, and you are encouraged to email me to set up other times to meet as well. Note also that your success depends on the engagement you bring to the process. And all of us contribute to the success of our class.

We can only achieve our goals in this course if **we promote discussion and academic freedom in our class**. That means we all must be able to voice our views without outside constraints or censorship, and it means that we all must listen to each other to understand why we hold our ideas. The open communication that makes possible our learning is something we, in part, build ourselves: speaking with the aim of reaching others, and listening with an honest desire to understand viewpoints other than our own.

Our goals in this class also require your **commitment to academic integrity and preclude the use of generative AI** – with one exception discussed below. Using generative AI as a shortcut for reading or written assignments shortchanges your learning. You can best learn how to weigh evidence and take a position by practicing doing so; and you need those skills in order to evaluate anything produced by generative AI. Our final short written assignment will ask you to engage in a dialogue with generative AI, as another way to develop your own thinking about news and democracy, and skills developing, hearing and discussing arguments. Using generative AI for other work in this class is a violation of Penn’s code of academic integrity.

### **Responsibilities and Evaluation:**

Class participation:

Your active and informed participation – as a speaker and listener – is the backbone of this course and your learning. Classes will be discussions of assigned readings and other materials. That means you should come to class on time, having done the readings and prepared to consider them together. Attendance is a mandatory part of participation: recognizing, though, that emergencies or illness may arise, everyone may miss up to two classes without penalty (if you must miss a class, though, you are still responsible for materials discussed). If you cannot attend a class, let me know in advance.

Class participation counts for 30% of your grade.

Media and democracy essays:

Students will write two 2-3-page essays that answer the same question: **What media structures, systems or practices are important for supporting democracy in the United States?** Your essay should develop a precise argument, grounded in specific evidence from the course materials to date. That means that, although the question will be the same for your two essays, your answer will differ and/or become richer as you expand your expertise in this area and have more historical moments to consider. Remember, the goal is to draw conclusions from your source materials, not to start by arguing for the means of distributing news that you may like best. And keep in mind that there may be trade-offs in different structures; acknowledging the limits of your position is valuable.

Media and democracy papers are due by 5:00 pm on Fridays, Feb. 15 and Mar. 28.

Media and democracy dialogue:

At the end of the semester, you will return to this question by engaging in a dialogue with a generative AI tool and writing a 1-page reflection on that dialogue. The specific prompt for the dialogue will be distributed later in the semester, but in general, students will ask the tool to generate a brief essay and then follow up by discussing the essay with the generative AI, asking questions, and challenging the tool's conclusions, sources or reasoning. The bot will respond to your comments as part of the conversation. You will submit both a transcript of your discussion and a reflection essay. Your reflection essay should discuss what you have learned from the dialogue, particularly considering some of the following: what you have learned about the relationship between news, media and democracy from the conversation; what is important to question in such a discussion or what we can productively contest as part of the process of scholarship (and perhaps citizenship too); or how we know things and what kinds of evidence or reasoning help us make conclusions. The media and democracy dialogue is due by 5:00 pm Apr. 25.

Students who are uncomfortable sharing their information or ideas with generative AI should speak with me about an alternative assignment.

Primary source project:

Our Feb. 27 class discussion on the African-American press and alternatives to mass media will be based on your readings of relevant primary sources: African-American newspapers. To facilitate this, students will select and examine a source, discuss their findings in a 2-3-page essay, and bring three written questions to class to discuss. Specifically, you will evaluate how a particular African-American newspaper covered a historical event or trend from the period between 1900 and 1940. You must, then, choose a newspaper and an occurrence to study. Read about your historical item in the mainstream/predominantly-white press and compare it with how your particular newspaper reported that event. Do different pictures emerge? What can you learn about the various journalistic perspectives and visions of the world? What do the different voices reveal? In your essay use the comparison as a starting point to make your argument, and then support it with examples from your primary source. Finally, the questions you offer to the class should be rooted in your research, but also should be open enough so that your classmates can draw upon their own primary materials to discuss them. The project is due by the start of class on Feb. 27.

The media and democracy essays and dialogue and the primary source project together count for 40% of your grade.

Research essay:

The course will culminate with an 8-12-page primary-source research essay that explores a focused aspect of the relationship between news media, democracy broadly defined, and the history of the United States. You must define a narrow topic, make a clear argument about your topic, and test and support it with your primary sources. You are encouraged to think creatively in selecting your topic. All students must discuss their topics with me no later than Mar. 19. The research essay is due by 5:00 May 7.

Prior to handing in the essay, there are three components of your research project that you will help you prepare for the final paper. First, you must meet with me to discuss your proposed topic. Second and third, you must write a two-part preliminary

examination of your research topic. One part will identify your question and why it is worth studying (this part requires the inclusion of secondary sources). One part will identify your primary sources and select at least one to interpret (this requires starting and citing your primary source research); for this component, make an argument about what one of your primary sources tells you, supporting that interpretation with the source. Each of these components will run 1-2 pages. The first part is due by Apr. 11, the second part is due by Apr. 18; either part may be handed in first.

The research essay counts for 30% of your grade: 25% for the final essay and 5% for the three preliminary components.

#### Paper policies:

All written work should state a clear thesis and develop it with properly cited evidence from your sources. All essays should represent your own work and demonstrate your academic integrity. With the exception of the dialogue, generative AI is not permitted. Papers should be proofread before submission. Be sure to back up copies of your work: lost papers are your responsibility.

Essays should be handed in by the deadlines stated. You will be permitted up to three extension days, to use without penalty when you choose to do so. You must let me know you are using an extension day prior to the deadline. Keep track of your days and save them for times you truly need them. Papers that come in late without an extension day will be graded down by one-third (eg. A- to B+) the first day; a full grade for more than a day, up to a week; papers more than a week late will not be accepted. For exceptional circumstances, see me.

#### Course Materials:

Most course materials are available through Canvas, as noted in the schedule. Books may be read online (in some cases, noted (O) below), purchased from the Penn Bookstore or elsewhere, or borrowed from the library (in Franklin, the "Get It" button will allow you to request a book, even if it isn't in Penn's library). Books include:

Susan Smulyan – *Selling Radio: The Commercialization of American Broadcasting, 1920-1934*

May be hard to find; consider requesting early through the library

Thomas Doherty, *Cold War, Cool Medium: Television, McCarthyism, and American Culture* (O)

Susan Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing up Female with the Mass Media*

David Hallin, *The "Uncensored War": The Media and Vietnam* (O)

Eric Klinenberg, *Fighting for Air: The Battle to Control America's Media*

Sophia Rosenfeld, *Democracy and Truth* (also on Canvas)