OBJECTIVITY AND THE POLITICS
OF THE JOURNALISM REVOLUTION

New York University

I  OVERVIEW
At the birth of this nation, it was assumed by the press and its readers that journalists were partisans, telling stories from particular points of view. But the growth of the modern newspaper, combined with the ideals of science, transformed the image, self-image, and practice of journalism, which now claims to worship at the altar of objectivity, to present information or “news” without bias. But this ethic has given way to new realities, perhaps a new ethic within journalism itself, inspired by a partisan political climate and corporate media control. Our challenge then is to examine the basis—and reality—of an objective press, and, most importantly, whether this ideal or promise is possible, or even desirable. To pursue this inquiry we consider the challenges to objectivity presented by the introduction of new communications media; the journalistic values and construction of news frames; alternative forms of journalism; and the rise of partisan media outlets. The course culminates in an end-of-the-term conference in which student teams present media case studies that incorporate the ideas, theories and models of journalism discussed in class.

II  READINGS
Books:
These books can be purchased at the NYU bookstore.


Short Takes:
1. Plato, “Allegory of the Cave” (online)
2. Gore, from “The Assault on Reason”
3. Plato, Phaedrus 14 http://plato.evansville.edu/texts/jowett/phaedrus14 (online)
4. Herr, from Dispatches
5. Bagdikian, “Common Media for an Uncommon Nation” (online)

III  ASSIGNMENTS
It’s essential that you keep up with these readings since they will be the focus of our class discussion and assignments. Likewise, assignments must be submitted on deadline to be relevant to the class. Late assignments will be penalized 5 points; assignments more than one week late will not be accepted. All assignments must have page numbers and be stapled; no email submissions will be accepted without my approval.
1. **Intellectual autobiography (2-3 pages)**
This assignment asks you to examine your political-intellectual being. What is it about your background—family, religion, education—that has shaped your political worldview? What political figures or thinkers have influenced you the most? Have there been other major events or personalities (a teacher; a book; a media presentation) that have guided your political life?

2. **Media Analysis: Choose ONE of these two assignments.**

   Follow a network newscast for a week and analyze it for “news bias.” For our purposes, “news bias” has to do with the choices that networks make in selecting and framing the news.
   Questions to consider: What stories are chosen and how are they placed within the newscast? How does this newscast’s prioritize its stories and compare that “agenda” with that of a major newspaper (look at the following day’s newspaper)? How does this network’s news compare with other network newscasts? On a micro level, can you point to words/phrases that indicate a bias on the part of the anchor/reporters in covering the news? What sources are chosen to be interviewed? What alternative sources are excluded? How do you account for this? What images are selected, or ignored, in the stories of the day, and why? What is your overall analysis of this newscast as it pertains to its stance as an objective source of news and information?
   
   or

   **b) Analysis: Interview with a professional journalist (3-4 pages)**
   Select a professional journalist and conduct an interview as to the role that “bias” plays in his/her reporting. You may consider the questions in the assignment above as an avenue to gather your responses. (Note: It’s likely that your interviewee may react negatively to the word “biased,” so you might want to avoid using this word—try the phrase “reportorial decisions,” made in “framing” a story.

3. **NYU Journalism Review Critique (3-4 pages)**
I am placing you in the role as a critic for the NYU Journalism Review. Read both Capote and Thaler’s book and choose ONE to review using the questions below as a guide.

   **For Capote’s book:**
   What investigative/reportorial techniques are used by the writer? Who are his sources? How does he use dialogue, detail, and imagination in his story telling? What cultural references are woven into his narrative? What “voice” is used in his story? What point of view, if any, is evident? Do you consider this work a legitimate form of journalism? In your judgment, what are the limitations, shortcomings or weaknesses in the work?
For Thaler's book:
What is the author's central argument about American journalism? What kinds of evidence does he use to develop and support his argument? What are the underlying issues that relate to modern media today, how they operate, and their impact on culture? What are Thaler’s major conclusions—and do you agree or disagree? In your judgment, what are the limitations, shortcomings or weaknesses in the work?

4. Final Project: Case study and Presentation (5-6 pages)
You will be assigned to a panel that will then select an umbrella topic as a case study. Examples of previous case studies will be discussed in class. Each panel member will take one aspect of the case study, write a report and then make a presentation at our Journalism Revolution Conference taking place during the last three weeks of the term. The reports collectively should provide a comprehensive look into the subject at hand. Two scheduled in-class meetings will give students the opportunity to discuss their progress with fellow panelists. Students will also be responsible for submitting an abstract and title of their paper prior to presentation.

5. Class participation and attendance
I am looking for original thinking in both class activity and home assignments. The strength of our seminar depends on active participation in which the student engages in and formulates new thinking about ideas presented in class. You are expected to keep up with weekly readings since they will be central to the class give and take. Regular class attendance is expected. Each class session is an intensive seminar; if you miss class, you essentially miss the course. Attendance is taken at the start of each class. Two or more unexcused absences will result in lost points; repeated absences may result in a failing grade. Full credit will be given to students who attend each session and intelligently participate in the class.

IV GRADING
Each assignment has been given a set number of points. A final grade is computed by adding your total points, which are then converted into a letter grade using the scale below. Extra-credit points may be earned through special assignments and classwork.

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<tr>
<th>Final Grade</th>
<th>Point Value</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>100-93</td>
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<td>A-</td>
<td>92-89</td>
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<td>B+</td>
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<td>F</td>
<td>60-</td>
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*I*Incompletes are granted only with the permission of the instructor.
Explanation of Point System for Media Analysis/Interview and Book Critique:

20-19 = Excellent. Outstanding work in all respects. Paper demonstrates a comprehensive and solid understanding of material with thoughtful, focused and original insights; well-written and an interesting read; fluent expression and no grammatical errors; bibliography and graphic materials when appropriate.

18-16 = (Very) Good. Work demonstrates a complete and accurate understanding of the course material; presents a reasonable degree of insight and broad levels of analysis. Work reflects competence, but stays at a general or predictable level of understanding. Source materials, examples, illustrations, are used appropriately and articulation/writing is clear. Papers have been carefully proofread.

15-13 = Fair. Work is generally correct but superficial, incomplete, or expresses some significant errors or weaknesses. Source materials are used inadequately or inappropriately, and arguments lack concrete, specific examples and illustrations.

12-10 = Below Average. Work has significant shortcomings and needs to be revised. Writing/articulation appears vague, hard to follow, or loaded with other technical errors.

Under 10 = No grade awarded. Work demonstrates serious errors in understanding. Sources are used inappropriately or not at all, and writing/articulation appears deficient.

V CONTACT
This course extends beyond the boundaries of our classroom, and students are encouraged to meet with me during my office hour (by appointment on Thursday from 5:00-6:00 p.m. at my office (TBA) and through email pthaler@aol.com (please use this email address, rather than my NYU email, for your correspondence). I will also be available after each class session.

VI RULES
Statement of Academic Freedom and Responsibility
This class will deliberately address controversial issues with the intent of challenging students’ beliefs and assumptions. During our discussions, students should feel free to speak his or her mind without concern that that any idea will be penalized or disqualified. It is expected that every member of the class act in a respectful manner toward others.

Academic Honesty
Students are expected to meet the highest standards of academic integrity and adhere to the norms of a serious intellectual community. To do otherwise constitutes cheating and will result in a failing grade for the course. Each student has an obligation to submit his/her original work and to properly acknowledge the work of others that have been incorporated into papers and projects.

Academic Courtesy
Some simple rules (based on common courtesy) are important to maintaining an effective learning environment for all students:

1. The class will start on time. If you must enter late, enter quietly and take a seat near the door.
2. The class will generally have a 10-minute break midway through the session. Students are expected to return promptly following the break.
3. The class will end on time. Do not interrupt the class by leaving before its conclusion. If you must leave early, coordinate with me prior to class.
4. If you must converse with a colleague, please do so in a manner that is not disruptive to other students or the instructor.
5. Computers and all electronic devices must be shut off.
6. Students may bring drinks (and only light snacks, please) into class.

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**COURSE SCHEDULE**

The course outline is a living document that is subject to change. While the outline sets up an overall plan of intellectual action, it may be modified at any time to take advantage of issues that are of currency.

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### THEORETICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I  (Sept. 8)</th>
<th><strong>Introduction:</strong> What is objectivity? What do we mean by the “journalism Revolution”?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Readings for Sept. 15: Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave”; (handout)</td>
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<td>Assignment for Sept. 15: Intellectual autobiography</td>
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<th>II (Sept. 15)</th>
<th><strong>Bias of the Species:</strong> Does objective truth exist—from Plato to Heisenberg to Lippmann?</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reality and human perception: in-class workshop</td>
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<td>Due: Intellectual Autobiography</td>
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<th>III (Sept. 22)</th>
<th><strong>Professional Bias:</strong> Values in the News</th>
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<tr>
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<td>In-class news assignment</td>
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<td>Models of the press—authoritarian to commercial</td>
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<td>Readings for Sept. 29: Gore, from “Assault on Reason”</td>
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<th>IV (Sept. 29)</th>
<th><strong>Technological Bias:</strong> Information environments, new epistemologies and the ‘bias’ of technology</th>
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<td>In-class reading: from <em>Phaedrus</em> (online)</td>
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<td>Book for Oct. 6: Jamieson, The Press Effect</td>
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### CHALLENGES TO OBJECTIVITY

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<th>V  (Oct. 6)</th>
<th><strong>Framing and the Journalistic Construction of News</strong></th>
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<tr>
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<td>Discussion: Jamieson’s The Press Effect</td>
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<td>Screening: Outfoxed</td>
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<td>Reading for Oct. 13: Herr, from Dispatches</td>
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<td>Due: Watching TV News/Interview with Journalman</td>
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| VI (Oct. 13)  | **Participatory and Partisan Journalism**                                                        |

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Discussion: The FOX influence
Screening: Stewart/O’Reilly
In-class: Group Conference Meeting I

VII (Oct. 20)
**New Journalism: Wolfe and Capote**
In-class reading: from Capote, In Cold Blood
Screening: from Capote
Book Critique for Oct. 27: In Cold Blood

VIII (Oct. 27)
**Media Critique: In Cold Blood (Student Presentation)**
Book Critique for Nov. 3: The Spectacle

IX (Nov. 3)
**Media Critique: The Spectacle (Student presentation)**
Screening: OJ Simpson case
Reading for Nov. 10: Bagdikian, “Common Media for an Uncommon Nation”: (online)

X (Nov. 10)
**Corporate Media: McChesney, Bagdikian and Chomsky**
Screening: Manufacturing Consent
In-class: Group Conference Meeting II
Assignment Nov. 17: conference paper abstract and title;
Favorite/controversial blogs

XI (Nov. 17)
**The Present and Future Journalism I: Opinion Journalism**
Reading for Dec. 1: Rosen, Web Users Open the Gates” (CP)
Abstracts/title due
Assignment: Bring in interactive sites

NO CLASS NOV. 24 —THANKSGIVING HOLIDAY

XII (Dec. 1) **The Present and Future Journalism II: Tweets, Blogs and the Era of Interactive Journalism**
Discussion: Rosen article
All case studies due Dec. 8
Final Group Meeting: Prepare for Journalism Revolution Conference
(Conference memo handout)

**THE JOURNALISM REVOLUTION CONFERENCE**

XIII (Dec. 8)
**Case Study I & II**

XIV (Dec. 15)
**Case Study III & IV**
and a few final words from your professor