OBJECTIVITY AND THE POLITICS
OF THE JOURNALISM REVOLUTION

New York University

K20.1299-001 Weds. 6:20-9:00 p.m. Spring 2016 Prof. Paul Thaler

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
In addition to these assigned readings, contemporary articles will be distributed each week and form the basis for our introductory class discussions. Students are encouraged to contribute articles from their own independent readings.

Books:

Short Takes:
1. Plato, “Allegory of the Cave” (online)
2. Hendricks, “When the town square is online, power lies with the people” (online)
3. Gore, from The Assault on Reason (handout)
4. Plato, from Phaedrus (handout)
5. Wihbey, “Extreme voices: Interest groups and the misrepresentation of public issues” (online)
6. Postman, Introduction from Amusing Ourselves to Death (handout)
7. Bagdikian, “Common Media for an Uncommon Nation” (online)
8. Rosen, “WebUsers Open the Gates” (handout)
III Learning Goals:
1. Students will gain insight through class discussion, readings and research projects into the historical nature of the press and the philosophical, ethical, social and psychological ramifications that come with the emergence of new information technologies.
2. Students will enhance research and writing skills through extensive readings, various written assignments, and in collaborative work leading to a major research project and presentation.
3. Students will gain critical skills to assess our modern communication environment, and the cultural shifts, and challenges, brought on by expansion of new media technologies.

IV ASSIGNMENTS
It is 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. Assignments should have page numbers and be stapled; no email submissions will be accepted without my approval (please try to avoid).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Points</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Intellectual autobiography</td>
<td>10 pts</td>
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<td>2. Media Analysis:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Watching TV News/Interview</td>
<td>20 points</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Book critique</td>
<td>20 points</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Case Study and Presentation</td>
<td>25+5 points</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Participation and attendance</td>
<td>20 points</td>
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1. Intellectual autobiography (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 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 (4 pages)
Select a professional journalist and conduct an interview as to the role that “bias” plays
in his/her reporting. How are stories chosen? Sources? What are reporter’s “loyalties”? Does
the reporter consider him/herself “biased, and is that a negative or positive quality?
How would the reporter classify his/her type of reporting? What challenges does the
reporter encounter? (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 pages)
I am placing you in the role as a critic for the NYU Journalism Review. Read both
Capote and Thaler’s books 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 (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 two weeks of the term
(group members can opt for joint reports). The reports collectively should provide a
comprehensive look into the state of contemporary journalism and media. 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.

V 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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<thead>
<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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<tr>
<td>A-</td>
<td>92-89</td>
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<tr>
<td>B+</td>
<td>88-85</td>
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<td>B</td>
<td>84-81</td>
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<td>B-</td>
<td>80-77</td>
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<tr>
<td>C+</td>
<td>76-73</td>
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<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>72-69</td>
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<td>C-</td>
<td>68-65</td>
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<td>D</td>
<td>64-61</td>
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<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>60-</td>
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*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.
VI 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 Wednesday from 5:00-6:00 p.m. at my office (Rm. 429 Gallatin Bld.) and through email pthaler@aol.com and thaler@nyu.edu (please use both email addresses to ensure a timely response) I will also be available after each class session.

VII 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 down. I prefer human interaction rather than electronic is this seminar, so computer usage is discouraged.
6. Students may bring drinks (and only light snacks, please) into class.

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.

THEORETICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATION
I (January 27)
Introduction: What is objectivity, and does it matter? What do we mean by the “journalism Revolution”?
Readings for Feb. 3: Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave”; (handout)
Assignment for Feb. 3: Intellectual autobiography
II (Feb. 3)
Bias of the Species: Does objective truth exist—from Plato to Heisenberg to Lippmann?
Reality and human perception: in-class workshop
Class Introduction
Due: Intellectual Autobiography
Reading for Feb. 10: “When the town square is online, power lies with the people”

III (Feb. 10)
Professional Bias: Values in the News and the New Public Sphere
In-class news assignment
Models of the press—authoritarian to commercial
Readings for Feb. 17: Gore, from Assault on Reason; Postman, “Introduction,” from Amusing Ourselves to Death

IV (Feb. 17)
Technological Bias: Information environments, new epistemologies and the ‘bias’ of technology
In-class reading: from Phaedrus (online)
MARCH 2: Jamieson, The Press Effect

NO CLASS FEB. 24 – SPECIAL LECTURE SERIES

V (March 2)
Framing and the Journalistic Construction of News
Discussion: Jamieson’s The Press Effect
Screening: Outfoxed
Due March 9: Watching TV News/Interview with Journalist
Reading for March 9: “Extreme voices: Interest groups and the misrepresentation of public issues”

VI (March 9)
Participatory and Partisan Journalism and the Postmodern Public
Discussion: The FOX effect
Screening: Stewart/O’Reilly
In-class: Group Conference Meeting I

SPRING BREAK – NO CLASS – MARCH 14-18

VII (March 23)
New Journalism: Wolfe and Capote
In-class reading: from Capote, In Cold Blood
Screening: from Capote

**Book Critique for March 30: In Cold Blood**

VIII (March 30)

**Media Critique: In Cold Blood (Student Presentation)**

Book Critique for April 6: The Spectacle

IX (April 6)

**Media Critique: The Spectacle (Student presentation)**

Screening: OJ Simpson case

Reading for April 13: Bagdikian, “Common Media for an Uncommon Nation” (online)

X (April 13)

**Corporate Media: McChesney, Bagdikian and Chomsky**

Screening: Manufacturing Consent

In-class: Group Conference Meeting II

**Assignment April 13: conference paper abstract and title**;

Reading for April 20: Rosen, Web Users Open the Gates"

XI (April 20)

**Making Sense: The Present and Future Journalism Revolution I**

Abstracts/title due

Assignment April 27: Bring in favorite/controversial blogs; interactive sites

XII (April 27)

**Making Sense: The Present and Future Journalism Revolution II**

All case studies due May 4

Final Group Meeting: Prepare for Journalism Revolution Conference

(Conference memo handout)

**THE JOURNALISM REVOLUTION CONFERENCE**

XIII (May 4)

**Case Study I & II**

XIV (May 11)

**Case Study III & IV** . . .and final words from your professor