Course Description

Prerequisites: Foundations, Inquiry. Media Criticism students only.
This course is designed to hone the student journalist’s ability to research and report deeply and to be able to imagine and develop fresh ideas, test them with the strength of his or her reporting and research, and then to present them in story form. Students will be expected to keep weekly beat notes or blogs, exploring what is current in the topic and demonstrating week after week the shoeleather they have worn in pursuit of their subject matter. Out of this work will come four or five stories in narrative, explanatory or investigative style, depending on the instructor and the specific assignment. Syllabi differ by content of the course but all sections emphasize idea development, interview technique, reporting, background research and writing skills across genres. Broadcast sections vary only by medium.

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Every four years, the people of the United States get another chance to choose their President, and both media and politics get another chance to reinvent themselves. The rate of change in the media industry -- financial, technological, and stylistic -- means that the coverage of Election 2012 will be different than any that has come before. Streaming media; data visualizations; and the strengths and weaknesses of the 24-hour cable channels will all come to bear on how Election 2012 is covered and plays out. Media criticism can come in many genres and formats, and we’ll explore not only text, but web video; audio commentary; and even mimetic culture (think of the tear-gassing memes in various photos and collages that went viral during the Occupy movement.)

You will become adept at finding the best sources of different types of political information, from data visualizations to regional beat reporting, to inform your own work. Everyone will produce shorter work in at least two forms of media, and a longer or more complex final project that may be in one medium or multiple media. There are so many outlets that can feature solid criticism and journalism, and you’ll be expected (with guidance) to place your best work in its best venue. For your final project, you will analyze media criticism of one aspect of the election: perhaps the effect of campaign advertising in the era of SuperPACs; or pop culture media targeting of young voters; or public debates of...
voter roll purges and voting IDs. We will look at varying types of partisan and opinion speech, from a diverse group of sources, to give a full range of perspectives.

The course will include an introduction to media criticism in general, and the specifics of critiquing election season media. How have evolutions in media business and technology changed not only how we produce, but what and how we critique? How can you fairly compare and contrast media produced by major outlets; by campaigns; and by occasional bloggers and armchair pundits? How is multi-device saturation of the audience (producing “continuous partial attention”) affecting our ability to transmit critiques that meet their targets? What past pillars of media criticism should we look to to guide us in this new era?

Woven into the class will be specific instruction on multimedia journalism, as part of the Arthur L. Carter Institute’s curriculum.

Textbooks:

Additional Materials
• Tea Party: The Documentary Film. Director Pritchett Cotton (Ground Floor Video)
• Mic Check: Documentary Shorts from the Occupy Movement (The Media Education Foundation)
• Selections from FaceTheFactsUSA.org

Assignments:
The students will keep a private (password-protected) Tumblr blog that houses their weekly assignments, or responses. Unless otherwise noted, the weekly response will require a short (approximately 250 word, or appx. 3-substantial-paragraph) rumination on the week’s reading; and a separate short media critique of coverage of a political news event of the week. Students are expected to
stay abreast of the news, and to select an item of their choice. (For example, you can choose a news story in any medium and see if the reporter uses biased language; or chooses what seems to be a deliberately unflattering image of a candidate. Or you could find an opinion piece and write about how the critique does or does not hit the mark.) On your Tumblr and the printed material, provide a link to the digital version of what you are critiquing. If it is not available digitally, please print it out or provide a citation. For the purpose of grading, students will print their new weekly critiques (i.e., new entries; not the entire blog) and deliver them at the beginning of each class. The previous week’s assignments will be returned at the mid-class break.

In addition, there will be two 750-word assignments plus a final assignment, which can be done in the media forms described below. Late assignments will be docked one letter grade per day late.

**Assignment #1:** Using the grading notes from one of your weekly assignments as a guide to revision, expand on one of your short critiques, being sure to both cite from at least one class reading and analyze at least two examples of political media coverage. The assignment should hold together thematically, exploring one topic with both news and analytical reference. This will be an academic paper, with citations to the class readings and media sources referenced. (Approximately 750 words, text. Links to video or audio are welcomed, but do not change the word count.)

**Assignment #2:** You have a choice. Use the format above (text, appx. 750 words) or do an appx. 3-minute multimedia slideshow, with images, narration, and text. The slideshow should lead us through a thesis about how one aspect of the campaign coverage is unfolding, and can ask or answer a pointed question. (Eg: Are broadcasters spending more time on gaffes than issues? Or: How are data visualizations changing how we get political news?) This should not just be a slideshow of images, but should include research, references, and a clear line of reasoning.

**Assignment #1**
- Choose and share with instructor a topic by September 27th.
- Assignment due October 18th.

**Assignment #2**
- Choose and share with instructor a topic and the chosen format by October 25.
- Assignment due November 8th.

**Final Assignment:** This will consist of a longer and more in-depth critique of a contemporary trend in political media, using multiple references to recent news coverage and historical perspective on the evolution of media. The format may be a multimedia slideshow (audio and photographs) or a narrated video. Each of these should be 5 well-crafted minutes. Or the final assignment can be an essay,
approximately 1,500 words. You may use original reporting in the pieces, but that is not required. If an essay, it should be an academic paper with proper citations. If a slideshow or video, the sources – which may include original interviews -- should be identified in narration or Chyron/“lower third” text.

- Students will deliver a topic plus a short description of initial themes, references, and the chosen media form by November 15.
- Students will get feedback to their proposal via email by Wednesday November 21. (Class does not meet on Thursday November 22.) If requested, revisions to the proposal are due November 29.
- A draft or work-in-progress is due December 6.
- The revised final assignment is due the final day of class, December 15. On that day, students will present their work to the class – discussing their thesis and reading excerpts if text is the medium; and showing the work and discussing if a slideshow or video is the medium.
- Students who have technical or editorial questions about their final assignments are encouraged to ask them well in advance.

Weekly Responses/Assignments  20%
Assignment 1:  15%
Assignment 2:  15%
Attendance/Lateness  20%
Participation  10%
Final Project/Presentations  20%

Academic integrity: This is a journalism class, therefore plagiarism of any kind will lead to immediate expulsion from the class and possibly more severe penalties.

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Class Schedule

Class 1
Thursday Sept 6  Introduction

We will begin with the questions: “What is media criticism in our era? Who is a “media critic”? And what are media criticism’s roots?” In a digital age, the number of people who do some form of media criticism has proliferated widely.
Each student will create a private (password protected) Tumblr account, shared with the instructor, on which he or she will post the weekly assignments. We will also create a group Tumblr blog. Tumblr instruction will be given in class.

During the second half of class, we will use the group Tumblr to do live-blogging media critiques of the Democratic National Convention (which is on that night); and then play taped material from the Republican National Convention and “live” blog that. We’ll wrap by discussing what we are looking for when we act as digital media critics posting short commentaries.

**Reading assignment for Sept 13 response:** "How the Media Covered the 2012 Primary Campaign" Pew Research Center (2012)

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**Class 2 (with Multimedia 1)**
**Thur Sept. 13** Overview of Political Media Criticism
**Due: Weekly responses including Pew’s “How the Media Covered the 2012 Primary Campaign”**

We’ll explore examples of how political media criticism is exercised in different media and styles, from clips of the Daily Show to blogs to newspapers. Is the medium the message?

**Multimedia Instruction 1**
Technical and conceptual principles of visual storytelling (guerilla lighting, visual composition techniques, and audio strategies). Students will learn to operate DSLRs, recorders, and microphones.

**Reading for Sept 20 Response:** “Writing News and Telling Stories,” by Robert Darnton (from *Killing the Messenger* )

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**Class 3 (plus class time multimedia assignment)**
**Thur. Sept. 20** Does the Media Speak to the Public... Or Itself?
**Due: Weekly responses including Darnton’s “Writing News and Telling Stories”**

During the first half of class, we will take to the local streets to gather “MOS” – (wo)man-on-the-street interviews about the political process and the media coverage of it. This is a chance to road test the instruction we have gotten on visual and audio storytelling. Students will work in teams of 2-3, recording audio, video, and taking still images. Students will be encouraged to upload and use a clip of audio or video and/or a photograph to supplement their next week’s response assignment.
During the second half of class we will discuss, in context of the Robert Darnton essay, whether the media is more interested in speaking to itself than to the public. Our MOS-gathering may provide some perspective for the discussion as well.

Multimedia: MOS-gathering assignment

**Reading for Sept 27 Response:** Ch. 5 “The Rise (and Fall) of the Television Age,” from *A Virtuous Circle* by Pippa Norris

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Class 4 (with multimedia 2)
Thur. Sept. 27     **Is the Medium the Message? (Part 1)**
**Due: Topic for Assignment 1**
**Due: Weekly responses including Norris’ “The Rise (and Fall) of the Television Age.”**

Using Norris work, we will begin a discussion of how media production, style, economics – and the criticism of that media – has changed radically in the past two decades, focusing on the role of television in the digital age.

Multimedia Instruction 2
Media review and intro to post-production workflow in week 2 (Photoshop, resizing, corrections, conversions)

**Reading for Oct 4 Response:** Ch. 5 “Ch. 6 The Emerging Internet Era,” from *A Virtuous Circle* by Pippa Norris

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Class 5
Thur Oct. 4     **Is the Medium The Message? (Part II)**
**Due: Weekly responses including Norris’ “The Emerging Internet Era.”**

During the first half of class, we will go over the technical challenges of gathering video, stills, and audio from our last MOS assignment. We will return to the streets to gather additional MOS, this time focusing our inquiry on how the citizens we speak to get the news – online, via social media, via print, or broadcast... and why.

During the second half of the class we will discuss how the evolution of online and social media have changed media criticism, referencing Norris’ “The Emerging Internet Era.”
**Reading for Oct 11 Response:** “The Role of the Mass Media in Reporting News About Minorities,” Commission on Civil Disorders, from *Killing the Messenger*

Class 6 (with multimedia 3) **Race, Gender, Religion and Critiques (Part 1)**
Thur. Oct. 11
**Due: Weekly responses including “The Role of the Mass Media in Reporting News About Minorities.”**

We will begin the class with Multimedia Instruction 3 -- Creating an exercise type audio slide show in FCP Intro to editing.

During the second half of class we will begin our conversation on how race, gender, religion and other factors affect political media critiques. The Commission on Civil Disorders, also known as the Kerner Commission, was convened to explore the roots of the 1967 race riots. We’ll begin with their historic report linking failures of the media to civil unrest.


Class 7 (with multimedia 4) **Race, Gender, Religion and Critiques (Part 2)**
Thur. Oct. 18
**Due: Assignment 1**

During the first half of the class we will tackle Multimedia Instruction 4—pitching story ideas. We’ll ask not only what makes a good topic, but how multimedia production influences the topic choice and execution.

During the second half of class we continue our conversation on how race, gender, religion and other factors affect contemporary political media critiques, referencing “Stop the False Race-Gender Divide” and “Election 2012: Romney, Obama and Identity”.

**Reading for Oct 25 Response:** Gloria Steinem’s, "Learning from a Year of Hope and Hard Choices," from *Who Should Be First?*

Class 8 **Race, Gender, Religion and Critiques (Part 3) and screenings**
Thur. Oct 25
Due: Topic for Assignment 2
Due: Weekly responses including Steinem’s “Learning from a Year of Hope and Hard Choices”

We will conclude our discussion of race, gender, religion and critiques, referencing “Learning from a Year of Hope and Hard Choices,” which is about the 2008 election; and positing how the 2012 dialogue over identity has changed.

During class, we will screen excerpts of two documentaries -- “Tea Party: The Documentary Film” and “Mic Check: Documentary Shorts from the Occupy Movement.” Both of these films were done by supporters of their respective movements. Students will be expected to take notes on the films to incorporate into their responses the following week.

Reading/media for November 1 responses: Students will choose two critiques, in any medium, by opponents of the Tea Party and Occupy movements. The responses should compare and contrast supportive and oppositional portrayals of these movements.

Class 9 Who is the storyteller? Partisan and ideological critiques
Thur. Nov. 1
Due: Weekly responses including references to “Tea Party” and “Mic Check,” as well as student-selected critiques of the Tea Party and Occupy movements.

We will discuss how movements are portrayed very differently by insiders and outsiders. How are journalists, as well as the public, expected to parse the facts? Do people seek facts, or an echo-chamber of their existing beliefs? We will view additional material from “Tea Party” and “Mic Check” during the discussion.

Reading for Nov 8 (no response due): Students will peruse FaceTheFactsUSA.org, a nonprofit and non-partisan site designed to provide voters with one fact a day throughout the election.

Class 10 (with Multimedia 5) Nonpartisan v. Partisan Media
Thur. Nov. 8
Due: Assignment 2

We will begin with Multimedia Instruction 5 - Creating the main audio slide show

During the second half of class we will return to the issue of partisan vs. nonpartisan media, asking how “sticky” (or attractive) readers/viewers/listeners find media that speaks to their beliefs vs. media that aims to speak objectively. Is
nonpartisan media losing ground, due to both human desires and media economics? (Opinion is often cheaper to produce/report than nonpartisan or objective media.)

**Reading for November 15 (no response due):** Theodore Roosevelt’s “The Man with the Muck Rake,” from *Killing the Messenger*

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Class 11 (with multimedia 6) -- How do Politicians Respond to Political Speech and Media?

Thurs. Nov. 15

**Due: Topic and outline of final assignment.**

(Note: instructor critiques of the topic and outline will be returned via email by November 21.)

We begin the class with Multimedia Instruction 6 – Fine tuning, web integration and publication.

During the second half of class, we discuss the ways historical and contemporary politicians respond to media critiques and political speech, referencing Theodore Roosevelt’s “The Man with the Muck Rake.” We will also discuss the class analysis within Roosevelt’s work, and compare that to current debates over income and class.

**Reading for November 29 Response:** “Ch 1: The News Media and Democracy,” by Pippa Norris, in *A Virtuous Circle*

**Additional assignment:** Each student will select a piece of video, a slideshow, or an image which uses satire or mimetic culture in a news/political context. Examples could be a clip from The Daily Show; the viral videos of Baratunde Thurston or Jay Smooth; or an example from political memes like the Tumblr Texts from Hillary (eg: [http://bit.ly/NjpHog](http://bit.ly/NjpHog)). We will show/share and discuss these in class on the 29th.

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(Wednesday November 21, via email: instructor will tell students if revisions are needed on final project proposal. If so, those revisions are due November 29.)

Thur. Nov. 22    **No Class**

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Class 12

Thur. Nov. 29    **Assessing the Big Picture, plus Satire Rules!**
Due: Weekly responses including to “The News Media and Democracy” by Pippa Norris
Due (if needed): Revisions to topic and outline of final assignment.

We begin by discussing the big picture of how news and democracy interact, given all that we’ve learned so far this semester, and referencing Norris as well as previous works.

During the second half of class we talk about (why) Satire Rules! Yes, sometimes satire does “rule” – in the pleasurable sense. But it also has rules. What are the rules of mimetic and viral satire, as well as video critiques like The Daily Show and text/audio satire? We will share the examples we’ve brought to class.

No new reading/No Dec. 6 responses

Class 13
Thur. Dec. 6     Final Project Workshop
Due: Draft or work-in-progress of final project.

We will use class time to workshop your final assignment.

No new reading/no Dec 13 responses.

Class 14
Thur. Dec. 13    Final Projects due/ Presentation

During our final class, each student will present his or her work, and we will discuss each one as a group. The presentation should last approximately five minutes. The student should state his or her thesis and read excerpts if text is the medium. If a slideshow or video is the medium, the student should introduce and show the work. The class may ask brief questions following the presentation.

At the end, we will have a short farewell with refreshments.