

# MCOM 3513 – Topics In Mass Communication: Media and the Election

## MWSU 4433 – Honors Seminar: Media and the Election

Fall 2020 – 3 credits  
Monday, Wednesday, Friday – noon

Room D202 Fain Fine Arts Center

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### Office Hours:

Monday – 11:30 a.m.-Noon, 3-5 p.m.;  
Tuesday – 11 a.m.-12:30 p.m., 3:30-4:30 p.m.;  
Wednesday – 11:30 a.m.-Noon, 3-5 p.m.;  
Thursday – 11 a.m.-12:30 p.m., 3:30-4:30 p.m.  
Also by appointment

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### Office Hours:

Monday – 1 -2 p.m.;  
Tuesday – 8:30-9:30 a.m. and 11 a.m.-2 p.m.;  
Wednesday – 1 -2 p.m.;  
Thursday – 8:30-9:30 a.m. and 11 a.m.-2 p.m.;  
Also by appointment

### Course Objectives/Description

- Students will analyze the ways in which media and politics intersect.
- Students will understand media theory and political theory and apply both to the current elections
- Students will examine the role the media plays in American electoral politics
- Students will explore how media coverage both reinforces and undermines democracy

## Prerequisites

- Consent of Honors Director or Chair of the Mass Communication Department

## Reading

We have decided not to use a formal textbook for this course this semester. However, required reading will consist of *numerous* handouts over the course of the semester and will be supplemented by considerable outside assignments/research. Students will also be required to follow the election through several forms of media.

## Grading

Final grades will be based on weekly discussion assignments, a weekly journal and a semester project. You should take note that you will be required to do a lot of writing over the course of the semester, and the quality of your writing will be a factor in your final grade. In addition, you will be required to spend some time in public-speaking situations.

In all formats, you will be required to think critically about the topics being discussed and form coherent, defensible positions. A textbook or rote memorization can not help you figure out what is going on during a continually changing situation such as an election. You need to methodically analyze the situation. As a result, we're not interested in true-false or multiple choices tests, nor are we interested in having you quote back the literature to us — we've read it. Details on all assignments will be given as the semester progresses.

Weekly Discussion Leader – 30 percent: Each Friday we will hold discussion to explore the current state of the 2020 election and the media coverage. Each student will be required to lead one of these discussions during the semester.

Journal – 30 percent: Each student will be required to keep a weekly journal of the media coverage of the election. We will provide you prompts to discuss the events of the week. Due Date: Monday, Nov. 2.

Final Project – 30 percent: In lieu of a traditional final exam, each student, working in a small group, will prepare a presentation related to the intersection of the mass media and the election.

Attendance and Attitude – 10 percent: We hope to run this course as a seminar, not as a traditional lecture/exam course. Given that this is an upper-level Honors course, perfect attendance is assumed. In the absence of a required textbook, attendance is critical, and we will go to great lengths to

attain full attendance. Additionally, attending class is not sufficient; you must come prepared to engage in the material. You will be expected to contribute to the class each class period. See also Attitude and Class Participation below.

If you have to miss a class or a deadline for any reason, please contact us IN ADVANCE to let one of us know. Contacting us in advance does not automatically excuse an absence, but it is a lot better than calling after the fact. If you fail to contact one of us before the next class period to explain an absence, it will be very difficult to excuse the absence. Please note that work, non-emergency medical and dental appointments, hangovers, intramural games, visitors from out of town, fixing your roommate's computer, fraternity/sorority events, arguments with boyfriends/girlfriends and studying for other classes do NOT constitute excused absences. See also the Missed Assignments Policy.

If you need to miss class due to a religious holiday, please see one of us as far in advance as possible.

If you need to miss class due to university-sponsored events such as field trips and sports, please see one of us as far in advance as possible. You will be required to complete the assigned work on or before the due date, and you will be required to submit an official form from the university before your absence.

Please note that on the evening of the election, Tuesday, Nov. 3, we will view the election returns as a group. You are required to be present for this event.

As one of Dr. Sernoe's former colleagues says, in the "real world," you can not do your job if you are not present to do it. Employers do not generally tolerate such behavior, and employees who offer weak, irritating excuses frequently find themselves unemployed and unemployable. The same rules apply in this course. We don't judge anyone who chooses to make attending classes a secondary (or lower) priority. However, this choice is not without consequences.

If you cannot make it a priority to attend every class session, please drop now so another student, who is more serious, can have your spot.

It is your responsibility to see us if you miss class. We will not chase students around the city.

A related note: You are required to be on time, and Drs. Sernoe and Garrison have little tolerance for those who are continually late. Constant tardiness will be noted and could lower your final grade. We are not above embarrassing students who walk in late.

Proper Communication with us: Unlike some faculty, we do not generally give our cell. phone number to students. However, we are in our offices far more than just during office hours, and we have an open-door policy (if we are in the office, the door is almost always open, unless we are discussing something of a private nature). If someone is already in one of our offices when you arrive, please wait in the hall or work-café/lounge (i.e., don't hover in the doorway and don't interrupt unless it is truly an emergency). We try to return phone calls and respond to e-mails quickly. Please observe proper grammar and other rules of etiquette in your e-mails (e.g., "Hello Dr. Sernoe" is a far more professional greeting than "Hi Dude!"). Please note also that we are not attached to devices 24/7. We generally do not look at e-mail after 6 p.m. or before 7 a.m. If you e-mail us at 1 a.m. with a question, do not expect an immediate answer.

Missed Assignments Policy: If you miss any assignments or quizzes without being excused, you will fail the course. We reserve the right to determine whether an absence will be excused. In-class assignments may be excused at our discretion; however, all outside assignments must be completed within a reasonable time frame after your absence — no exceptions. In addition, we reserve the right to determine what, exactly, is a "reasonable time frame." In sum: This is a zero-tolerance policy. No one has time or patience for those who are not going to take this class seriously; thus, "three strikes and you're out" does not apply. "ONE strike and you're out" is more applicable. If you have a legitimate problem, alternate arrangements can be made.

If you cannot make it a priority to complete every assignment, on time, please drop now so another student, who is more serious, can have your spot.

By accepting this syllabus and remaining enrolled in this course, you are indicating that you understand the Missed Assignments Policy.

Grade Calculations: Almost all assignments will be graded on a 0-100 scale unless otherwise announced. Final grades will be determined on the traditional 90/80/70/60 scale.

Please note that there is no provision for late work. If you have a legitimate excuse for missing deadline, please contact one of us. We reserve the right to determine whether a late assignment or project will be accepted.

Attitude/Class Participation: Our plan is to conduct this course as a seminar. That means, as it does in graduate school, that each student comes to each meeting having prepared and that each student comes to each meeting

planning to participate. The success of this course will depend on students keeping up with the reading and discussing the topics at hand. As stated above, this isn't the type of course in which you memorize information, spit it back on an exam, and forget what you've learned as you walk out of the exam room. Our experience has been that students get a lot more out of a course when they are forced to think critically and to present their conclusions. Because this is an upper-level course connected to the MSU Honors Program, corresponding attitudes and work ethics are required. Although this constitutes only 10 percent of your grade, it will play a big role if you are on the "borderline" at the end of the semester.

If you cannot make it a priority to have a good attitude, please drop now so another student, who is more serious, can have your spot. See also the [Missed Assignments Policy](#).

A related note: Cellular phones, pagers and other similar devices will not be tolerated. They are a sign of a bad attitude. We will not tolerate annoying jingles and beeps. If you own such a device, turn it off (not on vibrate) or somehow make sure it doesn't make any noise while we are trying to conduct class – better yet, leave it at home or in your car. If your other commitments are so pressing that they can not wait until the end of the class session, it may be in your best interests to reconsider the priority you place on being here.

Sending and receiving text messages during class will not be tolerated.

Unfortunately, laptop computers, iPhones, tablets and other similar equipment will not be allowed in class for note-taking. Although we realize this is a convenient way to take notes, past students have abused the privilege by using the equipment to surf the Internet, send e-mail, and troll Facebook. We will not tolerate this kind of distraction. We will, however, allow the use of technology for legitimate class reasons only with express permission.

Related: Recording any part of the class is prohibited, unless it is part of a reasonable accommodation under ADA, or by obtaining written consent by the instructor.

Why are we so adamant about technology? As a colleague once said, "Learning requires attention and focus." Despite the current generation's approaches to multi-tasking, our experience has been that the brain cannot perform two high-level functions at once, and multi-tasking is a myth. We can't learn, pay attention to class material, and monitor our text-messages all at once. We reserve the right to ask you to leave immediately or to embarrass you mercilessly if your beepers/phones/pagers/etc. make noise during class or if we see you using a device when it has nothing to do with the in-class topic at hand. If cell. phones become more than a one-time problem, we reserve the right to lower your final semester grade and/or take further disciplinary actions.

Appropriate conduct – in the classroom, with the instructors and in any other class-related situations – is required at all times. The instructors have the right to remove disruptive, disrespectful students (or students creating any other kinds of problems) from the classroom and take other disciplinary actions as necessary.

No food and beverages are allowed beyond water. If you are sitting near a computer, the water must be put on the table in front of the room. Past students have brought fast food, breakfast and salads to class, and this is not appropriate.

We reserve the right to drop any student with an F if he/she has excessive absences or missed assignments, engages in disruptive behavior, has a poor attitude, or in any other way is clearly not taking the class seriously.

By accepting this syllabus and remaining enrolled in this course, you are indicating that you understand the expectations for students concerning attendance, attitude and work ethic.

In order to help students keep track of their progress toward course objectives, the instructors will, if necessary, provide a Midterm Progress Report through each student's WebWorld account. Any student who is in danger of earning a D or F in this course will receive notification. Midterm grades will not be reported on the student's transcript, nor will they be calculated in the cumulative GPA. They do, however, give students an idea of where they stand at the midpoint of the semester. Students earning below a C at the midway point should contact one of us as soon as possible to discuss future actions.

Related: MSU faculty also have the option of filing an Academic Referral and/or a Conduct Referral with appropriate offices, both of which will follow-up with students. We reserve the right to file such referrals when needed. We will always try to contact the student first to request a meeting, but if the student does not respond appropriately, we will file the relevant referral(s).

Two final notes on grading: Critics from both within and outside of higher education have accused faculty of engaging in "grade inflation," the idea that grades don't truly reflect quality and instead have been devalued to the point that an A means very good, a B means average, and anything less than a B is failing. We're not sure whether those people would include us in their criticisms, but to us, an A means outstanding, a B means above average, and a C means average. Please remember these interpretations as the semester progresses.

Please remember also that attending every class and completing every assignment do not constitute outstanding quality or guarantee an **A** for the course. Attending every class and completing every assignment are only prerequisites for achieving a desired grade in the class. Too many students have argued that these are the reasons they deserved an **A** in the class, and we do not buy into this way of thinking.

By accepting this syllabus and remaining enrolled in this course, you are indicating that you understand the grading policies for the course. If you have questions, you should see one of us as soon as possible.

#### Statements Related to the Current COVID-19 Situation

- Given the state of the world, everything in this course could change with very little notice. That means deadlines, projects, even weighted percentages for each component of the course could change. Please note that we will consult with the class and use students' input to the extent practicable in making decisions about how to proceed. Students should not hesitate to contact us with questions, concerns and, even better, great suggestions. Most students know we will go out of our way to be fair to all.
- Safety and health of all are our top considerations. You are required to follow all best practices as they are developed during this crisis. If you feel sick, do not come to class. If you need to miss class, contact me as outlined under class procedures, and we will work with you.
- Masks will be required in all in-person classrooms, per the governor's order. Those who are unwilling to wear a mask must contact me before the end of the first week of class to discuss. Please see the university's official policy at the web sites listed below.
- A mandatory seating chart, to ensure social distancing and facilitate contact tracing should it be necessary, will be implemented.
- The Mass Comm. Dept. and the College of Fine Arts have adopted specific cleaning protocols, and all students are required to abide by these rules. Students who are unwilling to do their share to ensure everyone's health will be contacted by the professor. In short, you will be required to clean your area before and after class, the first as a safety precaution for yourself, the second as a courtesy toward others. We realize this means some areas may be cleaned twice within a brief time period, but this is better than not at all. This rule holds for traditional classrooms, labs, editing equipment, the newsroom and public areas such as the work-café.
- All handouts and other information will be available through the university's D2L system, and D2L's Gradebook function will be enabled (We will, nonetheless, keep our own spreadsheets with grades, and students are welcome to contact one of us for grade updates). Students

are expected to understand how to navigate D2L, even if we continue with in-person classes.

- If you do experience problems with D2L, please let one of us know as soon as possible. In addition, the D2L page has a “Report A Problem” function on the top navigation bar as well as a FAQ function in the middle of the page on the right.
- If we are forced to switch to online-only instruction, all students will be required to:
  - Attend class at the assigned time. We will offer to record the sessions but these recordings are supplemental and not replacements for attending at the assigned times. Excuses such as work will not be accepted, and students will be expected to make arrangements to attend every session. Students are also required to attend for the full class session.
    - The same provisions regarding attendance for in-person classes will be in effect if we move to a virtual classroom.
  - Have a computer with a webcam that can accommodate Zoom or other video software.
  - Have reliable WiFi.
    - As to the three requirements above, We know not all students have access to a reliable computer and reliable WiFi. However, you are expected to make arrangements in advance and have a plan. Do not assume you will be able to complete the course using only your phone and/or without attending actual classes during class time. If these requirements present problems for you, please contact one of us as early in the semester as possible. We will work with students in the hope that they do not have to drop the class as a result of these requirements.
  - Observe proper video meeting etiquette:
    - Arrive on time.
    - Leave your camera on. We realize not all students are comfortable with having their cameras on, but it will be a requirement. Not having the ability to look at you in-person to make sure you are paying attention and understanding what is being discussed, we will need to see you on camera (see next bullet point as well).
    - Pay attention. Devices such as phones will be prohibited, as they are in face-to-face classes. Students who are e-mailing or attending to other tasks while on screen will be reminded of this policy. Continued violations could result in a student facing disciplinary sanctions up to being dropped from the course with an F.
    - Set the mute function as the default. As stated above, discussion is encouraged, both in-person and in video



- meetings, but we do not need to hear barking dogs, ringing phones, roommates, etc.
- Use the raise-your-hand function.
  - Wear proper clothing. We have heard stories of students sitting in on video meetings with no shirt and in bikinis. This is not appropriate and will not be tolerated.
  - Avoid eating while on camera. As in a face-to-face classroom, you are expected to eat your meals while not in class.
  - Have a proper background.
  - Stay seated. Do not wander around. It will distract the rest of us and make us dizzy.
  - Do not plan to connect to Zoom while you are driving. This is obviously unsafe, as well as a poor atmosphere for learning.
- Use D2L effectively. As stated above, all syllabi, instructions for assignments/projects and other materials will be posted on the class D2L page. If we are forced to go to an online-only set-up, discussion posts may be required and assignments may have to be submitted through D2L.
  - Communicate with us. It is well-known among faculty and students that we do not share our cell. phone numbers publicly, as some other faculty do. As a result, we do quite a bit of communicating through e-mail, especially if we won't be in our offices. Office phones will be forwarded to our cell. phones, but students will still be expected to check their e-mail regularly. We will also make every effort to meet with individual students by Zoom or other video platforms.
    - Related: if adjustments to the normal office hours routine are necessary, we will communicate them to you.
- If we are forced to switch to online-only instruction, deadlines, assignments and other course elements may change. We will provide clear revisions, in writing, and will address any questions/concerns by phone, e-mail or in a video platform.
  - Please note that the federal government, state government, various local government units (city, county, health district, etc.) and the university administration have the power to issue declarations that can directly affect how we navigate. Please be flexible and we will get through these extraordinary times as a team.
  - Students are encouraged to visit web sites developed by the university in response to this crisis:
    - [MSU Coronavirus Page](#)
    - [MSU Return To Campus Guidelines](#)
  - **We reserve the right to drop any student with an F if he/she violates any of these policies. At the same time, we will work with all students to our fullest ability to ensure a worthwhile educational experience.**

## Ethics

Don't cheat.

"Not everyone cheats. Not everyone cuts corners. There isn't a diploma in the world that's more valuable than your integrity. And you can't buy your integrity back." – Jason Gay, commenting in [The Wall Street Journal](#) on the recent admissions scandals involving celebrities and the wealthy, March 14, 2019, p. A16.

The MSU Student Honor Creed, written and adopted by the 2002-2003 MSU Student Senate, covers expectations related to cheating and other forms of academic dishonesty. The main statement from this document is:

"As an MSU student, I pledge not to lie, cheat, steal, or help anyone else to do so."

All students in our courses are expected to abide by this student-produced document, as well as all other related university policies. We will provide copies of the MSU Student Honor Creed to any student who requests one. It is also on page on page 6 of the 2019-2020 MSU Student Handbook (the handbook is also available online at [MSU Student Handbook](#)) (the 2020-21 Handbook was not available as this syllabus was being finalized).

In addition, the university requires faculty to provide this statement to all students:

By enrolling in this course, the student expressly grants MSU a "limited right" in all intellectual property created by the student for the purpose of this course. The "limited right" shall include but shall not be limited to the right to reproduce the student's work product in order to verify originality and authenticity, and educational purposes.

By accepting this syllabus and remaining enrolled in this course, you are indicating that you understand the statement provided above and agree to comply with it.

We require complete honesty in producing your work. Working professionals are often encouraged to confer with their colleagues on strategies and wordings, but there is a difference between advice and blatant plagiarism.

We also realize it will be very easy to confer with colleagues on take-home assignments, but you should realize that instructors can usually identify when students have worked together. We also realize the Internet provides a convenient source of information, but students need to be aware that proper citation will be required.

Past students will tell you we take this issue very seriously and have not hesitated to confront them. A slightly higher grade on an assignment is not worth the extremely unpleasant experience of taking an accusation of academic dishonesty through the university hierarchy. Please don't force us to do it.

We reserve the right to drop any student with an F if he/she engages in any form of academic dishonesty. We further reserve the right to recommend other sanctions as may be appropriate. Students are also encouraged to consult the following sources for additional discussion of students' rights and responsibilities regarding cheating, attendance and general conduct:

- The MSU Student Honor Creed
- The 2019-2020 MSU Undergraduate Catalog, available online at [MSU Undergraduate Catalog](#).
- The 2019-2020 MSU Student Handbook (the handbook is also available online at [MSU Student Handbook](#)) (the 2020-21 Handbook was not available as this syllabus was being finalized).

By accepting this syllabus and remaining enrolled in this course, you are indicating that you understand the seriousness of academic dishonesty and realize we will impose the harshest sanctions possible if we can prove you have engaged in academic dishonesty. You are also indicating that you understand what constitutes academic dishonesty; we will not tolerate the excuse that the student did not know he/she was engaging in academic dishonesty.

## Privacy

Federal privacy law prohibits faculty from releasing information about students to certain parties outside of the university without the signed consent of the student. Thus, in almost all cases we will not discuss your academic progress or other matters with your parents. Please do not have them call. Regardless of these important legal considerations, it is our general policy to communicate with the students, not their parents, even when a student has signed a consent form. College students are adults and are expected to behave accordingly.

## Campus Carry

Senate Bill 11 passed by the 84th Texas Legislature allows licensed handgun holders to carry concealed handguns on campus, effective August 1, 2016. Areas excluded from concealed carry are appropriately marked, in accordance with state law. For more information regarding campus carry, please refer to the university's webpage at <https://mwsu.edu/campus-carry/rules-policies>.

Please be advised that any violations of the law will be reported immediately.

## Some Advice

- Attend regularly. This point cannot be stressed enough.
- Thoroughly understand all grading policies.
- Attend regularly. This point cannot be stressed enough.
- Note the Missed Assignments Policy and know that it is enforced.
- Attend regularly. This point cannot be stressed enough.
- Note the Academic Dishonesty Policy and know that it is enforced.
- Attend regularly. This point cannot be stressed enough.
- Note the Privacy Policy and know that it is followed.
- Attend regularly. This point cannot be stressed enough.
- Be flexible and ready for changes. We don't know what the election or the current world situation might produce and how we might need to navigate.
- Attend regularly. This point cannot be stressed enough.
- If anything in this syllabus is unclear or if you have questions as the course progresses, ask!
- Attend regularly. This point cannot be stressed enough.

## Special Accommodations/Emergencies/Outside Difficulties

Students with disabilities or who are in need of special arrangements should see us as early as possible in the semester. We cannot help you if you come to us at the last minute. We will do what we can within reason to accommodate your needs, but federal law requires us to remain fair to all students. Please note that in order to qualify for consideration of special accommodations, you must be registered with the MSU Office of Disability Support Services, and we must have a memo on file from that office, along with the Special Accommodations Request form.

If you have specific medical information that needs sharing or you need specific accommodations in case of emergencies or emergency evacuations, please see us as soon as possible.



and general workloads vary considerably from week to week. It is imperative that you complete the readings before we begin discussing each unit.

Date(s)	Topic(s)	Reading
8/24	Introduction Assignment: Memo to Professors	
8/26	Weekly Presentation Instructions	Handout
8/26 – 8/28	Media and Politics	Handouts
8/31 – 9/2	U.S. Government and the Media	Handouts
9/4	Discussion I	
9/7	Labor Day – Classes Canceled	
9/9	Finish on U.S. Government and the Media	
9/9	Journal Instructions	Handout
9/11	Discussion II	
9/14 – 9/16	Roles of the Media	Handouts
9/18	Discussion III	
9/21	Final Project Instructions	Handout
9/21 – 9/23	Media Theory	Handouts
9/25	Discussion IV	
9/28 – 9/30	Election Coverage/Media	Handouts
9/30	Project Proposals Due, noon	
10/2	Discussion V	
10/5 – 10/7	Historical Contexts	Handouts
10/9	Discussion VI	

Date(s)	Topic(s)	Reading
10/12 – 10/14	Regulation of Media and First Amendment Rights in Politics	Handouts
10/16	Discussion VII	
10/19 – 10/21	New Media and 21st Century Politics	Handouts
10/23	Discussion VIII	
10/26 – 10/28	Disinformation and Media Manipulation	Handouts
10/30	Discussion IX	
11/2	Election Preview	Handouts
11/2	Journals Due	
<b>11/3</b>	<b>Election Night – We will meet as a group Attendance is mandatory</b>	
11/4	No Class	
11/6	Analysis/Observations	
11/9 – 11/20	Presentations	
11/23	Final Wrap-Up/Last In-Person Session	