

History, Theory, and Practice of American Journalism

Tuesdays, 5-7 pm

INSTRUCTOR

Janet Steele
Professor of Media and Public Affairs
George Washington University
jsteele@gwu.edu

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Journalism in America is changing at warp speed. Fake news, echo chambers, gaslighting, false-equivalency, partisan media -- we hear these terms every day. Is there anything in journalism that remains constant? Is the “golden age” of American journalism over? Is “objectivity” really a thing of the past? These are some of the issues we will be tackling.

This course is designed to answer some of those questions. It has three goals: (a) to give you an understanding of the basic history and social context of American journalism, (b) to broaden your knowledge of the different ways in which news can be constructed, and (c) to explore the intellectual underpinnings of the occupational ideals and professional practices that guide journalism today.

The language of instruction will be English. There will be short recommended readings assigned for each class meeting, and the format will be discussion, not lecture.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

As a result of completing this course, you will be able to:

1. Understand and use a variety of theories of how news is constructed.
2. Read news more critically, recognizing and evaluating professional norms and practices across a wide range of news media.
3. Write short critical essays that use evidence effectively in support of an argument or thesis.
4. Analyze the structure of news writing and how that structure affects the meaning of news.

COURSE OUTLINE

Week 1: March 1– The basics: Who, What, Where, When, Why and How?

How do journalists answer these questions? The answer is more complicated than you would think! Be prepared to come to class with examples from Serbia.

Week 2: March 8 -- The partisan press, the penny press, and the idea of news

What was so revolutionary about the penny press in the 1830s? We will focus on the rise of the “independent” press, and the commercial press. Why are both of these concepts so important today?

Reading: Michael Schudson, “Discovering the News,” chapter 1 (available as PDF)

Week 3: March 15 – Objectivity? Whose objectivity?

Although the goal of “objectivity” is key to the ideology of journalism today, this has not always been the case. When and why did objectivity become the key to professionalism in journalism? And do we still believe in it today?

Week 4: March 22 – Race and Media Bias

Viewing (before class) “The Black Press: Soldiers without Swords”
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wo8Pvr7TyP4>

Reading: From “The 1619 Project,” essay by Nikole Hannah-Jones

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/black-history-american-democracy.html>,

Week 5: March 29 -- News and social engagement: The 1930s and documentary

Viewing: Webcast of Farm Security Administration photos:
<https://www.loc.gov/item/webcast-5541>

WPA film “We Work Again,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QSF6SMYZKbo>

Week 6: April 5 – Donald Trump and changing press norms

[What the post-Trump debate over journalism gets wrong.](#)

Rosen: [Asymmetry between the major parties fries the circuits of mainstream press](#)

Pope: [What we miss when we obsess over Trump’s Tweets](#)

De Vreese: [Political Journalism in a Populist Age](#)

Rosen: [Show us your work](#):

Sullivan: [What it really means when Trump calls a story fake news](#)

Silverman: [I helped popularize the term fake news and now I cringe every time I hear it.](#)