

# Course Portfolio for Journalism 190 (Introduction to Mass Media)

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## Framing Statement

This portfolio is for a freshman-level course offered by the WWU Department of Journalism--a course that fills a general university requirement and attracts students, not all of them freshmen, from across campus.

Two reasons underlie the creation of this portfolio (or a portfolio for any class, for that matter): 1) to help the instructor think more clearly about what the class is trying to do, how it should be organized, and what it is intended to achieve; 2) to create a blueprint--or roadmap--for others who will teach the class and would benefit from a discussion of the class and some hints about how to organize it, what works well and what to hope for at its conclusion.

## Design

Introduction to Mass Media is a course that has been in existence since the 1989-90 academic year when it was offered one quarter to a group of about 35 students.

The decision to develop it was linked to the understanding that in a department oriented to print media (primarily newspapers and magazines in that era before online print), students were exposed to a lot of media, much of it electronic, and were greatly influenced by it. Faculty believed students needed to study the influence of other media and think critically about them.

Few students, however, had any classroom opportunity to explore what the impact(s) of mass media was on their lives, let alone on the society in which they lived, its culture or the democratic political process.

In the 1990s, J190 has increased in frequency and in size -- from one time per year with 35 students to three times per year with 105 students per offering.

It became a popular WWU General University Requirement, filling a humanities requirement before being switched to a social science requirement in 2000.

The catalog description of the course says it is designed to introduce basic issues and problems facing journalists and the public as recipients of mass media messages in national and international society, as well as to explore the nature, theory and effects of mass communication, the structure of media systems, the flow of world news, the controls on the media and the rights guaranteed under the First Amendment.

This description serves as a mission statement when understood in the context of the history of the Journalism Department's intent that students, especially its majors, should understand the complexities of mass media, not just print journalism, and their impact on society.

The department's goals put it this way:

A student graduating with a degree in journalism should have a strong liberal arts education, skills in critical thinking and analysis, an aggressiveness in gathering diverse and substantive information that may not be readily available, and an ability to write clearly and reasonably quickly on complex topics. The graduate should have a sense of commitment to see that the democratic processes in society are served by the timely disclosure of quality information to the reading, viewing and listening public.

From these goals, and with the recognition that as a GUR the course reaches many non-journalism majors, the overarching question guiding the course is this: What is the impact of mass media on American society and culture, and what is their impact on democracy and the self-governing process?

A trio of objectives emerged for the course to answer this question and serve to guide its exploration:

- 1) Students in J190 should be able to understand and identify the workings, structure, dimensions, key concepts and theories of mass media, especially in America.
- 2) Students should be able to analyze the various media messages and their portrayal of people, events, issues and ideas, especially in light of those people, institutions and corporations producing, controlling and influencing those messages.
- 3) Students should develop an ability to evaluate the structure, interests, motivations and content of mass media and evaluate their impact on society, culture and the political process, especially regarding whether media provide citizens with all relevant information so that they may govern themselves effectively.

The hope for J190, therefore, is that class members will come to understand the tremendous impact media as an institution have on them and will gain media literacy and leave the class with a more critical understanding of media structure, workings and impact. Of course, in the best of all worlds, they would use such knowledge to make a difference in their lives and in society.

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## Enactment

To achieve these objectives in one brief quarter, what content does the course use, and how is the content ordered?

The selection of the content is especially crucial to success, because the course could easily be conducted as one simply cheerleading for media, especially since media are not critical of themselves and since students are bombarded with media messages throughout their lives. Therefore, the course needs to take a different approach -- one of media literacy -- and needs to use scholarship that questions media's social, cultural and political impact.

To that end, a text (for example, **Media Impact** by Shirley Biagi) is used that includes two important themes: 1) media are profit-oriented businesses; 2) media reflect and affect the cultural, social and political dimensions of the United States and the world.

Supplemental books are used that examine cultural, social and political impact of mass media -- along with media economic ties.

Required readings come from Ben Badikian's **The Media Monopoly** (exploring media mergers and how media drive for profit affects democracy), Tim Pilgrim's **Nothing Ventured, Nothing Gained** (exploring how special legislation affected newspaper competition in the Seattle area), and Neil Postman's **Amusing Ourselves to Death** (exploring how the change from a typographic society to one visually dominated by television has affected culture and society).

Class lectures and Web summaries also weave in material from sources such as Julia T Wood's **Gendered Lives** (exploring how media stereotype women), Shirley Biagi's **Facing Differences** (exploring problems of race and gender within mass media), Herbert Schiller's **Culture Inc.** (exploring how cultural space is dominated by media images and advertisements), and W. Lance Bennett's **News: the Politics of Illusion** (exploring how media are manipulated by politicians -- with adverse consequences for democracy).

Because students of today learn in a visual manner (the average person spends more time in front of the television than in school), the class also uses an extensive array of videos that explore the following areas:

- 1) how media are structured (a handful of corporations like Disney control most of America's mass media -- including the informational news media) and subject to manipulation and why they are more and more image-oriented (**Mass Media; Consuming Images**);
- 2) the effects on society of media entertainment being focused on violence (**The Electronic Storyteller** and **The Killing Screens**);
- 3) the consequences for women, men, racial groups and others when media stereotypes them (**Women Seen on TV; Still Killing Us 3; Dreamworlds 2; Tough Guise: Violence, Media, And The Crisis In Masculinity; Ethnic Notions**; and **Bell Hooks**);
- 4) the effects of mass media with a structure oriented toward advertising and profit, not promoting self-governance, on culture, society and self-governing (**Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media; Free Speech for Sale; Illusion of News; The Ad and the Ego; Advertising and the End of the World; The Myth of the Liberal Media**).

With this array of material added to experienced teaching and professorial knowledge, the

objectives and goals detailed above have a higher likelihood of being met, especially since together, the materials above constitute substantial evidence that mass media have effects, some of them adverse, on society, culture and self-governing.

But, the material is best presented at the proper pace and in an order conducive to maximum learning. In a way, the professor of the course is a preacher (professor means professing a point of view), presenting information and evidence with an enthusiasm that begins to stir first the interest and then the whole being of the congregation.

The following order is one workable way to teach the course:

1) A theoretical overview of how mass communication works (**who says what in which channel to whom with what effect**), along with an introduction about the main questions concerning the class (how do media impact society, culture and self-governing), is presented via the syllabus introductory lectures, text readings and an opening writing assignment asking them to tell what they think the impact is.

2) Lecture material and an introductory video (#1 mentioned above) puts the priority on the importance of self-governing by approaching study in the course from this perspective: "People in a self-governing society need all possible information to make the best decision regarding how their society goes forward. To achieve this, they must communicate en masse. Therefore, the *problem* facing them is mass communication -- how do the masses communicate to govern themselves. Mass media are a *potential solution* to this problem of mass communication. How well do mass media do in solving this problem?" (Students to discuss in online groups questions related to the learning and some class discussion is useful as well.)

3) The structure of mass media is studied (showing how that handful of corporations such as Disney, AOL Time Warner Turner, Viacom, General Electric, etc. own and control most mainstream media) using lecture material, the text and **The Media Monopoly** (the 2000 edition) readings. As it should be throughout the quarter, class and online discussions continue so that students may exchange ideas about the impact of the structure of media ownership or similar class material.

4) As the quarter begins to unfold, each major mass medium is studied -- print first, then broadcast -- and using the text and readings, the professor places emphasis on reinforcing that each is controlled by those large corporations. As this reality takes shape, the course begins to focus on what the effects are on people as they perform their self-governing duties, the society and its culture. Some theories of mass communication and related assertions are introduced that say mass media set the agenda for society, tell people how to think of their world and cultivate in them attitudes and behaviors that come to be viewed as normal. (The text, readings and videos from categories 2 and 3 above are used. Class and online discussions continue, students analyze and respond to compelling video arguments in writing, and exams ask them to identify, understand and analyze.)

Particularly useful are responses to videos about gender role portrayal by using questions such as this: The video, **Dreamworlds 2**, argues that portraying women as mere objects in music videos and other visual media do not directly cause sexual assaults against women but cumulatively influence how we think about the world and influence what we believe to be true. Thus, they cultivate conditions in a society that allow such acts. In your view, to what extent do such portrayals affect how society thinks about women? Turn in your one-page argument on Monday for 10 points.

5) As the study of broadcast media concludes and study of advertising and public relations begins, the questions asking how media cumulatively and, for the most part, unconsciously affect culture and society are reiterated. Also, with this new context given, the question of how media affect self-governing again becomes an area of focus. (The text, lectures, readings, especially Postman, and some videos from category 4 above are used. Class and online discussions continue, usually intensifying, more written analyses are completed, and an exam requiring an increased amount of analysis is given.)

6) The class then focuses on interweaving the social, cultural and political/self-governing dimensions and explores the ramifications -- including environmental -- of a society, and world for that matter, dominated by mass media working in this manner and making beautiful the using up of the natural resources.

Students are asked to evaluate the status of mass communications and argue for a way of improvement. Lecture/discussions -- in class and online -- continue, a final chapter in **The Media Monopoly** is used, the videos **Manufacturing Consent** and **The Myth of the Liberal Media** are viewed, and a take-home final essay aimed at analysis and evaluation concludes the course -- as does a final lecture using the poet Wendell Berry, who urges students to work together in communities to solve problems, to live more poorly than media tell them to, and to find work, if they can, that does no harm.

## Results

Of course, assessment of whether such an ordering of content achieves the objective of the course can be conducted by a number of methods -- but only in the framework of understanding that J190 is a class where outcomes assessment may not be easily quantified because of the nature of the exploration. However, here are a few that have proven to be helpful:

- 1) Some objective questioning (usually a matching of concepts and definitions on an exam) and in-class oral questioning can be a check for recognition and understanding of the main concepts related to the class. Some of this kind of assessment also shows the level of student reading of the materials, watching the videos and noting of class- or Web-presented information.
- 2) Some short-answer questions asking students to identify and analyze in writing media messages, portrayals, concepts and theories show the level of learning. Brevity can be an advantage in a large class in terms of grading, and brevity is not necessarily lack of depth -- for as the class assignments put it: "The student wrote a long answer because she/he did not take the time to write a short one." This means that concise answers may well have as much thinking demonstrated as do longer ones.
- 3) Some free-writing situations (online discussion and analysis/response to class material such as videos or readings), and essay questions asking students to evaluate the class materials (in a final written essay project) indicate the amount of learning as well.

For example, a question about a video exploring the impact of media on politics might read:

The video, *Illusions of News*, asserted that the selling of political candidates in a manner similar to selling products is now the norm in American (and other) cultures. In your view, tell whether this growing practice is as harmful as Bill Moyers, Ben Bagdikian, Todd Gitlin and the crew would have us believe. If so, why? If not, why?

Also, an opening writing assignment asking students to tell what the impact of media is on society, culture and self-governance can act as a pre-test of materials to be covered as well.

- 4) Some feedback opportunities given in class at the midpoint (along with intermittent feedback via questions in the online discussion groups and a weekly opportunity to respond to teaching and class content via a Web-posted response tool) have proven to be good ways to allow students to speak directly to what is being taught, what its relevance is, how it is being taught, and what specific learning has come from it.

Together, these tools of assessment create a grading "picture" that shows if students have read or watched or listened to the information presented. The tools move less emphasis on *analyze* and *evaluate* devices earlier in the quarter to more later on.

Each assessment -- be it an exam, a video attendance, video response or online-discussion entry -- can be given points relative to its importance. Together, the values can be totaled and placed on a grid, with those students achieving high levels of points being given high grades. In an ideal world, or in Europe, of course, grades for the course would not have to be assigned.

More important, perhaps, ordering the content of the course in the manner above -- a manner that culminates with interlinking of social, cultural and self-governing effects -- brings increased interest from the students. As they begin to understand how mass media -- more intent more on profit and entertainment -- contributes to their lack of information on issues including world pollution, energy shortages, human rights' concerns, and manipulation of people and their culture, students begin to see how mass media are adversely affecting their own lives and futures.

By quarter's end, the concepts and facts that accumulate, along with the results of studies showing media influence has this detrimental side, prompts students -- who are beginning to see their personal stake in the main course concepts -- increase student ability to think critically about media and the problem of mass communication.

J190 instructors can find success and pleasure in such learning, as well as pleasure in the students who want to take class videos home to show roommates, parents, family and friends or in those who drop in their offices quarters later and want resources beyond those kept on the Web for a paper in their majors that touches on mass media or the student who writes or e-mails years later about how some discussion or event reminded them of J190 and the impact the course had on their lives.

Instructors can also find pleasure in the popularity of the class on campus -- not because grades are easy to get, but because the content is intellectually challenging and highly relevant to their lives and futures.

This is not to say that all students are challenged and pleased with the class and go away as critical thinkers par excellence. All classes have "central negatives," students who either hate the instructor

or find the material offensive. In J190, a few students fit this category, and some even become super-patriots and attack the professor because they view class content as being an attack on corporate-capitalism and the American way of life. However, this is never more than a handful -- and professors who believe that all views should be heard encourage them to articulate and support their arguments -- without fear of grade penalty.

On the whole, one could say the main outcome of the course is a general ability of students to think more critically about mass media because of knowledge of the impact. This is evidenced in the form of a final essay project, which asks students to evaluate the state of mass media and/or to offer solutions to problems they see. Usually over 90% of these essays discuss media in a way that indicates unwillingness to accept media messages at face value and that voices a need for improvement of media structure and content.

The high percentage of such a stance in papers argued and supported in a logical fashion (for the most part) supports the more nebulous belief noted above of increased student ability to evaluate and to think critically about the important concepts of the class.

In the last week of class, the professors gives students a survey, asking them to rank how their ability to critically evaluate mass media has been increased by the course. To date, 85-95 percent of the students indicate a significant increase.

Perhaps every instructor of the course should give a similar survey, just to create a record of students' perception of their learning. In this manner, the critical thinking outcomes of J190 can be quantified.

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