

PUBP 710-003

*“The Media and Public Policy:
Messengers Amid the Madness”*

Class Time: Monday, 4:30 p.m. – 7:10 p.m.

Location: ARL245

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This class will explore the complex and increasingly critical relationship between media and public policy. In a society where a 24/7 news cycle bombards a fractured public, where ‘infotainment’ and the ‘argument culture’ often overshadow traditional journalism, it has become more difficult to focus public debate and build political consensus necessary to shape, lead or change public policy. Polls, focus groups, Orwellian talking points, sound-bitten debates, massive spending by special interests and corporate ratings/circulation pressures can distort and overshadow important issues.

We will examine how these forces collide in our modern media, how coverage decisions regarding public policy are made in newsrooms, how advocates use and rely on the media to advance their message and how different media reflect different strengths and vulnerabilities. We will attempt to understand the consequences of what respected journalists Tom Rosenstiel and Bill Kovach refer to as the “mixed media culture” and its impact on the pursuit of public policy. We will probe the relationship between coverage and public opinion, and their influence on American domestic and international policy.

We will pay special attention to issues of terrorism and the Iraq war, U.S. foreign policy in that context and politics – all of which will be very much in the news through the spring of 2004 as the U.S. Presidential campaign moves into high gear.

This course has several objectives: to convey a deeper and nuanced understanding of the relationship between the media and public policy and the decision-making process that shapes the journalism of complex issues; to examine how public policy practitioners factor the media into their work and strategy; to understand some of the communication strategies designed to influence public opinion; and to explore whether and how the media help or hinder the civil discourse we require as a democracy.

The course will be lively, provocative and highly interactive, with extensive reading and an expectation that students will follow the news on a daily basis from several sources. We will make use of case studies and real world examples, reinforced by student presentations and frequent visits by accomplished professionals. Our guests will represent the media, public policy, advocacy groups, opinion polling, public relations and strategic communications.

There will be several writing assignments. All papers should be submitted in class and sent via email to sesno@gmu.edu. Papers should be composed in standard 12-point font, double spaced, standard margins. Citations and bibliography are required. Papers lacking proper academic documentation will not be accepted.

Class discussion and participation will be a central component of this course and worth 20% of the final grade. You will be expected to be well informed, organized, armed with the courage of your convictions – and prepared to articulate and defend your point of view.

REQUIRED BOOKS:

1. The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and What the Public Should Expect by Bill Kovach, Tom Rosenstiel
2. Terrorism, War and the Press by Nancy Palmer (editor)
3. Media Power, Media Politics by Mark J. Rozell, ed.,
4. The Press Effect: Politicians, Journalists and the Stories that Shape

the Political World by Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Paul Waldman

5. Embedded: The Media At War in Iraq by Bill Katovsky, Timothy Carlson