

Fall 2009 semester
Tu-Th, 3:30 to 4:45 p.m.
Caldwell Hall Room #102

JOUR 5420/7420 – Credibility, News Media and Public Trust

Many Americans think journalists are biased, careless, untrustworthy and aloof. This persistent and worsening "crisis of credibility" reduces readership, damages economic performance and diminishes journalism's role in our democracy.

Worse, this crisis comes at a time when other forces – technological, economic and demographic – threaten the business model for journalism.

Clearly, journalists need new strategies.

This course is both proscriptive and descriptive. We will study what experts say journalists should do, as well as study what journalists are doing.

Students will learn:

- The nature of credibility and public trust in news media
- What is causing the decline in credibility and public trust in news media
- How journalistic decision making weakens or strengthens credibility and public trust in news media
- How readers can analyze journalistic performance

John F. Greenman, Carter Professor of Journalism, will share research, case studies and methods gathered during 25 years as a journalist and publisher, primarily with Knight Ridder, then one of the nation's largest and most distinguished newspaper companies.

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Prerequisites, cross-listings

None

Readings and essay questions

Michael Schudson, [Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers](#) (HarperCollins, 1978). Read the book. Jeremy Iggers, [Good News, Bad News](#) (Westview, 1999). Read Chapters 3 and 5. Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Paul Waldman, [The Press Effect: Politicians, Journalists and the Stories that Shape the Political World](#) (Oxford, 2003). Read Chapter 7.

Question: All of these readings revolve around what Schudson calls the “ideal of objectivity” in journalism. First, trace the history of “objectivity” as a journalistic method. Second, discuss the pros and cons of “objectivity” as a journalistic method. And, third, identify the journalistic method Jamieson and Waldman propose as a substitute for “objectivity.” If widely adopted by journalists, would their method strengthen or weaken credibility? Justify your position.

Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, The Elements of Journalism (Three Rivers Press, 2001)

Question: Kovach and Rosenstiel write: the purpose of journalism is “to provide people with the information they need to be free and self-governing.” To fulfill this purpose, they offer nine injunctions, what they call “the elements of journalism.” Select and analyze three of these elements you regard as the most important to fulfill journalism’s purpose.

Herbert J. Gans, Democracy and the News (Oxford University Press, 2004)

Question: According to Gans, many steps can be taken to “move journalistic practice toward the democratic ideal.” Select and analyze three of these steps you regard as both most important and likely to occur.

Jack Fuller, News Values: Ideas for an Information Age (University of Chicago Press, 1996)

Question: In Chapter 8, Fuller writes: “The question is not whether a newspaper should serve the public interest or the interests of its owners. The question is how it can best square the two.” Describe and evaluate Fuller’s argument.

Note: Students will need to select a news organization for the content analysis exercises beginning October 22.

Course outline: Use as a guide, subject to revision as progress dictates

Date	Topic
Tuesday, 8/18	Overview of the course. In-class exercise: What do you want to learn?
Thursday, 8/20	Lecture: The credibility cycle. In-class exercise: Your usage of news media.
Tuesday, 8/25	Lecture: Data on credibility, news media and public trust. In-class exercise: Speculating about key factors causing the decline in credibility and public trust in news media.
Thursday, 8/27 and Tuesday, 9/1	Lecture: The conflict over journalistic identity. Assignment: Read Kovach and Rosenstiel and Gans. In-class exercise: Where do you stand on journalistic identity?
Thursday, 9/3 and Tuesday, 9/8	Lecture: The conflict over journalistic purpose. Assignment: Read Fuller. In-class exercise: Where do you stand on journalistic purpose?
Thursday, 9/10 and Tuesday, 9/15	Lecture: The conflict over journalistic method. Assignment: Read Schudson, Iggers and Jamieson and Waldman. In-class exercise: Where do you stand on journalistic method?
Thursday, 9/17	Lecture: Other factors causing the decline in credibility and public trust in news media.
Tuesday, 9/22	In-class exercise: Preparing to write the essay on the readings.
Thursday, 9/24 and Tuesday, 9/29	Case #1: "Plagiarism and the new era of zero tolerance." Assignment: Read the case
Thursday, 10/1	Case #2: "Public service or news-mercial: The blending of news and advertising." Assignment: Read the case.

Tuesday, 10/6	Case #3: “Truth and consequences: The public’s right to know ... at what cost?” Assignment: Read the case. Due: Essay on the readings.
Thursday, 10/8	Case #4: “Playing God: Which critically ill person gets coverage?” Assignment: Read the case.
Tuesday, 10/13	Case #5: “When competition fuels coverage and news judgment is set aside.” Assignment: Read the case.
Thursday, 10/15	In-class exercise: Preparing to write the essay on the cases. Discuss standards of judgment, key credibility issue in each case.
Tuesday, 10/20	Make-up day
Thursday, 10/22 and Tuesday, 10/27	Exercise #1: The “robustness” of news topics. Due Tuesday, 10/27: Essay on the cases.
Thursday, 10/29 and Tuesday, 11/3	Exercise #2: The quality of reporting – objectivity.
Thursday, 11/5 and Tuesday, 11/10	Exercise #3: The quality of reporting – informational richness
Thursday, 11/12 and Tuesday, 11/17	Exercise #4: Accessibility
Thursday, 11/19 and Tuesday, 12/1	Exercise #5: “People like me”
Thursday, 12/3	Evaluation
Tuesday, 12/8	No class: “Friday” schedule

Attendance

University policy is that attendance is expected. Note that in-class exercises, which count for 20 percent of the grade, must be completed in class and cannot be made up.

Grading

The grade will be determined as follows:

- One 1,250-word essay on the readings, 30 percent. The essay will be graded according to completeness, depth of inquiry and literary merit. Students may benefit from reviewing essay-question terms by Cleo Boyd found here <http://www.erin.utoronto.ca/~w3asc/prompt.htm>
- One essay 750 to 1,000-word essay on the cases, 20 percent. Identify and compare the key credibility issue in each of the five cases. Apply a standard of judgment. The essay will be graded according to completeness, depth of the comparison and literary merit.
- Five exercise reports, 30 percent. These reports, similar to lab reports from science classes, will be discussed closer to the time of the exercises, which begin October 22.
- In-class exercises, 20 percent.

Note: Without exception, assignments handed in after the deadline will be devalued.

Disclaimers

All academic work must meet the standards contained in “A Culture of Honesty.” Each student is responsible to inform themselves about those standards before performing any academic work.

The course syllabus is a general plan for the course; deviations announced to the class by the instructor may be necessary.

Some of the cases are based on fact. Some are hypothetical. Some blend fact and hypothesis. All of the cases are to be used solely for discussion and learning. None are to be distributed outside the class.

The content analysis exercises are drawn, in part, from John H. McManus, Market-Driven Journalism: Let the Citizen Beware (Sage, 1994), with materials to be distributed in class by the instructor.