Opinion Journalism JMC 3400:0001
Spring 2016
MW 9:30-11:20 in AJB W340

Instructor: Bradley K. Martin, AJB W311, office hours M 2:00-3:30; TH 3:30-5:00
Email: bradley-k-martin@uiowa.edu Office phone: 335-3415  Cell: 512-2368

This is a lab class. You will have reading assignments to perform outside class and typically at least part of each class period will be reserved for you to write. You may use one of the supplied computers or bring your own.

Class time and blogging

Each of you will renew acquaintance with the Word Press account you set up when a student in the multi-media class and blog there. (If you don’t have a Word Press account we’ll get you set up with one.) You’ll express your views on various matters and when possible include the multi-media elements that will make your blog more attractive and useful to prospective users.

Subjects that you’ll blog about can be whatever you have opinions about. Please choose several subject matter areas that float your boat, announce them to your classmates, instructor and prospective blog followers, set up categories on your blog and specialize in those areas as the semester moves on. Your blog will also include media criticism – your comments on books and articles, programs and films that you are assigned to read or watch for instruction or examples, plus comments on the news and opinion media that you follow daily whether on line or in print or on TV or radio. If you fail to follow news and opinion media in your blog, whatever you do produce will be graded down because generally speaking you can’t be much of a journalist without consuming a lot of journalism.

The instructor will have access to your Word Press blog. It’s a plus if you can get your thoughts published elsewhere besides on your Word Press blog.

You have a deadline, normally twice a week at the end of class, when you are expected to have added one or more gems to your blog. The instructor will follow your blog and offer critiques and grades to help you move in the best direction as you develop your blogging skills. Unexcused lateness or absence will entail deduction of points from your daily grade – fewer points if you are found to have blogged despite your absence.

Your blogs are expected to be in good English – grammatical, properly punctuated, persuasive. And you are expected to get your facts right, spell names correctly and otherwise adhere to the standards of good journalism, with the exception that you’ll let yourself be much more opinionated than you would typically be when reporting the news.
Daily class grade including blogs will account for a quarter of the total grade for the course.

**Textbook and Midterm Exam**

The main textbook, which you should acquire because we’ll use it right away, is: Jay Heinrichs, *Thank You For Arguing: What Aristotle, Lincoln and Homer Simpson Can Teach Us About the Art of Persuasion*, the 2013 revised and updated edition.

You will be encouraged to blog about this book, chapter by chapter, so a print version you can mark up may be more convenient to use than an e-book.

The midterm examination will be a take-home project: you will review the Heinrichs book. It will count for a quarter of your overall grade.

**2d Half Project**

Writing a long book review is a useful way for you to practice and learn about opinion writing, so we’re going to do two more of them this semester. In these two reviews – or one combined review of two books if you prefer – you’ll be writing your opinions about books written by opinion writers – pundits, as the term has it – or candidates. As presidential campaign years approach in the United States, the publishing industry always puts out a fresh stream of such books. Luckily for you they are fairly short, large-type books for the most part.

If you go to the second floor of the Iowa City Public Library, get off the elevator and look slightly to your left, you’ll see a shelf of new books on politics. These are mainly from the 2015-16 crop. The UI Library has more. If you want to own your copies, you can go on line to buy them in either print or electronic form.

Your assignment is to choose one book from the political left and one from the right and review them separately or together. A combined review would work well if the pundits were directly antagonistic toward each other’s viewpoints. Write a minimum 1,500, preferably 2,000 words for each book (or 3,000-4,000 words for a combined review). Analyze the writer’s arguments and tell us the characteristic persuasive devices he or she uses. Research to learn how others have praised or reviled your writer and his or her point of view. Attempt to estimate the writer’s impact nationally. If possible, localize that exercise by asking people here what they think of the writer and his/her arguments.

Sum up with an overall judgment. Don’t hold back. Persuade us that we should or should not read this book, with pithy explanations of why and why not. If an author you choose to review is intemperate with his or her own arguments, you may feel it will help you persuade if you satirize that person by using similarly intemperate arguments yourself. Or not. Do what fits and what works.
If you have a personal interest in an earlier historical period, see me and I’ll try to help you pick books from that period. Some of the authors on the following list are among the “usual suspects,” people who have published a new book every campaign season. If you want to stick to our theme of media criticism you may wish to pair older books by Bernard Goldberg (*Bias* or *Arrogance*) and Eric Alterman (*What Liberal Media?*) These are in the UI Library. Otherwise please check with me before going beyond the lists below. List your choices in the ICON dropbox.

Noting in your reviews similarities and differences with other pundits – starting, for example, with Father Charles Coughlin, the “father of hate radio,” whom we’ll learn about in class on Wed., March 23 – will be most welcome.

The deadline for your review(s) of the two books is Wednesday, April 27. Classes will continue as scheduled until May 4 and you’ll be expected to blog on a daily basis. These reviews will amount to a take-home final examination in the course and will account for a total 50 percent of your final grade.

I’ll judge your reviews on clarity and accuracy and persuasiveness as in the case of the review of Heinrichs’ book. If you are among those who are notified of problems with grammar, syntax, usage, spelling, etc., in the Heinrichs review, please make sure you rise above those problems in this round.

**JMC Learning Outcomes**

The School of Journalism and Mass Communication is committed to your academic and professional success. In line with this commitment, we have identified particular learning outcomes that every student should obtain by the time they earn a JMC degree. You can find more information about these learning outcomes here: [http://clas.uiowa.edu/sjmc/undergraduate-programs/assessment](http://clas.uiowa.edu/sjmc/undergraduate-programs/assessment). We regularly assess the curriculum to determine whether students are achieving these outcomes.

This course contributes to these learning outcomes by helping you achieve an understanding that clear, concise writing is at the heart of journalistic expression and that reporting and communicating effectively requires knowledge and achievement of the highest professionally accepted standards in all work. Achieving these outcomes means students will demonstrate:

- The ability to gather factual story elements and to evaluate and express them in logical, narrative forms for multiple media and audiences;
- The ability to access and analyze data, report facts accurately, research and edit information responsibly and in a manner commensurate with professional standards; and
- The ability to apply above concepts in a manner that is sensitive to audiences across all media.
Also, regarding media literacy, students will develop critical thinking skills to analyze and interpret media messages through an understanding of media practices and institutions.