

Journalism, Justice and Civic Change (IDS 2935)
Class Meeting: T Periods 5-6; R Period 5
Instructor: Dr. Kim Walsh-Childers
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office phone: 352-392-3924
Office Hours: Thursday mornings 8-11 (Weimer Hall) & by appointment
Offices: 3044 Weimer Hall (Tuesday/Thursday)
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About This Course:

What you will learn in this class

Students in this course will learn to identify and analyze how media content reflects, supports and sometimes curbs societal power structures in ways that influence civic life, particularly at the state and local levels. Students will be exposed to relevant mass communication theories such as agenda-setting and framing. Students will engage in analytical writing in ways that help them understand news media presentation of important social issues, particularly those relevant to state and local government, within their historical contexts.

Learning Objectives

Students who complete the course will be able to:

- Develop and demonstrate the critical thinking skills necessary to identify credible information sources and evaluate their reliability;
- Describe the journalistic process, the impacts of journalism in a democratic society and the relationship between journalists and the public they serve;
- Articulate the effect of algorithms on their information consumption, including the impact they have on the spread of disinformation/misinformation;
- Explain how news coverage influences state and local government policies and identify the ways citizens can use trustworthy news sources to inform their civic participation.

Class Policies

Classroom atmosphere: Each of you plays an important role in shaping this course. I encourage you to be actively involved in class discussions and activities. Please do make comments and ask questions! This course lends itself to sharing your experiences with journalism and media, and your input will significantly enrich our conversation. Please also be appreciative of the contributions of others, including any guest speakers, and help create a class environment that is respectful. This does not mean you should never disagree, but you should always do so courteously.

People of all backgrounds have important contributions to make to this class, and we expect all of you to respect that. If, at any point, you believe someone in the class – including me – has expressed ideas in inappropriate ways, please let me know. My goal is to make certain everyone feels comfortable participating in and listening to class discussions and that these discussions support a range of perspectives and experiences and identities. In a democratic society, it is essential for citizens to develop the ability to hear and think about others' perspectives and to consider how and why others' experiences and circumstances may lead to differences from our own beliefs and priorities, especially on contentious societal issues.

If experiences outside this class are interfering with your performance in the class, please let me know; I'd like to help connect you with appropriate resources for dealing with any such issues.

Cell phone use in class: As a matter of courtesy to your fellow class members, please turn off or silence all cell phones before class starts. Please **do not** text message during class or attempt to work on assignments for other classes.

Laptop/tablet use in class: We'll have a discussion about this the first week of class, but one of the apparent side effects of the COVID-19 pandemic has been a decline in students' ability to focus on one thing at a time – including class lectures and discussions and guest speakers. There is excellent scientific evidence that [having your laptop open in class interferes with your learning and lowers your final grade](#). All of your writing assignments should demonstrate that you have done the required class preparation, whether it's reading, listening to a podcast or watching a mini-documentary, **and** that you've paid attention to class discussions. You can't pay attention in class if you're working on assignments, trying to get caught up with (or get ahead with) class materials, checking your social media accounts, messaging friends, playing games, etc.

Attendance: Your attendance and participation are important to making this class a success. I expect that you will attend every class unless an emergency prevents you from doing so. If you find that you do have to miss a class due to an emergency, let me know immediately. Excessive absences, late arrival or early departure will affect your final class participation score – you can't participate if you aren't here. This course follows the university's attendance policy, which is available [here](#).

Missing Deadlines or Assignments: If you believe you have an exceptional reason for missing a deadline for an assignment, please discuss it with me *immediately* and *in advance*, if at all possible. Please note that poor planning, including underestimating how long it will take to do the research and analysis you need to do for your final paper, does not constitute an acceptable reason for missing a deadline. Fairness, both to me and to your classmates, requires that you meet all deadlines. All assignments are due at the times specified in Canvas. Failure to turn in your assignments by the deadline (without prior approval) will result in a late penalty, at a minimum.

Accommodations for Special Needs: If you have a legitimate, documented special needs situation, I will be more than happy to work with you to find accommodations. University policy requires students requesting classroom accommodation to register with the Dean of Students Office. The Dean of Students Office will provide appropriate documentation to you, and you should provide this documentation to me at the beginning of the semester. Please do so, even if you do not believe you will need the accommodations. It is your responsibility to initiate this conversation early in the semester.

Required Readings

There is no textbook for this course. The reading materials, podcasts, etc., will all be available in each week's Canvas module, either as hyperlinks or as PDFs for paywalled content. You are expected to read these articles and to listen to or watch the podcasts or documentaries listed on the syllabus before the class for which they're assigned; if you haven't done the readings, you will not be able to participate effectively in class discussions. Most weeks, you'll be required to post a reflection that helps me assess whether you are reading and understanding the content.

Plagiarism and Academic Honesty

Many students in this class may have no intention of becoming communications professionals. Nonetheless, every student at the University of Florida is bound by the Honor Code, which demands that students do their own work, independent of unauthorized assistance. In short, it is your responsibility to make certain you understand what constitutes plagiarism and to ensure that you give proper credit every time you draw on someone else's writing.

- Do not rely on what you think you've learned before. I strongly recommend that everyone complete the free Poynter NewsU course called [Avoiding Plagiarism and Fabrication](#).
- Prof. Mindy McAdams also has put together an excellent guide: <http://www.macloo.com/cheat/index.htm>
- If you have questions, ask me! No one else will be able to tell you what I consider acceptable or unacceptable. There is no penalty for asking questions, but the penalties for plagiarism are severe, including potentially failing the course and being referred to the Office of Student Conduct & Conflict Resolution.
- Treat Internet sources like any other book, journal article or other print source. Make certain you copy down correct reference information when you copy material from a website, even if you're paraphrasing. You will need to include references for the sources for your final project paper, and it's possible you may want to cite other sources in weekly reflection posts. In most cases, you'll be able to include hyperlinks rather than citations, but for any personal communication (e.g. emails or interviews), you will need to include a reference that includes contact information.
- Do not turn in for this class any work you previously have submitted to another instructor or that you plan to submit for any other class at UF or any other institution.

Please see the UF Office of Student Conduct & Conflict Resolution website for definitions of [academic dishonesty](#). The types of violations most likely to be potential problems for students in this class include plagiarism, misrepresentation and fabrication. It is your responsibility to understand what kinds of actions are prohibited. If a situation ever arises in which you think something you're contemplating *might* constitute one of these types of academic dishonesty, ask before you do it. Apologies after the fact will never resolve the problem for anyone. I consider it part of my duty as a professor and journalism educator to report academic dishonesty to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs.

Assignments

Weekly reflections (20 points per post, 200 points total)

Over the course of the semester, you will be required to write 10 short reflections (200-300 words). Each reflection will be due by midnight on Sunday. I will provide a prompt for each reflection to help you focus your response; completing the reflection will require you to have read/listened to/watched the assigned materials for that week's module. Each week's reflection is due before the class discussion of the topic to ensure that everyone comes to class with some familiarity with the story/stories for that week. The reflections will help form the basis of our in-class discussions.

Design Your Ideal News Source Group Project: 160 points, due by 11:59 p.m. March 31.

You will work in teams of two or three students to produce a description of what you envision as the ideal *trustworthy* news source covering either a specific geographic area or a specific social topic (e.g. education, poverty, health care, criminal justice, environment) at the state or regional level, and you'll present your project in class, using PowerPoint or Canva. The narrative and presentation should both cover:

- A mission statement for the news source, including what topics and levels of government/business your news source will cover
- What your organization's policies will be for verifying information before publication and for acknowledging/correcting mistakes
- What characteristics of your site will be designed to increase public trust in its content
- How you, as the managers, will ensure that the publication provides fair, equitable coverage of all racial, ethnic, religious, geographic and social class groups
- A plan for reaching and engaging with your audience: What platforms will you use? What storytelling methods will you use? How will you determine that the stories you're producing are meeting your audience members' needs?
- A discussion of how many staff members you will need, how much these personnel will cost and how you will bring in enough income to cover the organization's expenses. This isn't meant to be a formal business plan – we just want you to gain an understanding of how much it costs to produce high-quality, trustworthy journalism.

You will need to consider personnel costs for your journalists (reporters and editors), any advertising/marketing/social media staff, along with “publication” costs (e.g. printing and distribution, if you choose a paper product, or website management, etc.).

Ideal News Source reflection (40 points, due April 5)

In place of your weekly reflection post on readings, you’ll instead write an individual reflection about what you learned from the Ideal News Source project. This will include a requirement that you comment on at least one other group’s Ideal News Source proposal.

Story Impact Paper: 350 points total.

Proposal (150 points) due by 11:59 p.m. on February 27.

Final paper (200 points) due by 11:59 p.m. on April 23.

Each student will select a news story/series, podcast or documentary from a list I will provide; all of them will be examples of high-quality journalism that examined an important social issue at the state or local level. **The purpose of this assignment is to help you see how high-quality journalism affects citizens’ lives and the operation of state/local government, beyond the function of simply informing people.** Relatively early in the semester, you’ll submit a proposal for your paper, summarizing the key points of the story/series/podcast/documentary you wish to examine, describing the key government policies or practices at issue in the story, identifying which groups of people the policy or practice harmed and which groups benefitted, specifying which government officials or agencies you believe would have the power to resolve the problem, and explaining in as much detail as possible how you will determine **how the news organization’s work affected citizens** in their coverage area, beyond making them aware of the issue. (These might include impacts on government policy, impacts on business policy, impacts on community engagement and organization, etc.) The proposal will help me to see whether you understand the requirements of the project so that I can offer advice about assessing its impact. The proposal itself will be worth 150 points.

The final report will **describe the impact the story/series/documentary (etc.) had** (including how you determined this) and will explain who resisted these changes and how; in other words, who was working *against* solving the problem, and how effective were their efforts in maintaining the status quo? In this report, you also will analyze the news organization, the reporter(s) who wrote/produced the story and the story itself, describing the characteristics of the news organization, the reporter(s) and the reporting process that should have led audiences to view the story as trustworthy. This final report will be worth 200 points (20% of your final grade). More information, including examples of good projects, will be provided in a separate document in Canvas.

News Diet Assessment (50 points total)

At the beginning of the semester, you will answer questions about your own consumption of news. At the end of the semester, we will revisit the same questions, with one additional question about whether your news consumption and perceptions have changed at all. Each exercise is worth 25 points, for a total of 50 points.

Class Participation (200 points)

Every student is expected to be an active participant in this class. Why? Because research shows that students who participate, who are engaged in the class, [learn more](#) than those who don't. Active participation means showing up on time, having already read or listened to or watched the required materials (and having done so analytically), asking good questions, respectfully offering your opinions and thoughts on the information presented, etc. Here's a [how-to](#), in case this is tough for you. Many weeks, we will have guest speakers, and students are strongly encouraged to ask questions of these speakers. Be aware – although attending class consistently is important, simply showing up will not be enough to earn full participation points. I will take roll each day, but students who have 100% attendance but never speak up will receive no more than 80% of the class participation points.

To encourage everyone to participate, each student is required to sign up for two weeks during which you will be a “discussion leader.” I'll ask discussion leaders to summarize the assigned articles/stories for that week, to offer comments on how the story was done, where it succeeded and where it failed, and to ask questions about anything you didn't understand from the story. If you have questions about the government policies or agencies that were relevant to the story's topic, it will be really helpful to send those to me ahead of time, so that I can try to find answers if I don't know them already. Every student, discussion leader or not, is encouraged to ask these sorts of questions, but when you're the discussion leader, you should be especially well prepared for class on those days. I'll make a point of calling on the assigned discussion leaders (if necessary) during each class, but of course, you should always feel free to comment or ask questions, regardless of whether you're signed up for that day. Failure to sign up as a discussion leader and/or not being present and prepared to comment during a week for which you're signed up will lower your participation grade.

Evaluation of Grades

Assignment	Total Points	Percent of Grade
Reflections (20)	200	20 percent
Group project	200	20 percent
Story Impact Paper Proposal: 150 Final paper: 200	350	35 percent
News habits assessments (2)	50	5 percent

Class participation	200	20 percent
TOTAL	1,000	100 percent

Grading Scale

A-	90-93.4	A	93.5-100		
B-	80-83.4	B	83.5-87	B+	87.1-89.9
C-	70-73.4	C	73.5-77	C+	77.1-79.9
D-	60-63.4	D	63.5-67	C+	67.1-69.9
E	Less than 60%				

Course Outline

Below is a description by week of the material we will cover. We will generally have guest speakers related to the topic for at least a portion of our Tuesday classes.

WEEK 1

January 9 & 11

Introduction

Discussion of assignments, expectations for the class, citizen responsibilities in a democracy. The importance of state and local government: Why this course matters.

WEEK 2

January 16 & 18

Why state and local government matter

Guest speaker: Gainesville Mayor Harvey Ward.

The role state and local government play in our democracy. How local/state coverage affects government. Why should you care about local news? Discussion of your personal information environment.

News Habits Assessment 1 due by midnight Jan. 14

WEEK 3

January 23 & 25

What is journalism?

We'll talk about the principles, processes and ethics of journalism and how they've evolved to meet the digital age. We'll also discuss journalism ethics, the objectivity debate, why declining trust in news media should matter to you and what separates quality news organizations from "content providers."

Reflection 1 due by midnight Jan. 21.

WEEK 4:

January 30 & February 1

The value of local news

What is the role of local news in the digital age? What special challenges do local media face?

Reflection 2 due by midnight Jan. 28.

WEEK 5:

February 6 & 8

The First Amendment

Journalism is the only profession explicitly protected by the First Amendment. How should journalists raise awareness of First Amendment issues?

Reflection 3 due by midnight Feb. 4.

WEEK 6

February 13 & 15

Voting Rights

Voting is key to a functioning democracy, but who has the right to vote and how that right is protected has been an often shifting principle. How does journalism affect perceptions and protections of voting rights?

Note: To vote in Florida's 2024 presidential primary elections, you must be registered to vote by February 20.

You can register to vote in Florida (if you're a Florida resident) or update your registration here: <https://registertovoteflorida.gov/home>

Reflection 4 due by midnight Feb. 11.

WEEK 7

February 20 & 22

Education

Education is the most local of issues, and at one time, it was one of the least contentious. These days, however, local and state education policy has become a central focus point in the "culture wars." What does effective coverage of education issues look like, and what role does local journalism play in helping citizens ensure that education policy meets their children's needs (and for older students, their own needs)?

Reflection 5 due by midnight Feb. 18.

WEEK 8

February 27 & 29

Policing and criminal justice

There are more than 18,000 local police departments in the United States, and oversight of those departments varies from locality to locality and state to state. What role do journalists play in police accountability?

Reflection 8 due by midnight Feb. 25.

WEEK 9

March 5 & 7

Public health/health care

We often think of health policy as primarily a national issue, but important health policies vary widely from state to state. Those variations affect who gets access to medical care, how they access care and how much they pay. What role do journalists play in helping citizens understand the complexity of these issues and what influences state/local health policy-makers' decisions?

Reflection 7 due by midnight March 3.

Spring Break!

WEEK 10

March 19 & 21

Housing

Not everyone can live (or wants to live) in a multi-million-dollar mansion, but everyone wants to live somewhere that is comfortable, affordable and safe. State and local government decisions often determine how easy or hard it is to find a decent place to live, and news coverage can ensure that the public knows whether those government decisions are helping – or hurting – both renters and those who own their homes.

Reflection 8 due by midnight March 17.

WEEK 11:

March 26 & 28

Environmental justice

Pollution, climate change and other environmental challenges might seem like issues requiring national and even international solutions. However, state and local governments also regularly make decisions that affect our local environments, influencing the safety of the water we drink and the air we breathe. We'll talk this week about journalism's role in covering state and local government decisions that affect the environment.

Reflection 9 due by midnight March 24.

WEEK 12:

April 2 & 4

Ideal News Source presentations

This week, each group will present its Ideal News Source project to the class. We'll talk about what they have in common and how they differ from each other – and from what's currently available in the media environment.

Ideal News Source paper and presentations due by midnight March 31. Individual reflections are due by midnight April 5.

WEEK 13:

April 9 & 11

When disaster strikes

When a traumatic event occurs – whether it’s a natural disaster, a human-caused tragedy or mass violence – journalists from the national media typically show up in large numbers, often with little understanding of the community context. This week, we’ll talk about the role of local journalists in understanding their communities, providing the information local citizens need, and potentially helping direct public officials’ attention to unmet needs.

Reflection 10 due by midnight April 5.

WEEK 14

April 16 & 18

Reconsidering the impact of state and local news

This will be a week for reflecting on what you’ve learned in the class. I’ll ask at least a few of you to discuss your Story Impact Paper projects and what you learned about how these stories affected state and/or local policy relevant to the stories’ subjects. We’ll also reconsider citizens’ responsibilities for engagement with state/local government and discuss “best practices” for ensuring that you stay well informed and avoid using or sharing misinformation.

Second News Habits Assessment due by midnight April 14.

WEEK 15

April 23

No class. Your final Story Impact Paper will be due by 11:59 p.m. April 23.

Assignment Rubrics

Rubrics specific to each major assignment are available in Canvas.

Course Credit

You will receive two grades for this course: one reflecting mastery of the subject matter and one reflecting writing performance. This course confers three credits toward the General Education requirement in social and behavioral science. A course grade of C is required to earn this credit. This course also confers 2,000 words towards the Writing Requirement, which ensures students both maintain their fluency in writing and use writing as a tool to facilitate learning. While helping students meet the broad learning outcomes of content, communication, and critical thinking, I will evaluate and provide feedback on students' written assignments with respect to grammar, punctuation, clarity, coherence, and organization.

Campus Resources: Health and Wellness

Contact information for the Counseling and Wellness Center:

<http://www.counseling.ufl.edu/cwc/Default.aspx>, 392-1575; and the University Police Department: 392-1111 or 9-1-1 for emergencies.

U Matter, We Care: If you or someone you know is in distress, please contact umatter@ufl.edu, 352-392-1575, or visit [U Matter, We Care website](#) to refer or report a concern and a team member will reach out to the student in distress.

Student Health Care Center: Call 352-392-1161 for 24/7 information to help you find the care you need, or [visit the Student Health Care Center website](#).

University Police Department: [Visit UF Police Department website](#) or call 352-392-1111 (or 9-1-1 for emergencies).

UF Health Shands Emergency Room / Trauma Center: For immediate medical care call 352-733-0111 or go to the emergency room at 1515 SW Archer Road, Gainesville, FL 32608; [Visit the UF Health Emergency Room and Trauma Center website](#).

GatorWell Health Promotion Services: For prevention services focused on optimal wellbeing, including Wellness Coaching for Academic Success, visit the [GatorWell website](#) or call 352-273-4450.

Academic Resources

E-learning technical support: Contact the [UF Computing Help Desk](#) at 352-392-4357 or via e-mail at helpdesk@ufl.edu.

Career Connections Center: Reitz Union Suite 1300, 352-392-1601. Career assistance and counseling services.

Library Support: Various ways to receive assistance with respect to using the libraries or finding resources.

Teaching Center: Broward Hall, 352-392-2010 or to make an appointment 352- 392-6420.
General study skills and tutoring.

Writing Studio: 2215 Turlington Hall, 352-846-1138. Help brainstorming, formatting, and writing papers.

Student Complaints On-Campus: Visit the Student Honor Code and Student Conduct Code webpage for more information.