

# Soc 345: Media, politics and propaganda

## Summer 2021

Course website: <https://people.eou.edu/socmedia>

- Instructor:** Bill Grigsby  
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- Course description:** Examines the commercial and alternative news media, how news is filtered, how deceptive techniques are used, and the ways in which media consumers are susceptible to propaganda.
- General education:** Social Science (SSC)

The general education curriculum assumes that 'every educated person should have some acquaintance with certain traditional areas of human knowledge and experience and be able to synthesize and contextualize this knowledge within their own lives.' You'll be asked to not only critically analyze mass news media using well-supported conceptual frameworks, but to place it in the context of your own lives and participation as consumers and citizens in a democracy.

We are inundated with media during our waking hours, and even while we're asleep they affect us. Without mass media our lives would be radically different, even our conceptions of who we are would be different. We'll be taking a small chunk—the news media and its relationships to politics—learning about and analyzing it. By the time you finish this course, if you've put some effort into it and faithfully paid attention to the assignments, you will be much more aware of the media around you. You will know many of the key corporate actors, some of the journalists and pseudojournalists and where they stand and what they stand for, some of the efforts to persuade you to think, like, shop or behave in a certain way, you will have a good list of places on the Internet where you can go and do more homework on issues, individuals and corporations, and you will never watch the evening news the same way again (if you ever did, anyway). Hopefully this is a good thing. If you have taken mass media for granted, it will be hard for you to take a breath of air without wondering what's in it, so to speak, after this course. We will focus on what is more universally accessible to us as members of the university community—TV, print and online media.

The object of this course isn't to 'take sides'—it's to motivate you to think critically for yourself about mass media and politics, and show you many intellectual and practical tools to do so.

**PREREQUISITES:** None. Recommended: Soc 205

### **COURSE OBJECTIVES**

- To become more aware of mass media and their effect on society and individuals
- To sharpen your 'media literacy.'
- To identify a broad range of media resources to help you more critically evaluate mass media
- To better understand relationships between mass media and politics.

**LEARNING OUTCOMES** Upon completion of the course, students will demonstrate capacity to:

- identify propaganda and techniques of deception used by powerful organizations, individuals, and media outlets in print, TV, radio and web-based media;
- use multiple web-based tools and reference sites to investigate news events, individuals or organizations related to these events;
- provide a coherent, structural explanation of the key relationships between corporate news media, public and private newsmakers, elected officials, advertisers and media consumers.
- discuss the importance of a free press to democratic institutions.

## MEANS OF ASSESSMENT:

- participation in discussion forums (**40%**)
- bi-weekly (every two weeks) quizzes (**30%**)
- paper reflecting on the nature and spread of a conspiracy theory (**10%**)
- paper analyzing differing coverage of two different news stories (**20%**)
- As per general education requirements:
  - *Demonstrate various strategies for generating effective arguments.* You will complete a ‘spin journal’ that will ask you to examine how bias can vary from one news outlet to another;
  - *gathering sources, analyzing information, evaluating claims and data, problem solving and synthesizing material.* The advertising assignment will ask you to examine the relationship between news content, propaganda, and advertisements;
  - *demonstrate systematic thinking.* This is the basis of the course—using conceptual tools to examine how and why news is filtered, how this affects political discourse and public debate, and how some of the most effective efforts at persuasion follow some basic research-tested principles.

## COURSE REQUIREMENTS

- Regular class participation (*weekly* participation in discussion boards—details below);
- Completion of assignments (quizzes, papers);
- Familiarity with the resources from the Canvas menu and the course website (<https://people.eou.edu/socmedia>). I will provide the relevant links.
- Access to the following texts/sources:
  - Robert Cialdini. 2009. *Influence: Science and Practice* (5th edition). Boston: Pearson.
  - Richard Paul and Linda Elder. 2006. *How to detect media bias and propaganda*. Dillon Beach, CA: Foundation for Critical Thinking. Through bookstore or The Critical Thinking Foundation’s [website](#).
  - A variety of other readings accessible through Canvas.

## GRADING PROCEDURES, ASSIGNMENTS

assignment	description	important dates	pts
Bi-weekly quizzes	at end of each even-numbered week, 30 pts ea	Available Sat - Tu midnight	150
Class participation	In discussion forums. Points for the quality and level of participation, + 5 possible for writing	15(+5) x 10 wks	200
Reflection paper	On conspiracy theories—choose one and investigate its origins, spread, logic, persuasiveness, etc.	Due July 27	50
‘Spin journal’	Identify and analyze differences in news coverage on the same story	Due Sept 1	100
Extra credit	A couple of opportunities—refer to Canvas and description below.	Weekly, Sept 3	(5-15)
<b>totals</b>			<b>500</b>

## Grading scale

Grading is on a straight percentage:

90-100%	450-500	A
80-89%	400-449	B
70-79%	350-399	C
60-69%	300-349	D
Below 60%	< 300	F

Minuses will be given for the bottom third (0-3) of each range; pluses for the top third (7-9).  
Unless I’ve made a mathematical error, *all grades are final*.

## Important Dates

Date(s)	Event	Date(s)	Event
Jul 3 – 7	Weeks 1-2 Quiz open	Aug 14 – 17	Weeks 7-8 Quiz open
Jul 17 – 20	Weeks 3-4 Quiz open	Aug 28 – 31	Weeks 9-10 Quiz open
Jul 27	Reflection paper due	Sept 1	Spin Journal due
Jul 31-Aug 3	Weeks 5-6 Quiz open	Sept 3	Last day for discussion make-ups

## Assignment descriptions

### Quizzes

Each even-numbered week we'll have a quiz. The quiz will post by noon Saturday (of weeks 2, 4, 6, 8 and 10), and you'll have until Tuesday night (usually midnight) to complete it. The only exception will be if I think that the discussion hasn't 'ripened' yet, and then I would wait to open the quiz, probably until Sunday morning. These quizzes will be timed (you'll have way more time than you need—3 hrs—even if you're cooking dinner or putting kids to bed)—so once you start, you need to finish. Hence you shouldn't open them until you're ready. That means you've done the readings—both the assigned readings and the lecture pages—and participated in the discussion threads.

There will usually be 2 to 4 questions, either short answer, multiple choice, or fill in the blank, and each quiz is worth 30 points. The quizzes are open book, but they are designed to have students put together what they've learned from readings and discussion in the previous two weeks, usually by applying information to some setting. So I wouldn't recommend opening them until you've prepared. A question that asks you to discuss something probably can't be answered in 2-3 sentences, so just keep in mind—each of these is 1/3 the length of a typical midterm or final exam.

*Quizzes will be worth 30% of your overall grade (150 pts)*

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### Spin journal (final project)

#### Analyzing and researching an important news story from three different perspectives

You will analyze a news story, choosing 3 news articles covering the story in the news. You'll be looking for evidence of bias, filtering, etc.—differences in coverage explainable in terms of biased reporting. The bias could be political, could be commercial, and the use of techniques designed to deceive, either by the news media outlet or by newsmakers. The book *'How to detect media bias & propaganda'* is your guide—you'll want to read through it carefully, probably more than once (it's short! Well ... *tiny*), to help you identify and describe the techniques of manipulation covered by the authors. **Note:** Part of this assignment involves choosing a story where there are some pretty *clear differences of political perspective*, especially where the stakes are high. As per the course's [title](#).

So, just to make it clear: one story, three versions of it, spread across outlets with left, center and right-leaning political tendencies. This makes your choices important. Definitely you'll want the stories appearing on the same day, as you know how news stories and politicians' spin on the previous day's quotes can change rapidly.

Spin involves the manipulation of language, used to defend one's views, attack others' move public opinion, etc.—is but one of many techniques used to try to influence. For instance, was the war in Iraq about freedom and democracy? Or oil? Why were Iraq's (alleged) weapons referred to in the US by politicians and the media as 'weapons of mass destruction' while the US' weapons had names like 'smart bombs,' 'precision munitions,' 'daisy cutters' and 'bunker busters'? Did the enemies of the U.S. *really* hate our

freedoms? Or did they have quarrels with U.S. foreign policy? Did the US military ‘torture’ prisoners, or engage in ‘enhanced interrogation?’ Is a person who supports a woman’s reproductive rights pro-choice, pro-abortion, or anti-life? Are those who oppose abortion pro-life, anti-abortion or anti-choice? Is the republican party *really* the party of family values? Are the democrats really the champions of the poor? Was President Obama a socialist? Was President Trump a fascist? Is Biden a communist? Is withholding evidence of state-sponsored spying on US journalists *really* about national security, or avoiding bad press?

There are many techniques designed to ‘frame’ issues in deceptive and self-serving ways, and part of what I’ll be looking for in your paper is whether you can identify them when they are used by people in the news, and by those who report the news. This means knowing the story well, so the other major requirement is to *do some background research on the topic (at least 3 outside sources)*.

Deception could come from individuals quoted in an article, it could be the spin of the media outlet or the author of the story, or the author might take an entirely uncritical view of quotes or statements in the story (reporting newsmakers’ spin as straight news). Even the *headline* of an article can be spun—so watch for spin, deception and propaganda in different places.

### Some basic rules

- **Same topic please!** Choose a story that covers the same topic. In other words, choose three articles covering the *same story in the same time period*, so they’re comparable. Also . . . the story *must be something happening during the term*—this is a class dealing with *current events*, not last year's news.
- **Things to avoid.** Among the three versions you choose to compare for your story:
  - *Avoid editorial articles*—Your assignment is to compare/contrast *news stories*—the reader should expect spin from an op-ed (editorial). Although you could supplement your stories by reading editorials to help you with your analysis and identifying different perspectives. Now it may be true that some news is editorialized, but you should be able to tell the difference between an article that is reporting, versus one that is clearly an opinion piece (*Note: If you see 'opinion' or 'views' in the URL, I will, too when I look at your citations*). Stick with articles that at least *claim* to be news. *No editorials!* The insidious part of the commercial news business is when editorials are sold as news, and it happens all the time in story selection, sources used, language used, etc. Don't get caught doing what we're trying to expose in this class—it would suggest a learning deficit.
  - *No more than one newswire story* (e.g., Reuters, Associated Press). Many news organizations subscribe to newswires and can use their stories in their own papers/websites. That means that they may reflect more the perspective of the newswire than the subscribing organization (but the organization did choose to carry it, right?), and you may not find variation from one site/paper to the next if they’re both carrying the same newswire story—nothing to compare, and that won’t be good for your analysis or grade because you should have caught it when documenting the source. It also means that the same AP or Reuters or Cox story covered by two outlets might read pretty much the same. So part of this assignment requires you be able to identify if you've chosen a newswire story. Know your original sources.
- **Choosing stories, sources.** You must choose one article from each of these three groups:
  - Right-leaning: [FoxNews](#), [Washington Examiner](#), [Breitbart](#)
  - Center: [Christian Science Monitor](#), [USA Today](#), [CNN](#)
  - Left-leaning: [Reader Supported News](#), [Democracy Now](#), [Vice](#).
    - If you’re having trouble finding the same story across three sites, try some of the sources on the ‘[Front Page News](#)’ of the website. But if you leave out representation from the right, center, or left in your analysis, it will come out in the points. It pays to follow instructions!

- **Doing background research on your story.** There are many ways to do this—use your common sense. What do you need to know to understand the story and its dimensions, and from what sources? Some examples:
  - Looking up an organization, who funds it, whether it's affiliated with one party or movement
  - Looking up the author(s) of the stories
  - Informing yourself by checking out reference sources (e.g., a reputable scientific website, a non-profit research cite [[Pew Research](#), for instance], a [LexisNexis](#) or Google [News](#) search of previous coverage), other prior news coverage on the topic (from enough sources not to fall into a bias trap on the research), a report issued by a public or non-profit agency, etc. Lots of ways to go ([some resources here](#), too). Be smart about sources you use that help you understand the story better for your analysis. A *minimum of three outside sources* required (above and beyond the three versions of the story you chose). One of those can be the 'How to detect' booklet. And remember, journalists try to [seek the truth and report it](#)--not our personal truth, but verifiable, fact-based truth.

### Resources for completing this assignment:

The '*How to detect media bias and propaganda*' book gives dozens of helpful examples. Consider ordering it through the Critical Thinking Foundation's [website](#), the price [increased](#), alas; downloadable pdf removed.

### Sources for news analysis

There are many 'weblogs' or sites that analyze, critique, and/or fact-check the day's news. You can find a small slice [here](#). These will give you ideas about various angles taken in stories (do acknowledge bias).

### Watchdog sites and other possible resources:

These sites keep an eye on news outlets and coverage they suspect of bias (a few examples):

- [FAIR](#) (fairness and accuracy in reporting)
- [Mediaite](#) (news on the news)
- [Columbia Journalism Review](#) (their takes on coverage)
- [PRWatch](#) covers the PR industry and media spin (one of their sites, [Sourcewatch](#), is good for investigating various organizations and agencies). Use to look up information on source credibility.
- [Politifact](#). Fact-checking from the [Poynter Institute](#).
- The [Course Resources](#) page will provide you with some ideas

Even fact checkers could have subtle biases, though. Remember—sometimes 'left-right' controversies are just distractions—there may be other biases at work. You should keep that in mind as you go through them, lest you get caught up in the same rhetoric we cover extensively. Also, you can get more resources from the course site's [resources page](#).

You will produce a report, covering a news story from three different sources and three different points on that political spectrum. It should be 5-7 pages in length, double-spaced—plus a short conclusion. Here's how points will be distributed:

### Spin journal requirements, points

Requirement	description	pts
Story/article choice	Choose from each 'group,' a story of political importance (choose wisely, mistakes here cost down below—ask if you're uncertain)	10
Summary/analysis	Summarize the story and use the tools provided to analyze each version of it; <i>support your conclusions with evidence from the articles</i>	40
Writing, citing sources	<b>full citations</b> , not URLs (each missing cite = 1 point)	10
Story research	Use credible source material: include outside material, content to do research on story topic, watchdog sites, and the ' <b>How to detect bias</b> ' book	40
<b>Total points</b>		<b>100</b>

## Good advice:

- *Choice*—your choice of a story and articles is important. You'll want to find three sources that report on the *same event or issue*, preferably *on the same day*, and stick to *stories of political importance*. So a big mistake would be to choose a story where you're not likely to find any differences—for instance where the political stakes may be low, or where the public simply yawns (e.g., an overthrow of the government in Thailand, or the plight of the Rohingya in Myanmar and Bangladesh, or famine and war in Yemen), won't work well for this assignment. They are truly important stories, but American outlets won't put much effort into covering them because so few Americans follow news that doesn't directly involve Americans. And ... *No historical stories*—they must be happening during the term. Make sure you are not using the same story appearing on two different sites (e.g., from the same newswire, like Associated Press, or Reuters).
- *Discussion*—you need to exhibit some insight (imagine ...). What did you learn? What are the meaningful differences of the story versions you chose? Did the authors seek out credible sources, or go with political hacks repeating talking points? Start with a brief summary, and move into analysis of the articles, the points made, research you've done on the topic, the authors, sources, word length, context, etc. Use what we've learned in class, and the *'How to detect media bias & propaganda'* handbook to identify techniques of deception or persuasion being used, and to try to explain the differences between each source's coverage of the story. This is where choice of sources and story are key. Don't get so caught up in the story that you forget the point—to analyze its *coverage*. Yes, summarize it, show you understood it, but the analysis has to do with how the three sources *covered* it (presumably, differently). Be wary of pushing your own agenda on a story--it will shine through, and not necessarily in a way that highlights insights gleaned from class.
- *Documentation*—full citations at the end of the assignment. **Original sources** (some news sites pull stories from other sources—but the cite should include the original source)! Documentation can also include *location* (front page, home page, living section, etc.), word length (if you copy and paste into word, you can go to the 'tools' menu and do a *word count*), what *sources are used* in the article (are they identified, who are the individuals, are they experts, do they work for think tanks, industry, academe, etc.?). Then you may want to check out a source on Google, or [sourcewatch](#), to see if an 'expert' sold to the news audience as independent might in fact have a conflict of interest (keep that '[tools](#)' page in mind). Also—*show, don't just tell*—don't make statements without supporting them with evidence or quotes from your articles. You must show me you read them, absorbed them, analyzed the differences, and can point them out in a logical fashion that exhibits what you've learned from the *'How to detect media bias & propaganda'* book and the class.
- *Research/detective work*—You need to do research on the topic, on sources quoted in the article, organizations mentioned in the article, the author, etc. If there is any scientific component, you should present that perspective, and obviously any efforts to cloud the scientific issues or the credibility of sources. The resources page has lots of possibilities in terms of looking things up, whether it be a reporter and his/her credentials, website and who funds it, an 'expert' and his/her credentials among peers, history behind the topic you've chosen, etc. Then you may want to check out a source on Google, or [sourcewatch](#) (an excellent source), to see if any of the 'principals' in the article have any ideological baggage or commercial interests, unbeknownst to the audience.
- *Following the 'rules'*—I expect that you'll follow the structure I've laid out for this. You simply cannot do this assignment well in less than five pages, double-spaced. Nor can you do this well if you start in the last week of the course. We will have by this time placed great emphasis on the *credibility of outside sources* used (one always strives for 'unimpeachable,' but the key is to disclose any implicit biases), so you will want to do the same in your paper. This is the assignment that demonstrates you pulled together key elements of the class and applied them to a real-world setting, and showed you learned something of value in the process that you were able to communicate. Grades will be earned accordingly.

- *Insight gleaned*—Your last paragraph should be a reflection of what you learned from this exercise. If you enjoyed it great, hated it, I’m sorry, but what did you get out of it? Be thoughtful.

100 pts possible, Due Sept 1

## Reflection assignment

### Conspiracy theories

You will be asked to identify and research a conspiracy theory (the Snopes.com [archives section](#) provides many options, and they even have a special '[collection](#)' of coronavirus conspiracisms). You’ll need to investigate and understand:

1. The ‘theory’ – a brief description
2. The origins
3. What principles of persuasion were used to make the theory compelling, ‘truthy’
4. How the theory spreads—among what groups, what social or other kinds of mass media, what individuals (e.g., influential talk show hosts, presidents), how it may have changed as it spread, etc.
5. Describe the process you used to attempt to disprove or debunk the theory.
6. How the untruthful elements of the theory could be addressed (in other words, how to keep bogus information from spreading). This is not simple, it could involve public education and awareness, it could involve more watchdog functions among social media sites, etc.
7. So basically, what is it, how did it originate, how did it spread (and how did propaganda aid its spread), what kinds of media or individuals aided in that process, how (un)truthful it is, and how to reach fervent believers that it’s not *real theory*—which is governed by testing of ideas, logical coherence, and verifiable supporting evidence from credible sources—it’s *conspiracy*.

### The Points

Criterion	Description	For ‘A’ work	pts
The conspiracy theory	Description, origins, logic	Well-sourced, with detail	10
Why is the theory persuasive?	Apply persuasion principles from class, why do people believe the theory?	Tie the principles directly to conspiracy’s argument	10
De-bunking process	Examine the theory’s logic and evidence	Identify gaps, fallacies	10
Responding to theory’s adherents	How to get people who believe the theory to question their beliefs?	Is there a treatment for the ‘rationalization trap’?	10
Writing, source material	At least five <i>credible</i> sources (full citations), well-written, proofread, organized	Credibility in debunking, and in explaining theory	10
<b>Totals</b>			<b>50</b>

### Context

There’s a lot of talk about conspiracy theories in the last few years (and of course, *that’s exactly what they want you to think!*). [Conspiracy theories](#) are sort of like fake news, except they tend to spread more pervasively, and often involve an overarching narrative about the unsavory forces we’ve always suspected operate in the shadows. And their converts may be deeply committed to them. Personalities like [Alex Jones](#), once on the fringe, attracted a large following before claiming any harm caused by his untethered conspiracies was because he suffered from ‘[psychosis](#)’. President Trump has [exploited](#) conspiracy theories (the most infamous being the so-called ‘[birther movement](#)’, which helped Trump’s appeal among the political right wing), including a rash of them [about the FBI](#). And his nomination for Director of National Intelligence [follows a spate of conspiracy sites](#) (note: *that doesn’t make them legitimate*). Belief in a [flat](#)

[earth](#) has waxed in recent years. Some conspiracies have sustained their persuasiveness over decades, such as JFK's assassination, 9/11 attacks as an inside job, various incarnations of the so-called 'Deep State,' etc. There's the current [deep state](#). [Vaccines causing autism](#). [Pizzagate](#). And really, who doesn't want to believe that The Man is at the root of most of our social problems (when we all know it's [Alex Jones](#))??

## Purpose

To learn how conspiracy theories are created, how they spread, how they influence, persuade, and how they insert themselves into political debates and dialogue.

*Here's what you'll need to do:*

1. Choose *one conspiracy* theory to research (*one that is recent or current*, but you can make the case to me for something more historical—*only if you let me know in advance*)
2. *Knowledge base*. Describe what is known about it. In other words, summarize the narrative and discuss how the theory is spread (talk radio/TV, social media, political events, etc.). Be specific.
3. *Address the logic and supporting evidence* of the theory. In doing so, you should be looking for use of propaganda and persuasion principles, techniques that 'involve' people (get them committed to it). *What makes the theory compelling enough to spread?* Illustrate their use, in so doing demonstrating your understanding of how conspiracy theories seek to persuade and gain believers. An incomplete list of persuasion principles you might consider and have read about is available in [lecture material](#) on the site, and will prove invaluable. Use *credible sources*).
4. Discuss ways to combat the theory's unsupportable elements:
  1. Evaluating *source credibility*
  2. Does the story seek out multiple sources and perspectives? What's left out?
  3. Does the story *make sense*—how do conspiracists make it seem believable? What efforts are made to confirm and verify claims and evidence?
  4. Are propaganda techniques important to the story's credibility or attraction?
  5. Are there images used, any way to verify their truthfulness?
5. *Conclusion*—a concluding paragraph laying out what you learned from this process. I would hope this would include your conclusion about the truthfulness of the theory, as well as the potential consequences of its spread and belief.

## The paper

Should be: 5-6 pages in length, double-spaced; include the elements above; and be submitted by midnight in Canvas, July 27. I will evaluate students' work based on adherence to the assignment guidelines, your use of quality, credible source material, and your ability to demonstrate a knowledge of the theory and principles of persuasion--in other words, can you apply principles and concepts from class to a conspiracy theory and show what you learned? Use [APA citation style](#), just be consistent and include citations in the text in some form like this: (Grigsby 2020).

## Required reading:

- Russell Muirhead and Nancy Rosenblum. 2019. *A Lot of People are Saying*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Chapter 1, 'Conspiracy without the Theory.' In [Canvas](#).

## Optional reading:

(THE FOLLOWING SOURCES ARE PROVIDED TO GET YOU THINKING ABOUT CONSPIRACISM AND HOW IT DEVELOPS AND PERSUADES)

- [Know your meme](#) (good for reading about how memes spread)
- Trump's birther movement six-week '[tour](#)'
- Jason Shepherd. 2020. [Misinformation goes viral](#). Apr 13, *Medium.com*.

- Maggie Koerth-Baker. 2013. [Why rational people buy into conspiracy theories](#). May 21, *New York Magazine*.
- Elizabeth Kolbert. 2019. [Why facts don't change our minds](#). Feb 27, *New Yorker Magazine*.
- Russell Muirhead and Nancy Rosenblum. 2019. *A Lot of People are Saying*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Chapter 6, 'Who owns reality?' In [Canvas](#).

**For fun** (sort of--to fully appreciate, but if you watch, watch in this sequence):

1. Glenn Beck's Tree of Revolution ([part 1](#))
2. Jon Stewart on [Glenn Beck's appendix](#)

A-level work: *Clearly* demonstrated through your answers to the questions that you did the readings, followed the guidelines of the assignment, provided supporting evidence, did outside research, cited sources, and put some thought and intellectual effort into this. And be careful, occasionally a student will be taken in by a conspiracy theory, roundly debunked in available media. Which at the least justifies some class exposure to this novel genre of persuasion.

50 points possible, due July 27th

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## Participation—Discussion forums

This is the most important part of the course, worth 200 out of 500 possible points. This is where you show me you're reading, engaging in the material (readings, discussion, and online lecture material), and learning. Students need to participate in the discussion every week to gain points for that week. Here's what I'll be looking for:

1. At least one *substantial* posting on *each discussion thread* I begin (there will usually be 1-2 per week).
2. At least two substantial responses within each discussion thread to a post from someone else in class. By *substantial* I mean that you need to show me that you've been following the thread and have something thoughtful to say. Posts need to demonstrate you have done the readings and read the lecture material. This part of the grade is worth 10 points/week. This is a discussion forum, not a posting board. It happens week-to-week. Treat it as such and you will get more points, and more learning out of the class.
3. *Thoughtful postings*. This covers the *quality* of your postings. I'm looking for some evidence of thought on your part. This is worth 5 points per week. Opinion is fine, as long as you demonstrate how it is informed by the assigned material for the week. If I can't tell whether you've even read the material, you won't receive many of these points. Gratuitous posts ('ditto!') keep us going, I like to see people encourage each other, but they're more a public service and act of kindness and collegiality than a source of points.

There are several kinds of postings that can get you credit. You can pose a question for the group, and then try to answer it or explain why you asked it. You can provide other research or web resources you've found that shed light on a subject we've discussing. You can summarize a long discussion thread and try to distill it down to one or a few issues. You can reply to others' postings—either agreeing or disagreeing, the main thing is that you provide evidence and some logical argument to back up what you're saying. Unsupported statements won't get you a '5' for the quality of your postings for the week. Overall, there are 15 points possible each week for participation in discussion. Here are some basic guidelines:

1. *You need to post during the week the discussion is taking place*. This is part of the value of the online medium—everybody contributes, nobody gets to hide in the back of the class, everyone has a chance to shine. If you're going to miss a week, can write a reflection paper to make up points, demonstrating

that you've been through the readings, lecture material, and discussion board (2-3 pages). Generally we'll begin a new topic on Tuesdays, and run through the next Monday evening.

2. Follow basic online '*netiquette*.' No flaming, no personal attacks—we're discussing ideas in this course, and mutual respect is a prerequisite. We certainly don't have to agree—but we can disagree in a civil way, and use persuasion, logic and evidence to support our own ideas. This is especially important in terms of your own professional growth—learning how to disagree with tact and grace. This is where we discuss, debate and exchange *ideas*. I'll insist on civility, and will deal with personal attacks privately, but firmly, removing posts and then students from discussion boards if need be. We're here to encourage everyone to participate, but your participation shouldn't discourage others from doing so.
3. If you're writing a long post, use paragraphs to break up points and (**warning!**), to be safe, you might write it in a word document (and save as you go), and then paste it into Canvas—this will help you avoid the angst of losing a post you've spent considerable time composing.

There are several kinds of postings that can gain you credit:

- You can pose a question for the group, then try to answer it or explain why you asked it.
- Provide other research or web resources you've found that shed light on a subject we've discussing.
- You can summarize a long discussion thread and try to distill it down to one or a few issues.
- You can reply to others' postings—either agreeing or disagreeing, the main thing is that you provide evidence and some logical argument to back up what you're saying.
- The key is, show me more than your ungrounded opinion—simply expressing what you think without reference to the reading material isn't learning, or at least not the kind that will merit a passing grade.

Discussion points will be based on the following criteria:

- *Your ability to reflect on the questions or the readings/lecture material.* To receive full credit, you need to show you've not only been through the readings, but understood them and used them as evidence to support your views. I can't emphasize this point enough. Some degree of chatter about a topic is fine, but not at the expense of what you need to do in the discussion boards.
- *Your grasp of the topic.* You don't necessarily need to show mastery of each reading or topic. After all, you're here to learn. But you do need to show effort, and you do need to ask questions where you're unclear to clarify your understanding and show me you're putting effort into understanding the material. Again, if you try to do this without referring to the readings or lecture material, I won't even know if you've read it. So 'I don't get it' won't garner you many points (you can expand and discuss what you *do* get, for starters).
- *Your ability to communicate your ideas.* I expect good, organized writing. Complete sentences, spell-checked, and all that. If you're citing something, do it correctly, give us a web page. 'I agree' is okay, as long as it's followed by a well-reasoned explanation of why you agree with a previous post (again, citing evidence). No textspeak.
- *Bringing in outside materials.* I encourage this, but I also want you to have evaluated these materials. If it's the first .com site you found on Google, I'll let you know if I think it's a suspect source.

**A note on absence from class:** If you're going to be out of town or away from the Web for any substantial period of time, please let me know. If you're not posting and haven't said anything to me, I'll just assume you're not participating in the discussion board for that week (and that's 15 points per week plus five possible for writing), so if, for example, you missed three weeks entirely, your chances of pulling an 'A' in the course would be very slim—that's 60 pts out of a possible 500 for the term).

**Making up discussion.** Obviously you can't make a habit of this—it's discussion, after all. But you can make up two if need be with reflection papers, following the basic guidelines below, demonstrating you have completed readings, lecture material, and read the discussion board (see 'instructions' below for making up discussions).

Again, *150 points on this part of the course—15 pts per week.*

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## Writing in discussion forums

You will have to demonstrate college-level writing in both the website analysis paper and in discussion threads. There will be five points possible each week for writing in the discussion boards, meaning you need to proofread your posts, check for spelling errors, capitalize, all that basic grammar-related stuff, and make sure that they make sense, to get the full five points each week (there will be a separate grade item for this). A '5' means your posts are in order, make sense, thoughts are well-organized, and you've probably done some proofreading before hitting the 'submit' button. A '4' means you've probably done some proofreading, but there are still some pretty glaring errors. '3' means it's not really clear you've proofread the posts for the week. A '1' or '2' indicates your posts have so many errors in them that they're hard to follow, and in any case readers may not take them as seriously. I'm mainly doing this because writing is just so critical to finding work, communicating with prospective employers, and we all need to show some self-awareness about our writing. **Note:** This will show up as a separate grade for each week of the course. You'll see this as an assignment, but there's nothing to submit—it simply comes due the same page the discussion forums for the week are due.

*5 points possible per week, 50 points total for the term.*

## Making up a week's discussion (you're entitled to two of these)

Papers should be **no less than 3 pages, double-spaced** (11 or 12 pt font) in length. This is how I would like you to structure the reflection papers:

1. *What for you were the most important points* that you took from the readings, discussion and lecture material for the week? This is an exercise in abstract thinking—what is the 'big picture?' You should touch on each reading assignment, discuss any common threads between them, or differences. I want to see what you got out of the readings and the week's topic, and gauge your depth of understanding. I'm not looking for book reports here—do some summary, but your paper should be no more than 1/3 summary (and no less than 2/3 analysis).
2. *Demonstrate you read the discussion board.* I don't need a play-by-play blow of people's postings, I just want you to demonstrate you went through the postings, and got something out of the process. How did people respond to the material for the week? What was your take? Just keep in mind—take a stand, but **don't make points if you're not going to support them with evidence or logic.** And cite your sources.
3. *Standards.* This is making up for your having missed the discussion boards, so I expect the same amount of intellectual effort to go into the make-up. Good writing, use of complete sentences, paragraphs to change ideas, citing of authors' works at the end. You can submit it in Canvas.

## Extra credit opportunities

I will make available a course evaluation during finals week. This survey is important in helping me design the class and making changes. It's worth up to five points, depending on the percent of the class completing it. Your responses will be confidential, and I don't read any of this until after grades are submitted. This is not the University's evaluation—I hope you do that one, too, though (that one is available through Webster). I'll provide a link and you'll have a four-day window to complete the survey during finals week.

In addition, partly because of the potentially distressing nature of acquiring some of the knowledge about how our media system functions, as well as the current state of affairs with the COVID-19 pandemic—even in relative decline (as we deal with vaccine issues as well)—and the fact that it will still be in the news, I'm including a separate weekly discussion thread, 'ExCred.' You'll see the instructions in the thread—share a valuable resource related to the class that you checked out, and briefly describe what it is and why it's useful.

*15 extra credit points possible*

## Policies, expectations

### Academic integrity

The university's official position: Eastern Oregon University places a high value upon the integrity of its student scholars. Any student found guilty of academic misconduct (including, but not limited to, cheating, plagiarism, or theft of an examination or supplies) may be subject to having his or her grade reduced in the course in question, being placed on probation or suspended from the university, or being expelled from the university—or a combination of these (see section II of the 2002-03 Student Handbook, p. 32ff, and p. 41 ff). The Library links to general resources on plagiarism (from [WSU](#)), on [identifying and avoiding plagiarism](#), and on taking a [‘self-test’](#) (Pomona College). Use these if you're not clear about expectations.

*My interpretation:* Plagiarism is taking credit for work, ideas, papers, that are not yours. Universities make lots of literature available for a nominal fee, the bargain being that if you use the ideas of others, you'll credit them. So it isn't just wholesale theft, but as the above says, deception, misrepresentation, etc. Be sure you're familiar with what plagiarism is, and how to avoid it. If you're caught plagiarizing, you'll receive an 'F' on the assignment and possibly for the course. So if you're having problems in class, please come see me before you turn to the Web . . .

### Due dates and late assignments

Assignments are expected on the day they're due. Late assignments will be assessed a penalty. Please use Canvas to submit. If you have extenuating circumstances for being late, I'm always willing to listen. But in fairness to others who've managed to get them in on time, it'll have to be compelling.

*Note: Class schedule and assignments may be revised during the course of the term as needed.*

### Expectations

I will justify my discussion and reading material, assignments, etc., by showing their relevance to the overall course objectives. I will provide a friendly environment for discussion of ideas, provide a safe atmosphere for free thought, and be generally accessible, approachable, clear and precise about course expectations. With respect to coverage of content, I tend to emphasize depth over breadth—I would rather cover less points thoroughly, at a reasonable and engaging pace, than pledge strict allegiance to a course schedule.

In turn I expect students will do their own work, use or develop critical thinking skills and be able to express them on paper or in class discussion, 'speak up' when unclear or in disagreement on a concept, either exhibit college-level writing skills or seek help to improve them. I'll look for progress in developing abstract thinking skills and students' abilities to focus on the "big picture"—key concepts delivered in class, their relevance to course material, the real world, etc.—and to be able to identify these phenomena and formulate informed ideas about them in real-life settings. I'm looking for evidence of learning—that you're able to read books and articles, identify their value, figure out how they're relevant to the subject matter, and if you're having a difficult time, let me know so I can help. You should be able to express this learning in some form I can evaluate—answers on a quiz, papers, discussion posts, etc. Discussion in 'class' will focus on making strong arguments supported with logic and evidence. You're expected to show respect to everyone in the class, so don't let ownership of ideas get in the way of healthy debate. If you have questions about what's appropriate in class, follow the Golden Rule or ask.

**Students with disabilities**

Any student requiring assistance or accommodation from me in performing course-related work should make his/her needs known to me in a timely manner. If you have a documented disability or suspect that you have a learning problem, you are entitled to reasonable and appropriate accommodations. But you must work with the Disabilities Services [Office](mailto:dsabsvc@eou.edu) (dsabsvc@eou.edu). The office is located in Loso Hall 234 (phone 962-3235 or 962-3081).

**Class schedule**

Readings schedule in Canvas modules and on [course website](#).