

## **“Too Much Information? Social Media and the Threat to American Politics?”**

A Course for Macaulay Honors College, MHC 348

Fall 2019

Professor: Lee A. Daniels

### Course Description:

This course has 3 major purposes: The first is to help you gain a significant sense of the impact the telecommunications revolution of the years from 1865 to the present has had on American society and on Americans as individuals and as citizens of a nation-state. That — of course — is an impossible undertaking unless we realize we'll be largely *scanning* the developments of these years in pursuit of an overarching understanding of the telecommunications foundation of present-day American society. The second purpose is to delve deeply in the latter half of The Course into the social media revolution of the last two decades in order to understand what it has done and is doing to present-day American society. This is a question of both the psychological and evolutionary effect of social media on individual behavior and thought and on how American society is to be governed. Only a few years ago, the social media universe was considered in overwhelmingly positive terms. Much of that sunny view has changed drastically and, relatively speaking, suddenly. Constructing the proper framework to best consider today's developments and our future requires understanding that the dynamic of interaction between breathtaking technological advances in media—the means of communication—and politics and the larger society has been a constant of American society since the Civil War. That concept dictates the structure of the course.

The first half of the course will consider the interaction between advances in media and American society from the 1860s to the campaign and administration of President John F. Kennedy in order to understand that what might seem to us a slow, orderly and limited progression was considered differently by those who experienced it. The pace of change did begin to speed up during JFK's years; certain developments of that period can be said to have led directly to how and why Barack Obama is widely considered America's first (and I would say, *still only*) “social-media president.”

The second half of the course will consider some of the social-media-driven controversies and issues that have come to the forefront during the Obama and Trump presidencies in order to give you a framework for continuing beyond the course to consider whether American democracy itself can remain vibrant in the era of a Trump presidency and a, thus far, virtually unrestrained social media.

This course will involve a substantial amount of writing because, even in this age when visual and aural expression seem to be paramount, writing is still the best way for those starting out in life to learn how to marshal their thoughts and ideas in coherent fashion. Thus, the third purpose of this course is to develop and sharpen your writing skills. You are college students, part of the cohort in training to become educated men and women. The ability to write well—to think precisely and express one's self cogently—should be considered a hallmark of being highly educated. We will devote a part of each class from Session 2 onward to considering the quality of the writing of the previous class exercises and discussing techniques and concepts for building the breadth of one's

vocabulary and the skill to use it in effectively and gracefully in writing. Our writing will include papers of from 5 to 10 pages in length. It will also include two-page memo exercises and bullet-point memo exercises. All of these are meant to help you develop an eye and an ear, so to speak, for thinking well and writing well.

### Learning Outcomes:

1. Learn to Read: We will read various forms of the written word and you will learn to read as an expert reader
2. Learn to Write: You will learn or enhance your ability to write well—that is, to express your ideas persuasively. You will learn how to *play* with words seriously, gracefully, powerfully.
3. Learn to Think: You will learn to use words and sometimes disparate ideas to clarify in your mind exactly what it is you are thinking and want to say.
4. Learn to Discuss: Through developing expertise in thinking about and using words, you will become eager to discuss your ideas and the ideas of others.

### Materials/Readings:

All readings will be PDFs or links that will be on the course website.

### Assessment and Requirements:

(20%) Reading: You will demonstrate your reading through presentations. You are expected to present on readings at least 5 times a semester.

(70%) Writing: This portion of your grade will be writing assignments. By the end of the semester you will have produced 20 pages of polished journalistic writing. You will arrive at that final product through writing and revisions as well as writing exercises such as boiling down your papers into memos and bullet point lists. Each draft will be 10% (x3), memos and lists will be 5% each (x4) and the final product will count for 20% of your grade.

(10%) Participation and Community Building: You are expected to share your thoughts, ideas, struggles, confusion, insight, and more with the class and help to build a community of writers and thinkers.

### Policies:

[This section will include any required policy statements on plagiarism or disability]

### Schedule and Reading Assignments:

#### **SESSION 1: THE TELECOMMUNICATIONS REVOLUTION AND THE MAKING OF MODERN AMERICAN SOCIETY:**

Richard White's *The Republic for Which It Stands: The United States during Reconstruction and the Gilded Age, 1865 - 1896*.

Sven Beckert's *The Monied Metropolis: New York City and the Consolidation of the American Bourgeoisie, 1850 - 1896*.

Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*, and Chapter 2 — "Information Arbitrage" — of Thomas L. Friedman's 2000 book, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree: Understanding Globalization*.

### **Session 2: The Technological Revolution and the Making of Modern American Society:**

1. *New York Revisited*, by Henry James (with an Introduction by Lewis Lapham,) Introduction, (pp. 11-25) and Part One, (pp. 27-48)
2. [YouTube.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ysdfDAIH2o0) the PBS documentary, "American Experience: 1900, Part 1." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ysdfDAIH2o0>
3. *The Lexus and the Olive Tree: Understanding Globalization*, by Thomas L. Friedman, Forward, pp. ix-x; Opening Scene, pp. xi-xxiv; and Chapter 1, pp. 3-16.

### **Session 3 — World War One and the modernization of Propaganda**

1. Online Materials and Youtube videos
2. *History Is A Weapon*, by Edward Bernays, excerpts

### **Session 4. The 1930s: The dynamic of "aurality" and visuality — Motion Pictures, Radio, and FDR's Fireside Chats**

1. Excerpts on the New Deal and FDR's Fireside Chats online
2. *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood*; Introduction, pp. 1-9
3. *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies*, Mark C. Carnes, ed.: "The Last of the Mohicans," by Richard White, pp.82-85; "The Birth of A Nation," Leon F. Litwack, pp. 136-41; and "Freud," by Peter Gay, pp. 170-173

### **Session 5: The Atomic/Electronic Age: the 1950s and the maturation of television**

Readings include excerpts of books and articles on Television.

### **Session 6: The 1960s and 1970s: Television and America's Years of Crisis**

1. *The Making of the President 1960*, by Theodore H. White, Chapter 11. The Television Debates, pp. 317-34
2. Other online Material
3. *The Expanding Vista: America Television in the Kennedy Years*,  
A. Chapter 3: "A Ringside Seat on History, pp. 71-89  
C. Epilogue, "Ineffable Sadness, Indelible Images,"  
pp. 213-29

## **Session 7: CNN and the creation of the 24/7 News Environment**

1. *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West*, Patricia Nelson Limerick, Introduction, pp. 17-34, Chapter 10, pp. 322-50
2. *Making the News Popular: Mobilizing U.S. News Audiences*, Anthony M. Nadler , (2016), pp. tbd
3. *In-Your-Face Politics: The Consequences of Uncivil Media*,” Diana C. Mutz, Chapter 1, “What is In-Your-Face Politics?” pp. 1-16; Chapter 8: How Politics on Television Has Changed,” pp. 178-192; Chapter 9: “Making Politics Palatable: Political Television in an Era of Choice,” pp. 193-222
4. *Blur: How to Know What’s True in the Age of Information Overload*, Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, (2010), Chapter 1: “How to Know What to Believe Anymore,” pp. 1-12; Chapter 4: “Completeness: What is Here and What is Missing,” pp. 57-73; Chapter 6: “Evidence and the Journalism of Verification,” pp. 94-120; Epilogue: “The New Way of Knowing,” pp. 198-203; Afterword: pp. 205-210
5. *The News Media: What Everyone Needs to Know*,” C.W. Anderson , Leonard Downie Jr., and Michael Schudson, (2016), pp. 62-101; pp. 120-162. [[Note: This reading is presented in memo form. Thus, it is “easy reading” — and very worthwhile]]
6. “The President and the Press,” New York Times Magazine, <https://www.nytimes.com/1984/10/14/magazine/the-president-and-the-press.html>
7. “CNN launches,” <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/cnn-launches>
8. “The CNN Effect: The Search for a Communication Theory of International Relations,” <http://www.guillaumenicaise.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/the-cnn-effect.pdf>.

## **Session 8: Barack Obama: Social Media’s Political Pioneer**

1. *Future Shock*, Alvin Toffler, Introduction, pp. 1-7; Chapter 1, pp. 9-18; Chapter 15: pp. 325-42; Chapter 16: pp. 343-67
2. “Tea-Partied: President Obama’s Encounters with the Conservative-Industrial Complex ,” Julian E. Zelizer, pp. 11-29, in *The Presidency of Barack Obama*, Julian E. Zelizer, ed. (2018)
3. “Civic Ideals, Race and the Nation in the Age of Obama, Gary Gerstle, pp. 261-79, in *The Presidency of Barack Obama*, Julian E. Zelizer, ed.
4. “Fear of a Black President,” Ta-Nehisi Coates, September 2012, The Atlantic Magazine, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/09/fear-of-a-black-president/309064/>
5. “Here’s how the first president of the social media age has chosen to connect with Americans,” The Washington Post, 15-05-26, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/politics/wp/2015/05/26/heres-how-the-first-president-of-the-social-media-age-has-chosen-to-connect-with-americans/?utm\\_term=.e175f3fc5067](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/politics/wp/2015/05/26/heres-how-the-first-president-of-the-social-media-age-has-chosen-to-connect-with-americans/?utm_term=.e175f3fc5067)

6. "Is Social Media Changing How We Understand Political Engagement? An Analysis of Facebook and the 2008 Presidential Election," Juliet E. Carlisle and Robert C. Patton, *Political Research Quarterly*, Vol 66 (4) pp. 883-895
7. "Obama: Innovations that helped elect me now dividing the country," 18-01-12, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/barack-obama/obama-innovations-helped-me-now-dividing-country-n836976>

### **Session 9: Social Media's 'dark side:' Democracy Under Threat**

1. "The Internet was supposed to save democracy. I asked 4 tech optimists what went wrong," <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/6/8/17202918/internet-democracy-facebook-cambridge-analytica-alec-ross-clay-shirky-jeff-jarvis>
2. "The web was never a liberalising force. The clearest message wins," Jason Wilson, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/dec/19/the-web-was-never-a-liberalising-force-the-clearest-message-wins-and-the-far-right-has-it>
3. "The World is choking on digital pollution," Judy Estrin and Sam Gill, *Wash. Monthly*, January 2019 <https://washingtonmonthly.com/magazine/january-february-march-2019/the-world-is-choking-on-digital-pollution/>
4. Walt Mossberg, Veteran Technology Journalist Quits Facebook," *New York Times*, 18-12-18 <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/18/technology/walt-mossberg-quit-facebook.html>
5. "How you can help fight the information wars," *nyt*, Kara Swisher, 18-12-18, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/18/opinion/russia-disinformation-facebook.html>
6. "The Dark Secret at the Heart of AI," Will Knight, *MIT Technology Review*, <https://www.technologyreview.com/s/604087/the-dark-secret-at-the-heart-of-ai/>
7. "Social Media's Forever War," 18-12-17 <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/17/technology/social-media-russia-interference.html>
8. "Can Silicon Valley fight the cyber-war the White House won't," *Vanity Fair*, 18-08-24, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2018/08/can-silicon-valley-fight-the-cyber-war-the-white-house-wont>
- 9.

### **Session 10: The New Zealand Massacre: Hellscape On Social Media**

The Reading Assignment will include newspaper and magazine articles, and certainly, by the time we get this deep in the Course, passages from books on the New Zealand massacre and its ramifications for the social media universe.

### **Session 11: Trump and Twitter: Media Coverage of Trump**

1. "Deconstructing Trump's use of Twitter," [gallup.org](http://gallup.org), 18-05-16

2. “10 reasons why American trust in the media is at an all-time low,” Knight Foundation, [medium.com](https://medium.com), 18/01/16
3. Trump’s Lies and False Claims — I will supply the latest compilation as of August 2019 from *The Washington Post*
4. “Here’s what fact-checkers have learned in the year since Trump won,” poynter.org, 17/11/09
5. “43% of Republicans want to give Trump the power to shut down the media,” [thedailybeast.com](https://thedailybeast.com), 18/07/18
6. “Trump’s historic break with the White House press corps,” Columbia Journalism Review, 18/05/02
7. “Trump’s ludicrous attack on Big Tech,” Kara Swisher, [nytimes.org](https://nytimes.org), 18/08/29

### **Session 12: “Social Media Activism in the Age of Trump: The Parkland Student Movement**

1. “On social media, Parkland students subvert the news cycle,”[‘A generational culture of real-time social media empowered witnesses to redirect the national conversation.’] [salon.com](https://salon.com), 18-02-16
2. “What the Parkland students wanted the world to see — but the media didn’t,” [prospect.org](https://prospect.org) 18-02-18
3. “Tech-empowered Parkland students are changing the rules of mass-shooting coverage for the better,” Balto.Sun, 18-02-19
4. “Parkland students face new attack, this time from the political right on social media,” Miami Herald, 18-02-20
5. “How Parkland’s social media-savvy teens took back the Internet — and the gun-control debate,” [nbcnews.com](https://nbcnews.com), 18-02-22
6. “What Parkland tells us about teens and social media,” [daily.jstor.org](https://daily.jstor.org), 18-03-06
7. “PolitiFact’s Lie of the Year: Online smear machine tries to take down Parkland students,” [politifact.com](https://politifact.com), 18-12-11
8. “Emma Gonzalez’s powerful March for Our Lives speech in full — video,” the [guardian.com](https://guardian.com), 18/03/24
9. “What Emma Gonzalez said without words at the March for Our Lives rally,” [nytimes.com](https://nytimes.com), 18/03/24
10. “It’s official: March for Our Lives was one of the biggest youth protests since the Vietnam War,” [vox.com](https://vox.com), 18/03/26

### Session 13      Women in Tech

1. “Why the time for diversity in tech is now,” <https://bigthink.com//amway/why-the-tech-industry-needs-diversity>
2. “Why is Silicon Valley so awful for women?” [theatlantic.com](http://theatlantic.com), April 2017 issue
3. “Which Big Tech companies employ the most women” [forbes.com](http://forbes.com), 2018
4. “The Tech Industry’s gender problem isn’t just hurting women,” [futurism.com](http://futurism.com), 18/01/31
5. “The ‘Women in Tech’ problem is worse than you think” [money.conn.com](http://money.conn.com) 18/05/18
6. “Want to be CEO? Look to these 27 Tech companies started by women,” [skillcrush.com](http://skillcrush.com) 16/02/10
7. “The Tech World is still a man’s world,” [statistia.com](http://statistia.com) 18/03/08
8. “The world’s most powerful women in Tech 20-17: Still a minority, their clout is growing,” [forbes.com](http://forbes.com), 17/11/01

#### Session 14 - Session 15

**Cullen Murphy:** *Are We Rome Yet? The Fall of an Empire and the Fate of America,*

Prologue (pp. 1-24) and Epilogue, pp. 186-206

**Michiko Kakutani,** *The Death of Truth: Notes on Falsehood in the Age of Trump,* Introduction, pp. 11-20; Chapter 1: The Decline and Fall of Reason, pp. 21-42; Chapter 8, “The Firehose of Falsehood: Propaganda and Fake News, pp. 135-149; Epilogue, pp. 165-173