

**MCOM 431/550: PUBLIC OPINION & THE PRESS  
Fall 2013**

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Office Hours: Office Hours: M 9:30AM-11AM, 12:15pm-2:00pm; Wednesdays 12:15-2:00PM Friday 1 – 2:30 pm (Friday is by prior appointment only; available at other times by appointment).

Appointments outside these times can be scheduled in advance via email.

**Department Web Site:** <http://www.towson.edu/mccs/>

**COURSE INFORMATION**

The course meets on Monday and Wednesday from 2-3:15 PM in VB 213.

**Course Blog:** <http://mcom431publicopinion.blogspot.com/>

**Course Description from Towson University Catalog:**

**Course Description:** Journalistic aspects of public opinion and propaganda; the impact of mass communication media on the formation of public opinion. Techniques of polling and testing public opinion. (*Towson University Undergraduate Catalog, 2012-2013. Page 284.*)

**Course Outcomes:**

At the end of the course the student should:

- Be able to question the definition of news as presented by mainstream media
- Have an understanding of media approaches - or biases - to coverage
- Have an understanding of the media's agenda setting role, and an understanding of how stories are "framed" by the media
- Have developed some insight into the impact of the Internet on the spread of news and information
- Be able to discuss the meaning of the term "public opinion"
- Have a basic knowledge of methods used to measure public opinion
- Understand how public opinion is influenced by economic, political and social forces
- See how the media influence public opinion, and how public opinion influences the media - especially in the Internet age.

**Required Textbooks:**

Asher, H. (2012). *Polling and the Public: What every citizen should know* (8th ed.). Washington, DC: CQ Press.

Bennett, W.L. (2012). *News: The politics of illusion*. (9<sup>th</sup> ed). Glenview, IL: Pearson.

Clawson, R. A., & Oxley, Z. M. (2012). *Public Opinion: Democratic Ideals, Democratic Practice* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: CQ Press.

**Additional Readings (Required):**

Additional readings are posted on the course e-reserves site

(<http://towson.docutek.com/eres/coursepage.aspx?cid=841>). The link to this site is also posted on our course blackboard page. The due dates for these readings are listed on the course schedule (see end of syllabus).

**EXPECTATIONS**

Success is your choice! If you choose to be successful, I will be happy to help you. If you do not choose to be successful, I will honor your choice. EVERY STUDENT HAS THE POTENTIAL TO BE SUCCESSFUL.

Do the reading! You are expected to complete all reading assignments by the date listed on the course schedule. It is your responsibility to consult the course schedule for particular assignments and to stay current with all chapters and assigned articles. All of the assigned reading material is “fair game” for the exams even if we don’t directly discuss particular items in class. **During the course of the semester, there may be surprise extra credit quizzes to test recall of the additional readings.**

While we all love to multi-task, it is expected that you will refrain from using your cell phones (texting, calls, etc), Facebook, IM, email, etc. while in lecture and section. If you are experiencing an emergency and might need to step out and accept a call during class, etc. please let me know ahead of time. **Repeated cell phone offenses may impact your attendance/class participation score. The same thing is true for offenses involving laptops and tablets that are being used for activities other than taking notes.**

You are expected to contribute to discussions and be an active, engaged participant in the classroom. Participation and attendance make up 10% of the final grade. Be sure to maximize your contributions.

Part of being an engaged member of the classroom means respecting fellow classmates and their contributions to the discussion. In this class, I have a commitment

to creating a positive and respectful learning environment. I expect all of us to contribute to a safe, productive and fun classroom environment, valuing each of our strengths and differences. In class discussions, everyone should be courteous and respectful of others; no rude, sexist, racist, or other disrespectful comments or behavior will be acceptable.

Ask questions. If you don't understand something or would like further clarification, please ask questions during class discussion. Don't be afraid to speak up.

I am open to your feedback about how I can best meet your needs as a student. I will actively solicit your feedback a few times in the semester through evaluations, but also welcome your comments at other times.

**Each week's lecture slides will be made available by the Friday of the week before class. Students may bring printed copies to class for note-taking if they like. Posting will discontinue if attendance drops as a result of the posting or if there are attention problems in class (cell phones, non-class related laptop activity, etc.)**

### COURSE POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

#### Attendance

Attendance is expected. I will follow the university policy with respect to attendance (see *Towson University Undergraduate Catalog 2010-2011*, p. 18).

Absences may be excused if you: (1) have an illness or injury precluding you from attending class; (2) observe a religious holiday that prevents you from class attendance; (3) are required to participate in a university activity by a recognized authority; or (4) experience a compelling, verifiable emergency beyond your control.

If you anticipate an absence in advance, you must contact me by e-mail **at least two weeks in advance** to let me know you will be absent during a class session. In the case of an emergency, **you must notify me via email within 24 hours after the absence**. Excused absences will be granted only when the reason for the absence is documented in writing. Supporting documents are required (doctor's notes, etc.). **All excuse notes must be turned in no later than 1 week after the absence(s). I will not accept notes turned in weeks after the absence(s) or at the end of the semester.** Other absences (funerals, weddings, etc.) will be addressed on a case-by-case basis. **You are responsible for obtaining lecture notes and announcements presented in the class session you missed. I will not provide notes for missed lectures or sections.**

**Two (2)** unexcused absences are allowed. Please use those wisely. You will **lose 2 points** for each absence you have over the limit.

**The exam dates are set and fixed at the beginning of the semester. Alternate arrangements will only be made for those with an excused absence (see list above). I will not accommodate those who have travel plans or other non-excusable schedule constraints. Since you are being given the exam dates at the start of the semester, you will need to adjust your other plans accordingly.**

Late arrivals and early departures are not allowed. Unless prior acceptable arrangements have been made with me, **2 “late and/or early departures” will count as one unexcused absence.**

#### Contacting Me/Office Hours

Email ([abecker@towson.edu](mailto:abecker@towson.edu)) is the best way to reach me. You can usually expect a response within 24 hours. Please be patient if you email me on a weekend or when I might be traveling or if you email after business hours (i.e., in the evening). **Please remember that you are emailing a professor and should treat this type of communication differently than an email or text message to a friend.**

I have tried to schedule my office hours at times that should work well with your schedules and the timing of assignments for the course. If you make an appointment to see me during Friday office hours for example, I expect that means you will show up on time and be prepared to discuss course material. If for some reason you can't make your appointment, I ask that you email me **at least 24 hours before the appointment to cancel.** I am available by appointment outside office hours. Please email me with your request directly. **If you make appointments and then do not show up, please don't be surprised if this is reflected in your class participation/attendance grade.**

#### Contacting You

I plan to contact you via email using your towson.edu account. I understand that many of you may use other email accounts/forwarding services. You are still responsible for checking your Towson email address. I will not keep track of personal emails, etc.

#### Late Work

**Late work will not be accepted.** Work missed for a known, excused absence must be turned in prior to the absence in order to receive credit.

#### Missed Exams

If you are unable to take an exam, you must notify me at least 24 hours ahead of time. A make-up exam will only be administered given accompanying legitimate written documentation regarding the absence or conflict (see University policy on what qualifies as an excused absence). Otherwise, students who miss an exam and do not make

alternate arrangements ahead of time will receive a zero.

### Academic Honesty/Plagiarism

Plagiarism is using other people's work and ideas without giving them credit. Cheating or plagiarism of any kind may result in one of the following consequences, an F on the assignment, and/or a grade of "F" for the course. This applies to work on all individual assignments including quizzes, and papers. If you are unsure of what constitutes academic dishonesty, please read the *Towson University Undergraduate Catalog*. The departmental policy on plagiarism and cheating can be found online here:

<http://www.towson.edu/mccs/docs/PlagiarismMemo.pdf>. You can also consult the university policy online at:

<http://www.towson.edu/provost/resources/studentacademic.asp>

### Sexual Harassment

The University specifically prohibits sexual harassment in any form. Please consult the university's policies on this issue.

### A Word on Liability

In all assignments, students must comply with all laws and the legal rights of others (e.g., copyright, obscenity, privacy and defamation) and with all Towson University policies (e.g., academic dishonesty). Towson University is not liable or responsible for the content of any student assignments, regardless of where they are posted.

### Civility

Students are also responsible for complying with the COFAC Civility Code. The policy can be found online here: <http://www.towson.edu/mccs/docs/CivilityCode.pdf>

### TU Weapons Policy

Weapons of any kind are forbidden on Towson University's campus. For additional information go to: <http://inside.towson.edu/generalcampus/tupolicies/documents/06-01.11%20weapons%20Prohibited.pdf>

### Students with Disabilities

This course is in compliance with Towson University policies for students with disabilities. Students with disabilities are encouraged to register with Disability Support Services (DSS) 7720 York Road, Suite 232, 410/704-2638 (Voice or TDD)

<http://www.towson.edu/dss/index.asp>. Students who suspect that they have a disability but do not have documentation are encouraged to contact DSS for advice on how to

obtain appropriate evaluation. A memo from DSS authorizing your accommodation is needed before any accommodation can be made.

### The Syllabus

This course syllabus is a contract. I will uphold my end and I expect you to do the same. I reserve the right to make minor scheduling changes as the semester unfolds.

### **ASSIGNMENTS**

	Percentage	Points
Exam 1	20%	40
Exam 2	20%	40
Paper 1: Media Analysis	10%	20
Paper 2: Polling Project	15%	30
Paper 3: Public Opinion Strategy	20%	40
Presentation	5%	10
Class Participation & Attendance	10%	20
<b>TOTAL:</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>200</b>

### Two Exams (40%, 20 points each)

Both exams will feature short answer and objective (e.g., multiple choice, true false, etc.) questions about the material covered in lecture and the course readings.

- Exam 1 will take place on **Wednesday, October 16th** and will cover material from Weeks 1-7 of the course
- Exam 2 will take place on **Monday, December 2<sup>nd</sup>** and will cover material from weeks 8-14 of the course

### Paper 1: Media Analysis (10%, 20 points)

Applying the concepts from our first unit on media analysis, you will write a 3 page paper (~1000 words) discussing the application of at least 2 key themes from the Bennett chapters (e.g., gatekeeping, indexing, agenda-setting, framing, etc.) to one of a series of political issues or breaking news stories (you will be provided with a list of choices). A detailed assignment sheet and rubric will be provided later in the semester.

Paper 1: Media Analysis will be due on **Monday, October 7th by 2pm on Blackboard.**

Paper 2: Polling Project (15%, 30 points)

Applying the concepts from our second unit on polling, you will begin by designing a 15 question survey or poll about media habits, views on the state and quality of the mainstream media, and perceptions of the intersection between media and politics. You will conduct interviews with five individuals and then write a 750 word response paper (about 2.5-3 pages), reflecting on your experience writing and conducting the poll. You will also apply course concepts from the polling unit to discuss the importance, strengths and weaknesses, and validity of polling as a way of measuring public opinion. A detailed assignment sheet and rubric will be provided later in the semester.

Paper 2: Polling Project will be due on **Monday, November 11th by 2pm** on Blackboard. The response paper and final poll will be uploaded prior to class. The five completed interviews will be handed in at the start of class on Monday, November 11<sup>th</sup>. More details to follow.

Paper 3: Public Opinion Project (20%, 40 points)

Applying concepts from our third unit on public opinion and other areas explored throughout the course, **working with a partner**, you are to write a public opinion strategy memo advising either: a) a candidate running for national office (in this case potential 2016 presidential contenders) or b) an advocacy organization looking to promote discussion of their issue during the next presidential election cycle (e.g., Planned Parenthood and reproductive rights, Human Rights Campaign and marriage equality, NRA and gun rights, etc.) on the best ways to try and influence public opinion to advance their goals (e.g., winning the primary or general election, passing legislation, advancing their cause, etc.). Your collaborative 5-7 page memo (approx. 1500 words) should explain potential media strategies, the use of polling as a research tool, and various factors that might influence public opinion (e.g., targeting specific demographic groups, appealing to value considerations, social network activity, etc.). You and your project partner should cite course readings and outside research to support the argument presented in your memo. A more detailed assignment sheet and rubric will be provided later in the semester. We will pick partners and brainstorm topics later in the semester. You will also be preparing a 5-min high impact presentation for the class that will be evaluated by the instructor and your peers (details under Presentation below). In the event that a team of 3 needs to be formed, the paper length will be adjusted upwards to 7-9 pages (2250 words). You will be given a class session to work together before the presentations.

You will be given the opportunity to complete a peer evaluation and provide detailed information about the contribution of each group member to the final project. These peer evaluations will be handed in during the exam period and will be considered during the calculation of final assignment grades.

Paper 3: Public Opinion Project will be due during the final exam period (online) scheduled for Wednesday, December 18<sup>th</sup> at 12:30pm.

#### Presentation (5%, 10 points)

During the final weeks of the course, you and your partner will prepare and present a high-impact 5 minute presentation sharing the highlights of your Public Opinion Project with the class. Imagine that your classmates and the instructor are the candidate's campaign leadership team or the executive board of your advocacy organization of choice. As a team of new communication strategists, you've been granted 5 minutes to make your case as to why we should follow your plan and hire you during this very competitive election cycle. You'll want to be impactful, clear, and grab our attention. Your presentations will be evaluated by the instructor and your peers. Both team members will need to participate equally in the presentation. In the event that a team of 3 needs to be formed, the presentation length will be adjusted to 7.5 minutes.

Presentation dates will be selected later in the semester and a detailed assignment sheet and grading rubric will be provided. You will be given the opportunity to provide detailed information about the contribution of each group member to the final presentation. See peer evaluation discussed above under Public Opinion Project assignment.

#### Class Participation & Attendance (10%, 20 points)

You can earn up to 20 points or 10% of your grade for participation and attendance. Your score will depend on your contributions to classroom discussion and attendance in lecture and section. It is therefore in your best interest to be an active classroom participant.

#### Extra Credit

During the course of the semester, I may offer opportunities to earn extra credit in the course. Sometimes I may ask a 1 pt. quiz question about one of the readings in class. Other opportunities may involve participating in a research study or in other campus activities. Any extra credit points earned will be added to your final course grade at the end of the semester.



**GRADING****Grading Calculations**

<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Letter Grade</b>	<b>Points</b>
93-100%	A	186-200
90-92%	A-	180-185
87-89%	B+	174-179
83-86%	B	166-173
80-82%	B-	160-165
77-79%	C+	154-159
70-76%	C	140-153
67-69%	D+	134-139
60-66%	D	120-133
Below 60%	F	Below 120

**Papers and Other Written Assignments:**An "A" paper:

1. Fully completes all parts of the assignment in a thoughtful manner.
2. Has an effective introduction and conclusion.
3. Includes a concise and clear thesis statement or topic sentence.
4. Provides support for arguments with adequate yet focused details.
5. Is well organized and free of grammatical and spelling errors.
6. Acknowledges and document sources.
7. Shows originality and creativity in completing the assignment.
8. Maintains a level of excellence throughout.

A "B" paper does all of the above (1-8) in a superior way, but without the level of originality or creativity of an A paper and/or has some minor errors or flaws.

A "C" paper does all of the above (1-8) in a satisfactory manner but includes more (or more serious) errors or flaws or is missing some of the above (1-8). Note: Rough drafts without additional work often resemble a C paper.

A "D" paper does a poor job with items 1-8 listed above and/or includes numerous errors or flaws.

An "F" paper is missing many of the above (1-8) and/or includes many serious and minor errors or flaws.

**Grading Policy:**

Students **earn the grades they deserve** based on the quality of the work completed; **students are not given grades.** It is the student's responsibility to keep track of their grades on blackboard and monitor their progress/status in the course. I will not calculate midterm grades during the course of the semester.

**In general, I do not change grades unless there is some sort of administrative error.**

Students are always welcome to come to office hours to discuss grades 24 hours after the grade is posted on blackboard. **I will not discuss grades or grade complaints/concerns over email.**

**[COURSE SCHEDULE FOLLOWS ON NEXT PAGE]**

**COURSE SCHEDULE**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Topic</b>	<b>Reading/Assignments</b>
<b>Week 1</b>		
W 8/28	<b>No Class – Dr. Becker at Conference</b>	Review syllabus and blackboard site
<b>Week 2</b>		
W 9/4	Introduction to Course, Review of Syllabus, and The News and Democracy	Bennett Ch 1
<b>Week 3</b>		
M 9/9	News & Information Biases	Bennett 2
W 9/11	Citizens & News	Bennett 3 Mutz (2004)
<b>Week 4</b>		
M 9/16	Politicians & Newsmaking	Bennett 4 Nisbet (2009)
W 9/18	Journalists & Reporting of the News Skype Guest	Bennett 5
<b>Week 5</b>		
M 9/23	Objectivity and Journalism in Practice/Guest	Bennett 6
W 9/25	Guest: Dr. Martha Kumar	
<b>Week 6</b>		
M 9/30	Political Economy of News and Business of Journalism	Bennett 7 Becker (2013)
W 10/2	Drawing Conclusions about the Media	Bennett 8 Young (2013)
<b>Week 7</b>		
M 10/7	Introduction to Polling	<b>Paper 1 Due</b> Asher 1 (skip appendix)
W 10/9	Non-attitudes & Sampling	Asher 2 & 4
<b>Week 8</b>		
M 10/14	<b>FILM</b>	
W 10/16	<b>EXAM 1</b>	

<b>Week 9</b>		
M 10/21	Question Wording & Collecting Data	Asher 3 & 5
W 10/23	GUEST SPEAKER	TBD
<b>Week 10</b>		
M 10/28	Public Opinion Exercise 1	
W 10/30	Media & Polls and Elections	Asher 6 & 7
<b>Week 11</b>		
M 11/4	Analyzing Polls/Polling in a Democracy	Asher 8 & 9
W 11/6	Public Opinion Exercise 2	
<b>Week 12</b>		
M 11/11	Public Opinion in a Democracy	<b>Paper 2 Due</b> Clawson & Oxley 1
W 11/13	Political Socialization & Age	Clawson & Oxley 2 Becker (2012)
<b>Week 13</b>		
M 11/18	Attitudes	Clawson & Oxley 4
W 11/20	Pluralistic Roots of Public Opinion	Clawson & Oxley 7
<b>Week 14</b>		
M 11/25	<b>FILM</b>	
W 11/27	<b>NO CLASS – THANKSGIVING BREAK</b>	
<b>Week 15</b>		
M 12/2	<b>Exam 2</b>	
W 12/4	Work Session: Group Presentations and Papers	
<b>Week 16</b>		
M 12/9	Presentations I	
W 12/11	Presentations II & Peer Evaluation of Presentations	
<b>EXAM SESSION: Paper 3 Due Online by 12:30 pm on Wednesday, December 18<sup>th</sup></b>		
<b>Peer Evaluations due in person at the start of the exam session</b>		