



# Public Issues in the Platform Era: Political Communication and Political Processes – MEJO 244 Prof. McGregor

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Tuesday & Thursdays | 9:30 – 10:45am | Carroll Hall, Hall of Fame Room (Room 128)

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Office Hours: By appointment – happy to schedule IRL or Zoom meetings whenever, and I am on campus most days of the week.

## **COURSE DESCRIPTION**

This course provides a detailed overview of political communication in the United States. Our task is to analyze the actors, technologies, and forms of communication that together constitute public debate. We focus closely on the processes of political communication, with an eye to how the state, press, political parties, civil society organizations, social movements, campaigns, and the public interact to shape public life and produce political culture. We consider the social and technological contexts that shape the production, distribution, and reception of political communication. At the same time, we define ‘political communication’ broadly to encompass the vast range of symbolic political expression, from political advertisements to protest events.

We will use events on the campaign trail and contests around policy issues as cases to analyze the role of communication in the democratic process and the workings of the central institutions that organize political debate. Throughout the semester we will analyze reporting, campaigns, and governance through the lens of the theories and concepts that we encounter in interdisciplinary readings that span the fields of communication, political science, and sociology. We will seek to evaluate and rework these theories through our close observation of electoral and governmental processes as they unfold.

## **OBJECTIVES**

- Understand the key actors in political communication processes;
- Understand the relationship between political systems, platforms, and political communication;
- Apply theories and concepts from class readings, discussions, and activities to real-world scenarios as political communications practitioners;
- Analyze, through case studies, controversies, coverage of, and contestation around key public issues;
- Examine the strategies that various political actors use to understand and shape public opinion;
- Workshop and understand communication strategies and solutions to understand various roles in public affairs and political communications strategy.



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## ATTENDANCE POLICY

**University Policy:** No right or privilege exists that permits a student to be absent from any class meetings, except for these University Approved Absences:

- Authorized University activities
- Disability/religious observance/pregnancy, as required by law and approved by [Accessibility Resources and Service](#) and/or the [Equal Opportunity and Compliance Office \(EOC\)](#)
- Significant health condition and/or personal/family emergency as approved by the Office of the [Dean of Students](#), [Gender Violence Service Coordinators](#), and/or the [Equal Opportunity and Compliance Office \(EOC\)](#).

**Class Policy:** Instructors may work with students to meet attendance needs that do not fall within University-approved absences. For situations when an absence is not University approved (e.g., a job interview or club activity), instructors determine their own approach to missed classes and make-up assessments and assignments. Please communicate with me early about potential absences, for which I aim to be accommodating. Please be aware that you are bound by the [Honor Code](#) when making a request for a University-approved absence. (source: <http://catalog.unc.edu/policies-procedures/attendance-grading-examination/>)

## REQUIRED MATERIALS:

Readings for the class outside of the main book will be made available through Canvas. There is one required textbook:

Klinger, U., Kreiss, D., and Mutsvairo, B. (2024). *Platforms, Power, and Politics: An Introduction to Political Communication in the Digital Age*. New York, NY: Polity Press.

## GRADING

### Grading scale

\*The University does not recognize an A+ or D-

A = 93-100%, A- = 90-92%, B+ = 87-89%, B = 83-86%, B- = 80-82%, C+ = 77-79%, C = 73-76%, C- = 70-72%, D+ = 67-69% D = 60-66%, F = 59% or below

### Grading rubric

Your overall grade for the course will be based on the following criteria:

Participation: 20%

Media consumption diary & reflection: 10%

Issue Coverage or Communications Analysis: 40%

Final media or campaign analysis paper: 30%

### Participation



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I value the diversity that each person brings to the University of North Carolina, which becomes even more important in courses such as this one that are premised on active discussion. Twenty percent of your final grade in this class comes from participation. Attendance is important. But, simply showing up to class is not enough – you must be actively involved in class meetings to earn full credit for participation. I expect you to come to class having already completed the readings and ready to discuss them. This includes coming to class with your own questions and observations about the readings and being ready to interact with the rest of the class. Additionally, I also expect you to be following political media – of whatever stripe – on a daily basis. Most days, we will begin the class with a discussion of ongoing and/or emerging contemporary political issues. You are required to participate in discussion, and whilst doing so, to be attentive, respectful, and engaged.

### Media Consumption Diary & Reflection (10%)

For two full days, keep track of your own media consumption. Everything from reading a newspaper (in print or online), TV or radio program (broadcast or streaming), social media (TikTok, Twitter/X, Instagram), YouTube, blogs, newsletters, news apps on your phones (including alerts), or anything else! Take notes and/or screenshots throughout each day. Using these notes, write up a two-page (double spaced, 1-inch margins, 12-point font) impression of how you get news, information, and entertainment. For example, what are your main sources of news? Why do you trust them (if you do), and which do you trust more than others? Do you go to news organizations' home pages / apps or do you mostly read articles via links from other places (and if so, does it matter who posted them)? A key question: What information do you think you might be missing, especially as it relates to political information? Does that matter to you? In general, I want you to explore your own use of media and identify your political communication diet.

### Issue Coverage or Communications Analysis (40%)

At the start of the semester, you will break into groups to analyze the coverage of or communications around a public issue of your choosing – one that you will track throughout the course. Your group will be responsible for making a short, biweekly 5-7 minute presentation on some aspects of the debate over this issue and facilitating class discussion. Presentations should provide a descriptive analysis of the issue, the various actors involved in the debate, and the frames they use to describe the issue, what is to be done about it, and why it is important to address. From the strategic communications perspective, we are particularly interested in your analysis of the strategy behind the communications approach that policymakers, elected officials, or advocacy organizations take and the platforms they adopt to get their messages out – from political news shows to social media. From the journalistic coverage perspective, we are interested in your analysis of how journalists cover these issues, through which type of outlets, their development over time, which sources they use (and don't use), the frames they adopt, and the evolution of this coverage over time.

The best presentations will provide examples of policy ideas, frames, and statements, strive to infer strategy, take account of a number of different media platforms, reveal the contexts within which political debate takes shape, show how media efforts affect discourse about the issue, and demonstrate an understanding of the readings in the class.



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This analysis can be on all matter of public issues. This can include focusing on local, state, regional, national, or even global policy-making contexts or media – or all of the above. It can include focusing on formal policy-making contexts, or the efforts of social movements to set the public agenda. In short, I am flexible about your approach and focus and encourage you to choose issues, media, and organizations to focus on in which your group is most interested.

### Final media or campaign analysis paper (30%)

For your final analysis in the class, you will work alone to analyze a single media outlet or a single campaign. You will write a seven- to nine-page paper based on one month of analysis of said media outlet or campaign. You will choose a source to monitor, discuss your in-progress analysis during class at various points towards the latter half of the semester, and finally, analyze this coverage in a paper. We will discuss this in detail later in the semester, and a detailed assignment sheet will be provided to you in advance of beginning analysis. During our scheduled final exam time, you will present your final analysis to the class and turn in your final paper.

### **IN CLASS**

On top of the assigned readings for the course, you should be paying attention to news, especially political news! Subscribe to various digital media feeds of the *New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Politico*, *Campaigns & Elections*, *Axios*, and various podcasts, newsletters, etc. At the beginning of each class, you are STRONGLY encouraged to introduce and discuss news items you have read/watched/listened to and share your perspectives on how this shapes political communication. These contributions will count towards your participation grade in the class.

### **COMMUNICATION!**

This is a class rooted in the practice of communication – so let's communicate! Use social media to communicate with one another or share ideas. Email is also important – and can be facilitated via Canvas. Collaborative work or helping one another can be fostered with Google Docs. I'll do my best to respond to emails within 24 hours (except for weekends).

### **EXTRA CREDIT READING GROUP**

If you are interested in reading more or want extra credit, there will be a reading group that will meet once a month throughout the semester for about an hour. Depending on what time we can figure out that works for folks, I will happily fuel our discussion with pizza. The books will provide a deeper dive into aspects of politics. They are:

Young, D.G. (2023). *How Media, Politics, and Identity Drive Our Appetite for Misinformation*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Van Duyn, E. (2021). *Democracy lives in darkness: How and why people keep their politics a secret*. Oxford University Press.

We'll work together to pick the other two!



# HUSSMAN SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM AND MEDIA

## WHO AM I?

I'm Dr. Shannon McGregor, an associate professor in our school. I joined the faculty at UNC's [Hussman School of Journalism and Media](#) in the summer of 2020. I am also a principal investigator with UNC's [Center for Information, Technology, and Public Life](#). Before coming to UNC, I was an assistant professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Utah. I have a PhD from the School of Journalism at the University of Texas, an MA from the College of Journalism and Communication at the University of Florida, and a BA in Journalism, Public Relations, and Political Science from Flagler College. I'm a former digital storyteller and editor, and I've been teaching in communication for over a decade. I also do research, which focuses mostly on political communication, social media, and journalism.

## HONOR CODE

[The Honor Code](#) forms a bond of trust among students, faculty, and administrators. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill operates under a system of self-governance, as students are responsible for governing themselves. As such, our University is transformed into a powerful community of inquiry and learning. The Honor Code embodies the ideals of academic honesty, integrity, and responsible citizenship, and governs the performance of all academic work a student conducts at the University. Acceptance of an offer of admission to Carolina presupposes a commitment to the principles embodied in our century-old tradition of honor and integrity.

I expect that each student will conduct themselves within the guidelines of the University honor system (<http://honor.unc.edu>). All academic work should be done with the high levels of honesty and integrity that this University demands. You are expected to produce your own work in this class. If you have any questions about your responsibility or your instructor's responsibility as a faculty member under the Honor Code, please see the course instructor, Senior Associate Dean Dr. Heidi Hennink-Kaminski, Senior Associate Dean Julie Dixon-Green, or you may speak with a representative of the Student Attorney Office or the Office of the Dean of Students.

## SEEKING HELP & ACCOMODATIONS

If you need individual assistance, it is your responsibility to meet with the instructor. If you are serious about wanting to improve your performance in the course, the time to seek help is as soon as you are aware of the problem – whether the problem is difficulty with course material, a learning difference, or an illness. I ask you to commit yourself to the course – attendance, participation, and effort. In any aspect of the course, if you need something from me – an extension, a clarification, a modification, etc. – I ask that you communicate with me about this with as much advance notice as possible. I do not need reasons or personal information – I trust that you want to be here, make the most of your college experience, and are working hard to do so.

## ACCESSIBILITY RESOURCE SERVICES

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill facilitates the implementation of reasonable accommodations, including resources and services, for students with disabilities, chronic medical conditions, a temporary disability, or pregnancy complications resulting in barriers to fully accessing University courses, programs and activities. Accommodations are determined through the Office of



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Accessibility Resources and Service (ARS) for individuals with documented qualifying disabilities in accordance with applicable state and federal laws. See the ARS Website for contact information: <https://ars.unc.edu> or email [ars@unc.edu](mailto:ars@unc.edu). (source: <https://ars.unc.edu/faculty-staff/syllabus-statement>)

## COUNSELING & PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES

CAPS is strongly committed to addressing the mental health needs of a diverse student body through timely access to consultation and connection to clinically appropriate services, whether for short or long-term needs. At the Hussman School, we are fortunate to have Carolyn Ebeling as the CAPS embedded counselor in-house. Carolyn offers a warm and non-judgmental space for undergraduate and graduate students to explore their thoughts and feelings. Email them at [cebeling@email.unc.edu](mailto:cebeling@email.unc.edu) to get connected. You may also explore resources at the CAPS website (<https://caps.unc.edu/>) or visit their facilities on the third floor of the Campus Health Services building for a walk-in evaluation to learn more. Also visit the Heels Care Network for additional mental-health and self-care resources: <https://care.unc.edu/>

Go to their website: <https://caps.unc.edu/> or visit their facilities on the third floor of the Campus Health Services building for a walk-in evaluation to learn more.

## TITLE IX

Any student who is impacted by discrimination, harassment, interpersonal (relationship) violence, sexual violence, sexual exploitation, or stalking is encouraged to seek resources on campus or in the community. Reports can be made online to the EOC at <https://eoc.unc.edu/report-an-incident/>. Please contact the University's Title IX Coordinator (Elizabeth Hall, interim – [titleixcoordinator@unc.edu](mailto:titleixcoordinator@unc.edu)), Report and Response Coordinators in the Equal Opportunity and Compliance Office ([reportandresponse@unc.edu](mailto:reportandresponse@unc.edu)), Counseling and Psychological Services (confidential), or the Gender Violence Services Coordinators ([gvsc@unc.edu](mailto:gvsc@unc.edu); confidential) to discuss your specific needs. Additional resources are available at [safe.unc.edu](https://safe.unc.edu).

## DIVERSITY

I strive to make this classroom an inclusive space for all students. Please let me know if there is anything I can do to improve; I appreciate any suggestions. More broadly, our school has adopted diversity and inclusion [mission and vision statements](#) with accompanying goals. These complement the University policy on [prohibiting harassment and discrimination](#). In summary, UNC is committed to providing an inclusive and welcoming environment for all members of our community and does not discriminate in offering access to its educational programs and activities on the basis of age, gender, race, color, national origin, religion, creed, disability, veteran's status, sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. The Dean of Students (Suite 1106, Student Academic Services Building, CB# 5100, 450 Ridge Road, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-5100 or [919] 966-4042) has been designated to handle inquiries regarding the University's nondiscrimination policies.



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## ACCREDITATION

The Hussman School of Journalism and Media's accrediting body outlines a number of values you should be aware of and competencies you should be able to demonstrate by the time you graduate from our program. Learn more about them here: <http://hussman.unc.edu/accreditation>. No single course could possibly give you all of these values and competencies; but collectively, our classes are designed to build your abilities in each of these areas. The values and competencies associated with this course include being able to:

- demonstrate an understanding of the multicultural history and role of professionals and institutions in shaping communications;
- demonstrate culturally proficient communication that empowers those traditionally disenfranchised in society, especially as grounded in race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and ability, domestically and globally, across communication and media contexts;
- demonstrate an understanding of gender, race ethnicity, sexual orientation and, as appropriate, other forms of diversity in domestic society in relation to mass communications;
- think critically, creatively, and independently;
- conduct research and evaluate information by methods appropriate to the communications professions in which they work;
- write correctly and clearly in forms and styles appropriate for the communications professions, audiences, and purposes they serve;
- apply tools and technologies appropriate for the communications professions in which they work.



**WEEKLY CLASS SCHEDULE**

\*Please see [UNC academic calendar](#) for the Spring 2024 schedule.

\*\*The professor reserves the right to make changes to the syllabus, including project due dates. I'll at time add additional current readings to the weekly schedule, which I'll post on Canvas. These changes will be announced as early as possible.

**Week 1 | January 11 – Introduction to the course and to each other**

Read: The syllabus

**Week 2 | January 16 & 18 – Political Communication in the Platform Era**

Read: *Platforms, Power, and Politics* – Chapter 1 & Wolfsfeld, G. (2022). *Making sense of media and politics: Five principles in political communication*. Routledge.

**Week 3 | January 23\* & 25 – Theories of Political Communication**

Read: *Platforms, Power, and Politics* – Chapter 2

\* NO class meeting on Tuesday, January 23<sup>rd</sup> – I'm presenting at the Knight Foundation's Informed Conference. Use the time to work on your Media Diary & Reflection

Due: Media Diary & Reflection – January 26<sup>th</sup>

**Week 4 | January 30 & February 1 – Platforms and their power**

Read: *Platforms, Power, and Politics* – Chapter 3 & Kreiss, D., & McGregor, S. C. (2018). Technology firms shape political communication: The work of Microsoft, Facebook, Twitter, and Google with campaigns during the 2016 US presidential cycle. *Political Communication*, 35(2), 155-177.

**Week 5 | February 6 & 8\* – Platforms in political and media systems**

Read: Kleis Nielsen, R., & Ganter, S. A. (2018). Dealing with digital intermediaries: A case study of the relations between publishers and platforms. *New media & society*, 20(4), 1600-1617. AND Molyneux, L., & McGregor, S. C. (2022). Legitimizing a platform: Evidence of journalists' role in transferring authority to Twitter. *Information, Communication & Society*, 25(11), 1577-1595.

\* NO class meeting on Thursday, February 8<sup>th</sup> – instead, attend the CITAP book talk at 3:30pm in the Freedom Forum

**Week 6 | February 13\* & 15 – Platforms, public spheres, and public opinion**

Read: *Platforms, Power, and Politics* – Chapter 4 & McGregor, S. C. (2019). Social media as public opinion: How journalists use social media to represent public opinion. *Journalism*, 20(8), 1070-1086. & Jackson, S. J., & Kreiss, D. (2023). Recentering power: conceptualizing counterpublics and defensive publics. *Communication Theory*.





\* NO class meeting on Tuesday, February 13<sup>th</sup> – university well-being day

## **Week 7 | February 20 & 22\* – Platforms and journalism**

Read: *Platforms, Power, and Politics* – Chapter 5 & Braun, J. A., & Eklund, J. L. (2019). Fake news, real money: Ad tech platforms, profit-driven hoaxes, and the business of journalism. *Digital Journalism*, 7(1), 1-21. & Peck, R. (2023). The Power of News Style and the Limits of Technology: Thinking Beyond the “Infocentric” Orientation of Disinformation Studies. *Bulletin of Information, Technology, and Public Life* <https://citap.pubpub.org/pub/vzttydqz>

\* NO class meeting on Thursday, February 22<sup>nd</sup>

## **Week 8 | February 27 & 29 – Politics and strategic communication**

Read: *Platforms, Power, and Politics* – Chapter 6 & Kreiss, D., Lawrence, R. G., & McGregor, S. C. (2018). In their own words: Political practitioner accounts of candidates, audiences, affordances, genres, and timing in strategic social media use. *Political communication*, 35(1), 8-31.

## **Week 9 | March 5 & 7 – Platforms, politics, and campaigning**

Read: *Platforms, Power, and Politics* – Chapter 7

## **Week 10 | March 12 & 14 – SPRING BREAK**

## **Week 11 | March 19 & 21 – Platforms and movements**

Read: *Platforms, Power, and Politics* – Chapter 8 & Brown, D. K., & Mourão, R. R. (2022). No reckoning for the right: How political ideology, protest tolerance and news consumption affect support Black Lives Matter protests. *Political Communication*, 39(6), 737-754. & Freelon, D., McIlwain, C., & Clark, M. (2018). Quantifying the power and consequences of social media protest. *new media & society*, 20(3), 990-1011.

## **Week 12 | March 26 & 28\* – Platform governance**

Read: *Platforms, Power, and Politics* – Chapter 9 & Zeng, J., & Kaye, D. B. V. (2022). From content moderation to visibility moderation: A case study of platform governance on TikTok. *Policy & Internet*, 14(1), 79-95.

\* NO class meeting on Thursday, March 28<sup>th</sup> – university well-being day

## **Week 13 | April 2 & 4 – Platforms, Misinformation, Disinformation, and Propaganda**

Read: *Platforms, Power, and Politics* – Chapter 10 & Wilson, T., & Starbird, K. (2020). Cross-platform disinformation campaigns: lessons learned and next steps. *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review*, 1(1). AND Kuo, R., & Marwick, A. (2021). Critical disinformation studies: History, power, and politics. *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review*, 2(4), 1-11.

## **Week 14 | April 9 & 11 – Platforms and populism, radicalism, and extremism**



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Read: *Platforms, Power, and Politics* – Chapter 10 & Marwick, A., Clancy, B., & Furl, K. (2022). Far-Right Online Radicalization: A Review of the Literature. *The Bulletin of Technology & Public Life*. <https://doi.org/10.21428/bfcb0bff.e9492a11> & Kreiss, D., & McGregor, S. C. (2023). A review and provocation: On polarization and platforms. *New Media & Society*.

### **Week 15 | April 16 & 18 – Platforms, politics, and entertainment**

Read: *Platforms, Power, and Politics* – Chapter 11 & Zeng, J., & Abidin, C. (2021). ‘# OkBoomer, time to meet the Zoomers’: Studying the memefication of intergenerational politics on TikTok. *Information, Communication & Society*, 24(16), 2459-2481. & Cervi, L., Tejedor, S., & Blesa, F. G. (2023). TikTok and Political Communication: The Latest Frontier of Politainment? A Case Study. *Media and Communication*, 11(2), 203-217.

### **Week 16 | April 23 & 25 – Platforms and protecting democracy**

Read: *Platforms, Power, and Politics* – Chapter 11 & (Costley White, K., Kreiss, D., McGregor, S.C., & Tromble, K. (2024). *Media and January 6<sup>th</sup>*. Oxford University Press. (read the Introduction & Epilogue)

### **Week 17 | April 30**

Read: Your own work! This will be a work day in preparation of your final paper and presentation.

### **Final Exam: TBD**