

## **MMJC 9200A Doing Democracy Right or Doing Right by Democracy: Ethics, Theory, and the Public Right to Know**

Instructor: Dr. Romaine Smith Fullerton

Office: 4139 FNB. Class: Mondays 1330—1620 in 3220 FNB

Office Hours: Wednesdays 1400-1500h or by appointment.

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### **About this course:**

Using theoretical frameworks borrowed from ethics, cultural studies, media studies, and political economy, this course explores concepts of democracy and responsibility in story-telling practices and products. Because both journalists and communicators must gather, evaluate, and disseminate information vital to a functioning democracy, it is essential that both groups understand what it means to operate ethically in the public sphere.

The central idea of this course is that we all consider together how information is proposed, created, remade, framed, mediated, abused, interpreted, and recast. If you, as an information handler, interpreter, and provider, are familiar with a variety of ways in which information can be formed and reformed, then you will be equipped to problem-solve as flexibly as one can be—whether the task is to inform, persuade, educate, and so on.

While this course examines different approaches to the ethics of story-telling in its broadest sense, it is your own judgement that you must learn to develop. Some of the material may help you, while some might puzzle you, or even tick you off, but all ought to be fodder for self-awareness and development. Setting aside time to consider the grey areas of practice now is essential because in the future, at the end of a workday, you'll need to be able to weigh allegiances, consider alternatives, and offer a reasoned explanation about your decisions to your employer and your public.

There aren't "right answers"; there are defensible, thoughtful, and sensitive approaches to story-telling.

### **Electronics Policy**

All the material from class will be made available on OWL so please turn off your phones and your laptops. You are entering a field where in some cases, like court reporting, electronic devices are forbidden. There is no time like the present to learn or relearn the value of cursive and hand-written notes; in fact, there is a lot of evidence that this is the best way to learn material.<sup>1</sup> And again, there aren't "right answers"; we will learn from civil, thoughtful, informed conversation. There is no need for detailed notes. If you need to send a text, check FB, or whatever, please leave the class to do so; consider it like a bathroom break and don't do your business in the classroom.

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<sup>1</sup> If you don't want to take my word for this, and you shouldn't, see this:

<https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2014/05/to-remember-a-lecture-better-take-notes-by-hand/361478/>; or this: <https://www.npr.org/2016/04/17/474525392/attention-students-put-your-laptops-away>; Or any number of other resources...

### **Required Text(s)**

*Covering Canadian Crime: What Journalists Should Know and the Public Should Question*. Eds. Chris Richardson & Romaine Smith Fullerton. Toronto: U of Toronto P. 2016.

Because we will use more than 10% of this book, and/or more than a single chapter, photocopying it would break copyright laws. You may, of course, borrow the book from the library and read it there, or pair up with a friend so you can share it.

Other articles, websites, podcasts, and so on will be shared on OWL.

**A note about your written work for this course:** All your work for me must be yours and yours alone. Please check Western's notes about plagiarism. This also means that you cannot submit or have submitted your work for any other course at this or any other institution. **The penalties for not complying are tough and will be enforced.**

Scholastic offences are taken seriously and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence, at the following Web site: [http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic\\_policies/appeals/scholastic\\_discipline\\_grad.pdf](http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/scholastic_discipline_grad.pdf)

### **Assignments (details below)**

Group research submission package (due one week prior to presentation)	20%
Individual close reading of one product or practice from the research package	25%
In-class questions (chosen at random, at least three times over term)	15%
Take-home final exam (assigned last day of class, due one week later)	30%
Professionalism	10%

### **Group Research Submission Package (Consists of Parts 1 & 2, due the week before I present the topic in class):**

You and your group will work on an area that correlates with one of the themes/topics outlined below. I expect you to function as my 'researchers' for that week. You do the background prep, consider what the time-slot should cover, what sorts of examples illustrate the central points, and then create some slides. Working from a selection of your material, and likely some of my own, I will organize and make the final in-class presentation. Please note, however, that you **MUST** be in class on the day your material is presented; it's your seminar. The penalty for being absent without acceptable accommodation is a zero on this assignment.

**Part 1 Group Assignment:** generate an annotated but manageable bibliography or reading list (I would say between 5 and 15 sources per group—scholarly and practical articles, book chapters, commentaries, podcasts, websites, etc.), and have a look at this critical material. In an annotated bibliography, along with the citation [and online link] is a paragraph describing what the central argument is for each submission, and whether/not you found it useful and why. If you find a source that you think is particularly well done and would be helpful to share with your classmates, please let me know and we can arrange to post it on OWL. Regardless of whether you share something with your classmates, I strongly encourage you to meet as a group and discuss what you have found, what your thoughts are about the critics you've read, what you think is covered well, and what is left out. Sharing, useful discussion, and evaluation of information are important skills for you to develop as professionals who will function often as part of a team—in a newsroom or in a communications office.

*You will turn in ONE GROUP-GENERATED ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY as part of your research package.*

**Part 2 Group Assignment:** In the second portion of the project (done before, after, or concurrently with the first part) I want you to locate some thought-provoking examples from existing media products and/or practices that illustrate the themes or ideas for the week. Offer a few words of context, and a way to access this primary material—i.e. collect some audio or video clips, textual excerpts or examples of photographs that I can show in class.

*As a group, please put all your clips, links, images, text samples, etc. into a Powerpoint presentation—use plain black background—so that I can incorporate your examples into my lecture for that week. Please put the Powerpoint examples on a thumb drive. These are part of your GROUP submission and will be turned in as part of your research package.*

**I will evaluate Parts 1 and 2 together and award a ‘pooled’ group mark that is worth 20% of your final grade.** A pooled grade means that everyone in the group does not necessarily receive the same number; for example, if I believe the research package is worth 80% and there are 3 members in the group, the pooled grade would be 240 marks. You may divide those marks up evenly amongst you; that is the default. But there is another option: One person could get 82, one 78 and the third 80. If one person took on a leadership role, or did a larger amount of the slogging than you yourself did, you may wish to reward that person, or those persons, by giving them some marks your own. I trust that you yourselves best know and understand how the work was accomplished, and I respect honesty. That is part of your professionalism component.

**Individual close reading:** Each of you will choose ONE of your media examples (from Part 2 of your group submission) and offer me your OWN close reading/analysis of this media example. You may use some of the theorists’ points you noted from the readings in your bibliography, or some of those offered in the class readings, BUT YOU DO NOT HAVE TO DO SO. You can rely on your own thoughts and opinions if you choose. The argument you put forth in this short analysis must be your own. Please do not paraphrase what critics have written because they ‘say it better.’ Cite people to show up their deficiencies, or to show where they have ‘got it wrong’ or not given quite enough information. In short, write me a thoughtful critique that is yours and yours alone. Please feel free to use first person, and say, “In my media example X, I see Y, and that makes me think of Z...” In terms of length, between 1500 and 2000 words should be adequate, per person, per example. I will call on you in class to outline what your perspective(s) is/are, and you may have to answer questions from me or from the class. This individual analysis will constitute 25% of your final grade.

The group research package, and your individual close reading are BOTH due in my office at noon, the week before the topic appears on the outline. The penalty for missing this deadline (for the research package and/or the individual close reading) is 5% per day.

**In-class questions about readings (which you will file via Dropbox, on OWL, to me by midnight the night before each class—Sunday)**

I expect you to read all assigned work before you come to class. This material will be posted on OWL or assigned from our text under each thematic week. From these background readings, you will generate two or three questions per article, and be prepared to pose these questions to the

class if called upon to do so. Your questions should make it clear what the context is, and demonstrate that you have read and are familiar with this material.

At the beginning of each class, I will announce the names of three or four people who will offer up their questions for that day. When called upon, you can ask the questions during or after the seminar—wherever they seem to fit. I will evaluate your questions on originality, clarity, and level of engagement. You will be asked to provide questions three or four times throughout the term. If you are absent when your name is randomly generated, or you are late to class, you forfeit a percentage of your grade.

The questions are worth 15% of your final grade, but I will keep these submissions, and give an overall mark at the end of the course.

**Final take-home exam** (open book, assigned last day of class, Dec. 10, and due at noon one week later, Dec. 17, via Dropbox)

I will generate two broad questions that encompass the material of the course. You will choose one, create a thoughtful thesis, and illustrate the argument with theoretical concepts and media products and/or practices drawn from class this term. Length: 2500 words max. Clarity of meaning, strength of argument, and of course, spelling and grammar, all count.

Take-home exam is worth 30 % of your final grade.

### **Professionalism**

To me, attitude means everything. While I likely will not remember the grade you earned in this course, I will always remember how you interacted with me and your peers, whether you were on time, prepared for discussion, polite, engaged, helpful, and so on. This is a professional program, and everything you “communicate” matters; keep this in mind when writing emails, asking questions, and so on.

Professionalism is worth 10% of your final grade.

**Weekly Themes and Topics**—readings assigned at least one week in advance.

Week 1: Sept. 10: intro day

Week 2: Sept. 17: Ethics, Storytelling, and Truth

Readings: Walter Fisher, “Narration as Human Communication”; Stanley Fish, “What Makes an Interpretation Acceptable?”; Patterson and Fullerton, “Credibility: The Best Currency in Journalism” and “Out v. About”. All posted on OWL.

Week 3: Sept. 24: Publics and the Public Sphere; Concepts for Journalists and Communicators

Readings: Jurgen Habermas, “The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedic Article;” Cherri Ketchum, “If a Radical Screams in the Forest, Will She Be Heard?” and Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere”. All posted on OWL.

Week 4: Oct. 1 Covering death, suicide and mental illness

Week 5: Oct. 8 Thanksgiving—no class

Week 6: Oct. 15 Covering kids and the elderly

Week 7: Oct. 22 Grad Break no class

Week 8: Oct. 29 Representations/coverage of women (business, politics, sports, general)

Week 9: Nov. 5 Covering sexual assault (Jhian Ghomeshi, #metoo, and more)

Week 10: Nov. 12 Covering gender and orientation

Week 10: Nov. 19 Representations/coverage of people of colour

Week 11: Nov. 26 Representations/coverage of Indigenous peoples

Week 12: Dec. 3 Covering crime—how we depict victims

Week 13: Dec. 10 Covering crime--how we depict perpetrators

Take home exam assigned in last class. Due December 17 via Dropbox.

Students who are in emotional/mental distress should refer to Western's "Health and Wellness"  
[http://www.uwo.ca/health/mental\\_wellbeing/index.html](http://www.uwo.ca/health/mental_wellbeing/index.html) for a complete list of options about how to obtain help.