

Media Coverage of Criminal Justice

Syllabus – Criminology, Law and Society 490, Section 005, Spring 2012

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"Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter."
-- Thomas Jefferson, 1787

What: A course that analyzes what the news media do, and why they do it, when it comes to covering crime and the courts. We'll look at The Big Cases, and how the media reported and handled them, such as the D.C. sniper case, the Duke lacrosse case, the Virginia Tech shootings, the Michael Jackson/Dr. Murray manslaughter trial and the Kobe Bryant rape case. We'll hear how people in the justice system deal with the media – the courts, the police, the participants, the victims. And we'll examine the impact the media have on people's lives once they enter the glare of a high-profile case, and how the media shape the public's understanding of criminal justice.

When: Wednesdays, 7:20 pm to 10 pm

Where: Robinson Hall A 111

Who: Me, a Metro reporter for The Washington Post since 1998 covering courts and cops in Fairfax County. Before that, I covered courts and cops in Kansas City for The Kansas City Star for 14 years. I have also written one true crime book, Rites of Burial, about a serial killer in Kansas City. Not for the squeamish.

We'll also have guest speakers from WJLA-TV 7, The Washington Post, the Fairfax County Circuit Court, the Fairfax County police, and more.

And you, a full and engaged participant in everything we do. Right?

Why: Because the news media not only provide the facts we use to understand the justice system, but they create the context and social constructions that drive viewers' and readers' perception of how the system works – or doesn't. We need to look at how those perceptions are created, and whether they accurately reflect how the police and courts really work. You'll learn how the news media do what they do, how the people in the justice system deal with the impact of the news media and how it all affects the general public.

How: Through the brilliant insights of myself and the guest speakers listed below, through the vital discussions that this class will have, both on Thursday nights and online, and with the help of our two fine textbooks:

Crime and the Media: Headlines vs. Reality, by Roslyn Muraskin and Shelly Feuer Domash (Pearson Prentice Hall)

Media, Crime and Criminal Justice: Images, Realities and Policies, by Ray Surette
(Thomson Wadsworth)

And one chapter from

Media Literacy by James W. Potter (Cage Publications) (available on e-Reserve through the library)

And don't forget: The Story of The Week: Our Blackboard page will have a new crime or courts story, either print or video, posted each week, with several questions available for you to answer. You will be required to post a response, analysis or opinion each week, of whatever length you choose, by Wednesday night. This will be a big part of your class participation grade.

Note: We will have two short quizzes, a midterm paper, and a final exam. The quizzes and final will be a combination of fact questions and short essay questions. Questions will come from the readings, the class discussions, and The Story of the Week. The midterm paper will be on a topic of your choosing, of 5 to 7 pages. I will provide the analysis points and research requirements separately. You must be prepared to discuss and defend your paper the following week.

Note 2: For the midterm paper, you are going to become a reporter, and research a topic we aren't reading much about. You will interview people and do independent research. Then write it on deadline – it's fun! More details soon. In a subsequent class, you will be required to stand and discuss your paper briefly, and respond to deep and penetrating questions from me about your work.

Note 3: Class topics and speakers below are subject to change as large cases or crucial issues emerge. Ideally we would try to attend a trial and analyze the media coverage of it, but there are no high-profile cases scheduled locally this semester.

Fourth and Final Note: Much of what will be on the quizzes and final exam will come from what goes on in class. You are going to have a series of guest speakers unlike any class you will ever take. So basically, you gotta come to class. It's worth it. And if you don't, you're going to be leaving big blank spaces on your quizzes. And those don't score well.

Grading:

The two quizzes: 25%

The midterm paper: 25%

The final exam: 25%

Class participation: 25%

Notes on grading criteria: You are expected to be on time, do the reading, and be prepared for each class. You must participate in the online Story of the Week discussion every week, or your class participation grade will suffer. There is one paper – turn it in on time. No excuses. The grading scale for the quizzes and final is as follows: 92-100 = A; 90-91 = A-; 88-89 = B+; 82-87 = B; 80-81 = B-; 78-79 = C+, 70-77 = C, 60-69 = D, 0-59 = F. No cheating, please. No plagiarism. See the Honor Code at the bottom for more on that.

Etc.: Cell phones on vibrate, please. No eating, please. Drinks okay.

Dates:

Jan. 25 -- Introduction – What is News, and How to Analyze What You See or Read

Feb. 1 – Journalism 101 – What do reporters, editors and producers do, and why
Read: Potter, “What is News,” pp. 101-126 (excerpt from Media Literacy on e-Reserve) AND
Surette, “Types of Content,” pp. 15-26

Feb. 8 – Journalism in the Real World – How do newspapers and TV stations decide what to cover, and how to play it
Guest speaker: Josh White, Crime Reporter, The Washington Post
Read: Surette, “Social Constructionism,” pp. 31-55

Feb. 15 – Inside the police department – Dealing with the DC media
Guest speaker: Warren Carmichael, former chief spokesman, Fairfax County Police Department
Read: Surette, “Crime Fighters,” pp. 92-115

Feb. 22 – Inside TV news – If it bleeds, must it lead?
Guest speaker: Peggy Fox, Reporter, WUSA-TV 9
Read: Surette, “Crime and Criminality,” pp. 57-89

Feb. 29 – A view from the top – Media and police department policy, in low- and high-profile cases
Guest speaker: Chief Charlie Deane, Prince William County Police Department, investigated John Muhammad sniper case
Read: Surette, “Crime Control,” pp. 171-196
ALSO: Mid-term Paper topics due

March 7 – QUIZ 1

March 14 – Spring Break

March 21 – Mid-term Papers due
Prosecuting the DC sniper case and handling the international media
Guest speaker: Rick Conway, Prince William County Deputy Commonwealth’s Attorney, prosecuted John Muhammad
Read: Surette, “The Courts,” pp. 118-147

March 28 – Discussing the mid-term papers
Also: Why the media love the courthouse, and how that affection has evolved
Read: Muraskin, “What About the Media?” etc., pp. 9-20

April 4 – The media and their impact on big trials

Guest speaker: Peter Greenspun, lead defense attorney for John A. Muhammad
Read: Muraskin, “Scopes Monkey Trial, Menendez Bros. and Ferguson,” pp. 31-51

April 11 – QUIZ 2

Cameras in the courtroom – What impact on the case, what impact on society?
Guest speaker: Virginia Supreme Court Justice LeRoy Millette, presided over the John Muhammad trial
Read: Muraskin, “O.J. Simpson, JonBenet Ramsey and Kobe Bryant,” pp. 52-78

April 18– Crime victims and their families – How are they affected by, and how do they deal with, the media?

Guest speaker: Andrew Gillinson, son of murder victim Joan Gillinson
Read: Muraskin, “Elizabeth Smart, Scott Peterson and Michael Jackson,” pp. 87-114

April 25 – Did the press get it right? A view from the trenches

Guest speaker: retired Det. Steve Shillingford, ex-Fairfax County homicide detective
Read: “Love and Murder in Great Falls,” Washingtonian magazine, Feb. 2005

May 2 – The Wrong Man: When people are wrongly accused

Read: Time magazine, “The Strange Saga of Richard Jewell”
Also: Prepping for the final

May 9 – FINAL

Other stuff: If you are a student with a disability and you need academic accommodations, please see me and contact the Office of Disability Resources at 703-993-2474. All academic accommodations must be arranged through that office.

Students are responsible for verifying their enrollment in this class. Schedule adjustments should be made by the deadlines published in the Schedule of Classes. Last Day to Add: Jan. 31; Last Day to Drop: Feb. 24. After the last day to drop a class, withdrawing from this class requires the approval of the dean and is only allowed for nonacademic reasons. Undergraduate students may choose to exercise a selective withdrawal. See the Schedule of Classes for selective withdrawal procedures.

GMU Honor Code: Honor and personal integrity are critical in your academic, professional and personal lives. Any breach of the honor code as described by George Mason University, to include but not limited to academic dishonesty and plagiarism will result in immediate failure of this course and detailed notation of the violation in your permanent student record. Such a notation will affect your future academic and career endeavors. Do not lie, cheat or steal or assist others in the same. All violations of the Honor Code will be reported to the Honor Committee. See honorcode.gmu.edu for more detailed information.