

W&M in Washington

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Media as the Fourth Branch of Government

Taught by Professor Dan Doherty

Often referred to as the “fourth branch” of government, the media serve an essential role in the functioning of a representative democracy. If a government is to be responsive to its citizens, those citizens must first gather the information necessary to develop informed preferences: information about the world around them – the economy, the environment, national security threats, etc. – and information about the beliefs, proposals, and actions of their elected leaders, and of those who seek such positions. Citizens must also engage in some form of individual and collective analysis and deliberation. The media, particularly in the Nation’s Capital, play a critical role in each of these steps. Our goal will be to understand and evaluate the media’s performance of these vital roles.

Washington Program Internship

- 6 credit hours: INTR 499

This course provides students the opportunity to observe the media from a number of angles. Some will intern with a media outlet that reports on the actions of politicians and the government, on the economy, the environment, national security threats, etc., such as **the Washington Post organizations, Politico, the American Prospect, CBS, NBC, ABC, NPR, PBS NewsHour, CNN, Fox News, MSNBC** and others. Students may choose the other side of that equation and intern with, for example, the **communications office of a Member of Congress, the Department of State or Homeland Security** – i.e., an organization whose goal is to control and shape the information that the media report. Still others may intern with a think tank or an advocacy group, such as the **American Enterprise Institute** or the **Heritage Foundation**, or a public relations firm like **Fleishman Hillard** or **APCO**; these critical actors in our political system seek to shape how their issues of interest are portrayed and interpreted by the media, and thus ultimately shape public preferences.

The Media’s Role in a Democracy

- 4 credit hours: GOVT 491

This course paints an extensive and nuanced picture of the political/policy roles played by the media by addressing a series of questions: What role should the media play in the functioning of a representative government? What, historically, has been the role of the media in America? How do the American media differ from the media of other advanced democracies? What factors (liberal bias? corporate bias? professional journalistic norms? sensationalism?) shape how the news media provide citizens with a lens – or, more appropriately, multiple lenses – on the national government? What has been the impact of the rise in online journalism? What is the impact of opinion journalists, from Paul Krugman to Rush Limbaugh, and of the seemingly growing divide between “liberal journalism” and “conservative journalism”?

Journalists as Political Actors

- 3 credit hours: GOVT 391

In this seminar, students hear directly from a wide array of journalists who cover government: journalists from different media (newspapers, television, radio, online); journalists serving different purposes (a White House correspondent, an opinion columnist, a reporter embedded in the military, etc.); and journalists with different views of the world and of the role of journalism (liberal and conservative critics, a foreign journalist, an African-American journalist, an “old-school” journalist, etc.). Each one provides us with a better sense of what journalists do in their jobs, and of the role journalists see themselves as serving.