# POL30710 Media & Politics 2020–21

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- Office hours: by appointment via Zoom / Skype
- Lectures:
  - Mondays 11am –1PM, Brightspace Virtual Classroom

## Introduction

Welcome to Media & Politics! In this module, you will learn more how mass media and social media influence political competition, in parliament and on the street. Whether it is biased reporting on television channels like Fox News or MSNBC, fake news during election campaigns, spam bots on Twitter, or issues like filter bubbles and echo chambers among social media users, the number of ways that our varied media landscape can interfere with political events is immense.

However, when learning about how media content impacts politics, it is important not to jump to conclusions too quick; the evidence base for "media effects" does not always withstand scrutiny and invites criticism as methodological questions arise. What are filter bubbles exactly? Does extremist political content polarize the public? Or do polarized citizens prefer extremist political content? How do we know? These are questions that go at the heart of research design and in this module you will learn how social scientists have grappled with such questions.

The module consists of two components. In lectures we will learn how media content may impact citizens' knowledge, attitudes and political preferences, and what drives such media content in the first place. We will also learn about the impact of social media on various kinds of political behaviour. Second, in practical lab sessions we will use the R statistical language to practice analyzing digitized content of mass media and social media using modern text analysis methods.

By the end of the module, you will have knowledge of key concepts and central debates in the field of political communication (framing, polarization, filter bubbles, and media systems, to name just a few). You will have gained a nuanced understanding of the relationship between (social) media and political events and can identify methodological challenges to detecting media effects. Furthermore, you will be able to use the R statistical language to perform basic, descriptive analysis of digitized mass and social media content.

## Contact

### Office hours

There are no fixed office hours. Instead, you can make an appointment by email for a meeting via Zoom or Skype. Do reach out of you have questions or find yourself struggling – I am happy to help.

### Brightspace discussion forum

For discussion about the content of our meetings I recommend you use the Brightspace discussion forum. I will actively monitor this forum and contribute where possible. Since many of us will be working from home, I hope that this forum is one way that we can have a fruitful conversation about the topics we discuss in class. Keep in mind that if something is unclear to you, it is likely that it is unclear to someone else as well, so you might as well discuss it on this forum.

## Organization

Typically, we cover a new topic every week. We do not have a textbook, but there is a reading list of articles, which you are expected to complete before class. You will need to spend time on these articles as they are not easy – learning how to read a research article is a skill that requires practice and patience. Lecture slides and assigned readings will be made available on Brightspace.

An important component of this module consists of learning how to analyze media content yourself using the R statistical language. We will use a free online book for this, *Quantitative Politics with R*, authored by Erik Gahner Larsen and Zoltán Fazekas, available at `http://www.qpolr.com`. Some of you will be more comfortable with quantitative analysis than others, but we will start from scratch and what we do is not beyond anyone. However, it is your responsibility to put in effort learning this new skill and to speak out in case you feel lost or lagging behind.

I appreciate that you may not be used to public speech. However, I strongly encourage you to speak out in both lectures and lab sessions, as you will gain much more from the module that way.

## Assessment

This module includes continuous assessment based on two coding assignments (each worth 30% of your final grade for a total of 60%), and a final research note (40%) which you will write in small, randomly selected groups and which you will present in the last week of class.


- Assignment 1 (30%): In this individual assignment you will write a response paper to a published article (approximately 1,000 words). In this response paper you will identify (1) the main argument of the article, (2) its methodology and data, (3) its substantive conclusions, (4) what you consider to be the article's strengths and weaknesses (and why), and (5) avenues for further research.

- Assignment 2: (30%): In this assignment you will use your newly acquired coding skills to analyze media data using the methods and approaches we learned in class.

- Final assignment: (40%): This is a group exercise. As a group, you will write an essay in response to 1 of 3 pre-selected essay questions. The essay will be between 3,500 and 4,000 words in length.

## Late submission policy

All written work must be submitted on or before the due dates. Students will lose one point of a grade for work up to 5 working days late (B- becomes C+). Students will lose two grade points for work between 5 and 10 working days late (B- becomes C). When more than two weeks are necessary, the student will need to apply for extenuating circumstances application via the SPIRe Programme Office.

## Plagiarism

Although this should be obvious, plagiarism – copying someone else's text without acknowledgement or beyond "fair use" quantities – is not allowed, including self-plagiarism. UCD policies concerning plagiarism can be found online. A more extensive description of what is plagiarism and what is not can be found at the UCD Library website.

## Overview and readings

*This outline serves a general plan for the course; deviations (announced) may be necessary.*

### WEEK 1: Introduction

*Introduction to the module. Who studies politics and media? What is the function of mass media? What are media systems?*

- Required readings:

  - Hallin, D.C. and Mancini, P. (2004). "Comparing media systems". Chapter 2 in *Comparing media systems. Three models of media and politics.* Cambridge University Press.
  - Hamilton, J. (2004). "A market for press independence: the evolution of nonpartisan newspapers in the nineteenth century". Chapter 2 in *All the news that's fit to sell.* Princeton University Press.

**Exercise**: What do you consider to be the most important functions of the news media in a democracy? Can democracy exist without political journalism? Think about these questions, write down your responses, and bring them to class.

### WEEK 2: Political media content

*What is in the news? Why do outlets report about politics? What is negativity bias?*

- Required readings:

  - Soroka, S.N., (2012). "The gatekeeping function: Distributions of information in media and the real world." *Journal of Politics, 74(2)*: 514–528.
  - Müller, S., (2020). "Media coverage of campaign promises throughout the electoral cycle." *Political Communication*: 1–23.
  - Hamilton, J. (2004). "Economic theories of news". Chapter 1 in *All the news that's fit to sell* Princeton University Press.

**Exercise**: In the United States, politicians' personal lives are permanently under a magnifying glass in the press, whereas in other countries such as, for example, France, private life is generally out of bounds. When do you consider a politician's private life to be political news? What are the boundaries between private and public? Think about these questions, write down your responses, and bring them to class.

## WEEK 3: Media effects research

*Agenda-setting. Framing. Priming. What are these concepts and why should we study them?*

- Lab session 1: Introduction to R

- Required readings:

    - Scheufele, D.A. and Tewksbury, D., (2006). "Framing, agenda setting, and priming: The evolution of three media effects models." *Journal of Communication, 57(1)* pp.9–20.
    - Kneafsey, L. and Regan, A. (2020). "The role of the media in shaping attitudes toward corporate tax avoidance in Europe: experimental evidence from Ireland." *Review of International Political Economy*, DOI: 10.1080/09692290.2020.1796753.
    - Larsen, E.G., and Fazekas, Z. (2019) Chapters 1 and 2 of *Quantitative Politics with R*. Available at `http://qpolr.com/`

**Exercise**: Bring to class an example of framing that you came across when reading the news (it doesn't have to be political news). What is the frame used? Why is it a frame? What impact can this have on the reader? Bring to class a 1-page report on what you found and your answers to these questions.

## WEEK 4: Political news and political attitudes

*Does what voters see, hear or read determine how they vote?*

- Lab session 2: Working with data in R.

- Required readings:

    - Ladd, J.M. and Lenz, G.S., (2009). "Exploiting a rare communication shift to document the persuasive power of the news media." *American Journal of Political Science, 53(2)*: 394–410.
    - Foos, F. and Bischof, D. (2019). "Tabloid boycott decreases Euroscepticism." *Working paper*
    - Larsen, E.G., and Fazekas, Z. (2019) Chapters 3 and 4 of *Quantitative Politics with R*. Available at `http://qpolr.com/`

**Exercise**: Bring to class your answers to the coding assignment distributed in class last week.

## WEEK 5: Media bias and political polarization

*What is media bias? How do we measure media bias? Does media bias make us more polarized in our political preferences?*

- Lab session 3: Analyzing text.

- Readings:

    - Conroy-Krutz, J. and Moehler, D.C., (2015). "Moderation from bias: A field experiment on partisan media in a new democracy." *Journal of Politics, 77(2)*: 575–587.

- Lelkes, Y. 2020. "National and cross-national perspectives on political media bias". In: *The Oxford Handbook of Electoral Persuasion.*
- Larsen, E.G., and Fazekas, Z. (2019) Chapter 7 of *Quantitative Politics with R.* Available at `http://qpolr.com/`

**Exercise**: Bring to class your answers to the coding assignment distributed in class last week.

## WEEK 6: NO CLASS

**ASSIGNMENT 1 DUE**

## WEEK 7: Fake news, misinformation and disinformation

*Who produces fake news? How much of a problem is it? What is the difference between misinformation and disinformation?*

- Lab session 4: Analyzing political news I
- Required readings:

  - Lazer, D.M., Baum, M.A., Benkler, Y., Berinsky, A.J., Greenhill, K.M., Menczer, F., Metzger, M.J., Nyhan, B., Pennycook, G., Rothschild, D. and Schudson, M., (2018). "The science of fake news." *Science, 359(6380)*: pp.1094–1096.
  - Scheufele, D.A. and Krause, N.M., (2019). "Science audiences, misinformation, and fake news." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 116(16)*: 7662–7669.
  - Munger, K. (2020). "All the news that's fit to click: the economics of clickbait media." *Political Communication, 37(3)*: 376–397
  - Larsen, E.G., and Fazekas, Z. (2019) Chapter 8 of *Quantitative Politics with R.* Available at `http://qpolr.com/`

**Exercise**: Bring to class your answers to the coding assignment distributed in class last week.

## WEEK 8: Filter bubbles and echo chambers

*Echo chambers and filter bubbles on social media. Do they exist? And why does it matter?*

- Lab session 5: Analyzing political news II
- Required readings:

  - Guess, A., Nyhan, B., Lyons, B. & Reifler, J., 2018. "Avoiding the echo chamber about echo chambers." Knight Foundation White Paper.
  - Zuiderveen Borgesius, F., Trilling, D., Möller, J., Bodó, B., De Vreese, C.H. & Helberger, N., (2016). "Should we worry about filter bubbles?" *Internet Policy Review 5(1)*
  - Duggan & Smith (2016). "The political environment on social media." Available at `https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2016/10/25/the-political-environment-on-social-media/`

**Exercise**: Bring to class your answers to the coding assignment distributed in class last week.

## WEEK 9: Political elites on social media

*Why do political leaders use social media? Why do political parties use social media?*

- Lab session 6: Analyzing political news III

- Required readings:

  - Barberá, P. and Zeitzoff, T., (2017). "The new public address system: why do world leaders adopt social media?" *International Studies Quarterly, 62(1)*: pp. 121–130.
  - Jungherr, A., (2016). "Twitter use in election campaigns: A systematic literature review." *Journal of Information Technology & Politics, 13(1)*: 72–91.
  - Kruikemeier, S., (2014). How political candidates use Twitter and the impact on votes. *Computers in Human Behavior, 34*:131–139.

**Exercise**: Bring to class your answers to the coding assignment distributed in class last week.

## WEEK 10: Bots, trolls and other social media creatures

*What are social media bots? And how can we use them to study social and political behavior?*

- Required readings:

  - Munger, K., (2017). "Tweetment effects on the tweeted: Experimentally reducing racist harassment." *Political Behavior, 39(3)*: pp. 629–649.
  - Bail, C.A., Argyle, L.P., Brown, T.W., Bumpus, J.P., Chen, H., Fallin Hunzaker, M.B., Lee, J., Mann, M., Merhout, F., Volfovsky, A. (2018). "Exposure to opposing views on social media can increase political polarization." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences 115 (37)*: 9216–9221.
  - Larsen, E.G., and Fazekas, Z. (2019) Chapter 9 of *Quantitative Politics with R*. Available at http://qpolr.com/

  **ASSIGNMENT 2 DUE**

## WEEK 11:

*The topic of this last week will be crowdsourced in class. Possible topics include: Covid19 and Misinformation; Social Media and Political Revolution; Gender and Media; Using Images to Study Politics; Other*

**FINAL ASSIGNMENT DUE**