

## **SPINNING ELECTIONS: HOW MOVIES, TV, RADIO AND THE INTERNET HAVE PORTRAYED AND INFLUENCED THE ELECTORAL PROCESS OVER TIME**

**Coordinators:** Mary Connelly and Rita Silverman

By looking critically at the changing media landscape and especially the role of those who spin, we consider how the election process has evolved over time and question if and/or how the voting public has been manipulated. Participants view films and other media to see how American elections have been depicted in the past. We examine the role that media consultants, television commentators, campaign ads, debates, polling, big money and each candidate's persona has played in influencing election outcomes. In addition to viewing films, we analyze campaign advertisements, debates and polling practices. Every participant takes part in two projects that require in-class presentations. Participants should have a Netflix subscription or other access to the films, and Internet access for the on-line materials.

### **Readings and other Required Materials:**

All readings will be available in a course pack and can be accessed from our web page. Weekly readings will average 40-60 pages, and films will be viewed outside of class for several class sessions.

**Mary Connelly** is a retired Marketing Director. She coordinated Documentary Films in Fall 2015 and was the office manager for a New York congressional campaign in the 70s. **Rita Silverman** is a retired professor of Educational Psychology. She is a film buff and a political junkie who enjoys making connections between these two interests.

**\* \* \* \* \* Syllabus - A Work in Progress \* \* \* \* \***

NOTE: Because 2016 is a Presidential election year, this syllabus is, of necessity, a work in progress. We will try to stay as close to the topics as we can, but we will not finalize the syllabus and the course pack until mid-August, and we will add readings [with links to them] during the semester. Also, we are making some educated guesses about topics like the debates. First, we are presuming that there will be debates and that there will have been at least one by mid-October, so that we can discuss the debate[s] and

the spin during the 8<sup>th</sup> week of class, which will be at the end of October. We may have to shift some topics if this and other presumptions don't hold up.

## Week 1

**Topic:** Introduction and Overview: Who are the spin doctors and why are they so powerful?

**Film:** Wag the Dog

### **Readings:**

1. Maslin, If the going gets tough, get a pet...
2. Siegel, Spin doctor to the world
3. McGinniss, Introduction to the Penguin Edition, pp. xi-xxii.
4. Nichols & McChesney, Chapter 1, Tragedy & Farce, and pp. 22-30, The Commercial Assault on Journalism.

### **Questions:**

1. "Wag the Dog" was made in 1997. What were the political events at the time that Barry Levinson, the director, might have had in mind as he made the film?
2. Think about the fact that the media are not visible in the film, yet they play a significant role. How would McGinniss describe their role? Nichols & McChesney?
3. Imagine the biography of Conrad Brean, the spin doctor played by Robert DeNiro play in the film. Which spin doctors that you know today might be Conrad's equivalent?

## Week 2

**TOPIC:** The role of polling and media choices.

### **Readings:**

1. Greenberg, George Gallup's democracy, pp. 260-269.
2. Graber, Media influence on attitudes and behavior. pp. 159-184.
3. Jamieson & Waldman, The press as soothsayer, pp. 74-94.

### **Questions:**

1. Greenberg gives us an historical perspective on polling. How did polls become so significant, do you think?
2. What do you think of Jamieson & Waldman's term "soothsayer," and do you think it's an accurate description of the role of the press in 2000?
3. Look at Box 7-1 on pp. 164-165. What point is Graber making about polling? How does the context of the polls affect the outcomes?

### Week 3

**TOPIC:** Media consultants: How do they *frame* the candidates, the issues, and the process?

**Film:** War Room

**Readings:**

1. Ebert, The War Room
2. Maslin, Another Making of the President
3. Lakoff, Framing 101: How to take back public discourse, pp. 1-29.
4. Jamieson, Taxes & trust, pp. 485-499
5. Draper, R. Higher Math. pp. 35-39.

**Questions:**

1. When does spinning move from offering a different interpretation to an outright lie?
2. What then is the media's role in reporting and questioning candidates?
3. How does the real life James Carville compare with Conrad Brean [Robert DiNero's character in Wag the Dog]? How do their campaign teams compare?
4. Although Greenberg calls it spin, notice how he introduces the concept of "framing" in this reading. When does spinning become framing?

### Week 4

**Topic:** The Fourth Estate

**Readings:**

1. Holiday, What is media manipulation?
2. Jamieson & Waldman, The press as shaper of events, pp. 95-109.
3. Nichols & McChesney, Media and the November election, pp. 124-141.
4. Jamieson, Campaigns and the press, pp. 48-80.

**Questions:**

1. Much of the Jamieson reading is a dialogue among press representatives from the two campaigns in 2012. Are they still spinning, after the fact, or do you find their responses more transparent?
2. "The press" as we once understood it, is no longer "the press." It is now "the media," and includes a broad range of "reporters." How have these changes affected the voting public?
3. Last week we looked at "framing" and attributed most framing to the spin doctors. How do the media also "frame?"

### Week 5

**Topic:** How does money [particularly big money] influence the spin?

**Film:** Can Mr. Smith get to Washington anymore?

**Speaker:** Jeff Smith [we have not confirmed Professor Smith yet]

**Readings**

1. Gold, Koch-backed political coalition...
2. Lakoff, The Piketty insight..., pp. 74-82.
3. Greenberg, Spinning out of control, pp. 416-426.

**Questions:** Additional readings and questions will be added as we come closer to the date of the class.

Week 6

**Topic:** Campaign ads from 1952 to 2016

**Internet:** [www.livingroomcandidate.org](http://www.livingroomcandidate.org) [specific ads TBA]

**Readings:**

1. Jamieson, Conclusion, pp. 517-523
2. Eckel, From Willie Horton to windsurfing
3. Farhi, Two political ads share more than fame...

**Questions:** Additional readings and questions will be chosen as we come closer to the date of the class.

Week 7

**Topic:** Reading the right

**Film:** Media Malpractice

**Readings:**

1. Lakoff, What Conservatives want, pp. 125-134.
2. Greenberg, The Reagan apotheosis, pp. 408-415
3. Current op-editorials, news stories, and articles

**Questions:** Additional readings and questions will be chosen as we come closer to the date of the class.

**Report:** Participants will spend 2-3 hours over the course of the week watching and/or listening to and/or reading media on the conservative media and share their findings and new understandings with the other participants.

Week 8

**Topic:** 2016 Presidential debates How have televised debates influenced elections? What have the spin doctors added?

**Readings:**

1. Sides, Do presidential debates really matter?
2. Maynard, Debating on television: Then and now.
3. Kaid, Political processes and television
4. Clark, How presidential debates work

**Reports:** Debates and post-debate spin

Week 9

**Topic:** Personality and image: What is spin and what is truth?

**Readings:**

1. Greenberg, George W. Bush and the “Truthiness” problem and Barack Obama and the spin of no spin, pp. 427-448.
2. Nichols, Donald Trump is dangerous, pp. 12-14.
3. Nichols & McChesney, Ch. 4

**Questions:**

1. How can we separate the spin from the truth?
2. Why is “spin” viewed as “truth” in so many venues?
3. Stephen Colbert gave us the term, “truthiness.” What is the difference between truth, truthiness, spin, and lies? Who can we trust to make that distinction?

Week 10

**Topic:** Analyzing the election results: Did spin win?

**Readings:** Will be selected from current post-election materials

**Questions:**

1. What was the post-election spin from the candidates’ campaigns?
2. ...from the media news outlets, particularly the ones with a discernible slant?

**Questions:** Additional readings and questions will be chosen as we come closer to the date of the class.

Week 11

**Topic:** Polling: Retrospective look at polls and outcomes

**Readings:** Will be selected from current post-election materials

**Reports:** Findings from the key state reports

Week 12

**Topic:** Wrap up: Where are we now?

**Speaker:** Director of Move On.com

**Readings:** Will be selected from current post-election materials

**Reports:** Findings from the key state reports