Crime, Media, and Public Opinion: CRIM 4900 (Writing Intensive)
Fall 2015 Syllabus

Course information:
Room: YMCA 104
Time: Tuesdays & Fridays 3:25-5:05
Course website on Blackboard (log in at: https://blackboard.neu.edu/webapps/login/).

Instructor information:
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Course Catalog Description:
Explores the construction and consequences of portrayals of crime and justice in the media and their role in popular culture. Examines contemporary and historical portrayals of crime and justice in popular entertainment, in the news, and by political actors. Surveys critiques, theory, and research on the way perceptions of crime and justice are actively framed and the consequences of particular perspectives. Prereq. junior or senior standing; passing grade in CRIM 2100 and CRIM 2200.

My Course Rationale/ Description
Crime is both a popular and controversial subject. Political debates (and stalemates) over the death penalty, drugs, “tough on crime” laws, inner-city violence, white collar crime, and police tactics and behavior are regular news fodder. Among domestic concerns, being “soft” on crime is one of the most damaging characterizations one can make of a politician. Crime is also a central cultural focus: we seem fascinated by movies and television shows focusing on criminals, law enforcement officers, lawyers, and prisons.

In this course we will survey, critique, and analyze the construction and consequences of portrayals of crime and justice in the media and politics. The course might be summarized by a series of (seemingly) simple questions:

- How do we perceive social problems, crime trends, and justice policies?
- How is crime portrayed in popular entertainment, in the news media, and in political discourse?
  - Both historically and contemporarily
- Why is crime and justice portrayed or framed in these ways in each of these domains?
  - Who is served by such framings?
- What are the consequences of these portrayals and framings of crime and justice?
- What are the roles of race/ethnicity, class, and gender in such portrayals?
Place in Criminal Justice Curriculum/ Prerequisites
This course serves as an advanced “open elective” in the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice. Students must be a junior or senior to enroll. Students must have achieved a passing grade in CRIM 2100 and 2200 to enroll. This class is not restricted to students in the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice. This class is classified as “Writing Intensive.”

General Course Learning Goals
This is a short list of what I hope to achieve this semester:
- Provide you with an understanding of portrayals of crime and justice, specifically:
  - Changes in the way crime and justice are portrayed across time, contexts, and types of crime
  - The role of race, class, gender, and age in such portrayals
  - The motivations for portraying crime and justice in particular ways
  - The consequences of particular portrayals of crime and justice
- Make you a critical consumer of news reports on, politicians’ claims about, and media depictions of crime and crime policies.

Requirements, Assignments, and Grading:
- Participation and Image Discussion 10%
- Discussion Facilitator Assignments (3) 15%
- In class essay-writing #1 15%
- In class essay-writing #2 20%
- Issue/Image Critique: Presentation and Paper 40%

What to expect in class:
Structure of the class:
- Our class will essentially be a semester-long discussion about crime, the media, and public opinion, informed by the ideas, theories, and research we encounter in the class readings.
  - Our discussions, then, will be the central component of the class and your preparation for and participation in them will be vital to their success.
- We will begin by trying to sort out the major ideas encountered in the assigned readings. This discussion will begin in a simple fashion—trying to ascertain what the author(s) were trying to say—and then progress to asking more critical questions of the work and trying to place the work in a larger context of theory and policy.
- I will occasionally have a short lecture on a topic that I will present at some point during the class session as appropriate.
- For many of our classes, some students will bring in articles, pictures, audio, or video relevant to that day’s discussion. The student will present the media and discuss its connection to the day’s topic.
- Every class will end with a collective effort to summarize the major take-home points from that day’s class, focusing on both the direct arguments and evidence from the readings as well as the broader implications of that day’s discussion. We will do this by first breaking up into groups to develop summaries of that day’s discussion and then discussing these summaries as a class.

Requirements/preparations for attending class:
- Complete the required readings for that day. Be sure to note ideas within the readings that are either unclear or interesting for class discussion.
- Be prepared to (and do) participate in the class discussion.
Discussion facilitator assignments:

Each student will sign up as a “discussion facilitator” for three separate class periods (most class sessions will have multiple facilitators). Here’s what is involved:

• Prior to class, the facilitator will write a short assignment with the following components:
  o The 4-5 most important points from each reading.
  o 4 total discussion questions to pose to the class.
    ▪ Some good types of discussions questions:
      • Critical questions about the author’s assumptions, methods, conclusions, interpretations, etc.
      • Connections to readings or topics we’ve covered in other weeks
      • Connections to “big” philosophical questions about crime, deviance, control, etc.
      • Questions about possible policy implications
    ▪ For each question, please also add a line or two with one possible answer (for instance, what your initial response to this question might be)
  o You must email me a typed copy of the questions and summary points by 3pm on the day of the assigned class.
• Facilitators should be prepared to summarize the major points from the readings, to pose discussion questions to the group, and (along with the rest of the class) to participate in all the discussions.
  o Note: we won’t always get to cover all the major points or discussion questions developed by the facilitators.
• You will be graded on the thoughtfulness, command of the reading, and overall quality of the discussion questions and summaries of major points.
  o This is an independent assignment. I expect the discussion facilitators to develop summaries and discussion question on their own (not as a group).

Image discussion assignments:

Each student will sign up as an “image discussant” for three separate class periods (most class sessions will have multiple discussants). Here’s what is involved:

• Prior to class, the discussant will complete the readings and then find and select two “images of crime” to present to the class.
  o Images may include:
    ▪ newspaper articles or other textual representations of crime and justice (graphic novels, selections from novels or short stories, etc.)
    ▪ pictures or other images (from news stories, twitter, etc.)
    ▪ audio files (radio, podcast, music, etc.)
    ▪ video
    ▪ other forms as appropriate (check with me if you are unsure)
  o Whatever form, please keep the clips short (under 2 mins)
• Discussants are required to post the images in whatever form they would like to present them to the class discussion board by 5pm in the evening on the day BEFORE the class in which they will be presented.
  o The post must include:
    ▪ The date and topic of the class the images are for
    ▪ A description of your perspective on how this image connects to the day’s topic and readings.
• In class, I will ask that day’s image discussants to present their images (I will assist in showing the image and the student will discuss the connection to that day’s topic). There may be days when we
In-class essay writing:

Instead of exams, this course includes two in-class writing assignments. For each in-class writing assignment you will be provided in advance with a list of three potential essay questions. These potential questions will be distributed immediately after the last class before the exam and will broadly address the topics covered in the previous section of the class. The second in-class writing assignment will be semi-cumulative: it will predominantly address only the material from the second section of the course, but will also draw comparisons with material from the first section of the course. On the day of the in-class writing assignment I will choose one of these questions and ask for your response in essay form.

You will be allowed to prepare and bring to class one outline for each of the three potential questions. Each of the outlines is limited to 200 total words (600 words for the three). You must hand in the outline with the essay you write in class.

The first in-class writing assignment will be on Friday, October 9th, in class.
The second in-class writing assignments will be on Tuesday, November 24th, in class.
There will be no exam or other meeting scheduled during finals week.

Issue/Image Critique:

One of the learning goals for this class is to encourage you to think critically about popular images of crime in politics, the news, and popular media. Further details on the content of this assignment can be found on our blackboard site. This assignment will be completed in several stages. One note: due dates are not scheduled for class days to avoid placing an undue burden on those students scheduled to facilitate class discussions around those times.

**Initial Proposal.** First, I will ask you to email me a two to three sentence brief summary of the critique you have in mind. I will either give a simple approval, some suggestions, or ask you to rethink the topic. This is due by email to me by Monday October 5th at 10pm EST (please also copy the TA on this email). I encourage you to begin thinking about this assignment early in the semester, but also to look ahead in the syllabus to identify possible topics of interest later in the semester.

**Outline.** An outline of the critique (in bulleted form) will be due on Wednesday October 21st at 10pm EST (submitted to blackboard).

**Full Paper Draft.** A full draft to be reviewed by the TA and I will be due Friday November 20th at 10pm EST (submitted via blackboard). **NOTE:** I expect a full completed draft with relatively polished writing (not a “rough” draft).

**Presentation.** Each of you will have 6 minutes maximum to present your critique to the class in the final class sessions of the semester (I will assign you to presentation slots). You will have an additional 4 minutes to answer questions posed by myself and your classmates. Students are required to attend all presentations. You will be graded on your ability to clearly communicate your critique to the class and your command of the material as evidenced by your ability to answer questions posed by the class and myself.

**Final Paper.** The final version of the write-up of your critique (2,000 word limit) will be due on Wednesday December 16th at 10pm EST (submitted via blackboard). In addition to incorporating mine and the TA’s feedback from the draft, I expect that the paper will incorporate comments or critiques encountered during the presentation.

Your final grade will be based on a combination of each of the outlines and drafts of the paper, your feedback to other students, the presentation, and your ability to respond to critical questions about your work.
Issues, Progress, Accommodations:
   The various assignments throughout the course should provide ample opportunities to alert you that you’re having issues in the class. Please come and see me as soon as you are concerned about your progress in the class. The class has a quick pace, and falling a bit behind can put you at a serious disadvantage if not dealt with quickly. Real life often intrudes and forces you to divert your attention elsewhere. This is not (necessarily) a problem, and if you come to talk to me as soon as you realize there is a problem, we should be able to find a way for you to continue to be successful in this course. If you wait until the end of the semester to let me know you have fallen behind, our options will be severely restricted. In addition to my office hours, I am regularly available by email often well beyond “standard business hours.”

   My goal is to provide the opportunity for everyone in the class to succeed and I am very happy to work out accommodations for those who contact me well in advance of needing accommodations. Once you have registered with the DRC (www.northeastern.edu/drc/), please arrange for a brief chat with me so we can devise a plan for how best to make things work.

Course Policies:
   Plagiarism of any kind is unacceptable. If you have any questions about what constitutes plagiarism, be sure to contact me and ask. In general, following these rules should work: If you directly quote OR paraphrase ANY source (another student, an internet site, an academic article, etc.), you must attribute the quote or paraphrase to that source. It should (but it won’t) go without saying that I expect every student will complete their own work.

   For more information on this, Northeastern has an Academic Integrity Policy outlined on pages 36 and 37 of the Student Handbook (www.northeastern.edu/admissions/pdfs/UndergradHandbook.pdf). I encourage all students to review this policy and to contact me with any questions.

   Students who miss in-class assignments or presentations will not be allowed to make them up without a documented medical or other emergency. Please contact me as soon as an issue arises that might interfere with your ability to complete an assignment on time. Papers handed in late without a similarly documented medical or other emergency will be penalized for each day the paper is not received after the due date.

   Technology. I allow the use of laptops to take notes in class or to refer to electronic copies of readings. Please do not use your laptop to surf the web, play games, or for any other reason. If you use a machine with a vertical screen (laptop, etc.), and plan to display anything on that screen other than class notes or the class readings, please sit in the back row so that you do not serve as a distraction for other students. I reserve the right to ban computing devices at any point in the class if I believe they have become a distraction. There is never a valid use for cellphones during class time.
Books/ Readings:

This course will include a number of readings that can be accessed on blackboard. Additionally, there are three required books for this course. First, we will use Beckett and Sasson’s book on the politics of crime and punishment as a way to broadly bookend the course and think about representations of crime in politics in particular. Second, we will use Yvonne Jewkes overview of issues related to crime and media in our sections on representations of crime and justice in the news media and in popular media. Finally, I have also asked that you get your hands on a copy of the classic writing guide by William Strunk and E.B. White.

Topics/ Readings List:
On our course blackboard website you can find a full listing of the topics we will address each day of the semester in class, including the reading assignments (and in many cases links to the readings themselves).