

St. Francis Xavier University
Department of Sociology

SOCIOLOGY OF MASS MEDIA (SOCI 325)

Fall 13/Winter 14
Wednesday 9:45am – 11:00am; Friday 8:15am – 9:30am
Lecture Room: NH 250

Instructor: Stephen Marmura
Email: smarmura@stfx.ca

Office Hours: Tuesdays 10:00am – 1:00pm; Thursdays 12:00pm – 3:00pm
(or by appointment) Office: Annex 111C

Required Course Material

Coursepack: SOCI 325 – *Sociology of Mass Media*
Available at the campus bookstore

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Sociology 325 introduces students to a broad range of topics dealing with the importance of the mass media in relation to virtually all aspects of social life.

The fall term begins by focusing on the historic linkages between developments in mass communications and social/cultural change. Particular attention is devoted to the relationships between mass media and nation-building, with emphasis on the case of Canada. Controversies about the nature and significance of propaganda are then examined in light of related debates concerning the character of modern 'mass societies'. We then consider the importance of the news media in democratic societies, with attention to state, corporate and popular influences on news content. The term ends by considering how internet technology has been closely tied to recent changes to civil society and the 'public sphere'.

The winter term builds on the groundwork established in the fall, with emphasis on the interrelationships between contemporary media products, media audiences, and popular culture. We begin with attention to longstanding debates about media influences on human attitudes and behaviour. The focus is then broadened to consider wider social/cultural contexts and trends from which both mass media and new (digital) media have become inseparable. These include the growth of consumer capitalism, the prominence of advertising, renewed fears of 'cultural imperialism', and the spread of identity-based social networks and political activism on a global scale.

Evaluation:

Two **tests** (10% x 2) = 20%

Test 1: Oct. 9

Test 2: Feb. 5

Fall exam: 20%

Date: TBA

Spring exam: 20%

Date: TBA

Class Participation: 5%

Final Assignment: 35%

Due date: April 4

Note: Additional comments regarding assignments and course expectations are included at the back of this syllabus.

COURSE OUTLINE

Fall 2013

(Sept. 4, 6) Introduction

COMMUNICATION MEDIA AND SOCIO-HISTORIC CHANGE

(Sept. 11, 13) (Sept. 18, 20) Media, Knowledge and Perception

Interpreting Aboriginal Cultures

Gerald Friesen

In Plato's Cave

Susan Sontag

(Sept. 25, 27); (Oct 2, 4) Innis and McLuhan: the 'Canadian school' of media studies

Introduction (Empire and Communications)

Harold Innis

Harold Innis and 'the Bias of Communication'
Edward Commor

The Medium is the Message; Media Hot and Cold
Marshall McLuhan

(Oct. 9) **Test 1** (in class)

MASS MEDIA AND THE NATION-STATE

(Oct. 11); (Oct. 16, 18); (Oct. 23, 25) The Nation as an 'Imagined Community'

The Origins of National Consciousness
Benedict Anderson

Technological Nationalism
Maurice Charland

True Stories of Canada: Tim Hortons and the Branding of National Identity
Patricia Cormack

Made in America: The Problem of Mass Culture in Canada
Paul Rutherford

(Oct. 30; Nov. 1); (Nov. 6); (Nov. 13, 15) Mass Societies and the rise of Propaganda

*Nov. 8 – study day (no class)

What is Propaganda and What Exactly is wrong with it?*

Douglas Walton

The Conditions for the Existence of Propaganda
Jacques Ellul

Judith Miller, *The New York Times* and the Propaganda Model
Oliver Boyd-Barrett

(Nov. 20, 22); (Nov. 27, 29) Media, Democracy and the Public Sphere

Mediations of Democracy
James Curran

Media, Citizenship and Civic Culture
Peter Dahlgren

Analyzing online political discussion using three models of democratic communication
Deen G. Freelon

The 2011 Vancouver Riot and the role of Facebook in crowd-sourced policing
Schneider & Trottier

Winter 2014

MEDIA EFFECTS AND MEDIA AUDIENCES

(Jan. 8, 10); (Jan. 15, 17) The Media Effects Tradition

Television Violence and Children's Behaviour
David Chandler

Cultivation Analysis: An Overview
George Gerbner

The Impact of Television: A Canadian Natural Experiment
Tannis M. MacBeth

Tales of 9/11: What Conspiracy Theories in Egypt and the United States tell us about
'media effects'
Stephen Marmura

(Jan. 22, 24); (Jan. 29, 31) Marxist Cultural/Media Critique

Culture industry reconsidered
Theodor Adorno

The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction
Walter Benjamin

(Feb. 5) **Test 2** (in class)

(Feb. 7); (Feb. 12, 14); (Feb. 19, 21) The Cultural Studies Tradition

Women Read the Romance: The Interaction of Text and Context
Janice Radway

Encoding/decoding
Stuart Hall

Representation and Popular Culture: Semiotics and the Construction of Meaning
Christine Geraghty

Woman as Sign in Television News
Rakow & Kranich

(Feb. 26, 28) **Midterm Recess**

Media, Advertising and 'Postmodernity'

(Mar. 5, 7); (Mar. 12, 14) (Mar. 19, 21)

Consumption, Narcissism and Mass Culture
Christopher Lasch

Exposed
Emily Gould

Simulacra and Simulations
Jean Baudrillard

The Masses: The Implosion of Meaning of the Social in the Media
Jean Baudrillard

Authors Analogue and Digital
Mark Poster

Media, Identity and Power in the context of Globalization

(Mar. 26, 28); (Apr. 2, 4)

From Hard Goods to Soft Goods
Benjamin Barber

A Universal Civilization? Modernization and Westernization
Samuel Huntington

Mexico's Zapatistas: The First Informational Guerilla Movement
Manuel Castells

Whatever happened to Kony 2012?
Manuel Barcia

The Google Doctrine
Evgeny Morozov

COURSE EXPECTATIONS AND ASSIGNMENTS

PLEASE NOTE: For reasons of security as well as practicality I do not email grades to students on an individual basis. If you have a question about a mark you already received or if you want to know your grade on a test or paper which you weren't able to pick up on the date it was returned, please come to see me during my office hours.

Research Assignment:

Class Participation

5% of final grade

Students are expected to attend class regularly, be attentive during lectures, keep up with weekly readings and contribute to discussions. The latter may take the form of group exercises or more open class discussion. Keeping up with weekly readings is essential both in terms of constructive class participation and in terms of overall success in this course. The readings are sometimes highly theoretical and/or abstract, and it is during lecture periods that we work through the ideas and concepts that they deal with. Students are responsible for creating and maintaining their own class notes as I do not make these available online. By the end of the year it is apparent which students have been attending regularly, keeping up with the material, etc. and which have not. Your mark out of five is based on this recognition.

Final Assignment

35% of final grade

Due: April 5

Length: 10 – 12 pages

Late penalty: Barring exceptional circumstances such as medical emergencies, a 5% penalty will be deducted per late day including weekends.

This assignment requires that you investigate a major issue or area of controversy pertaining to mass media which you find particularly intriguing. You will need to build a critique which goes beyond a mere summary of the relevant literature. This will entail evaluating competing theories and/or methodological approaches developed by media researchers attempting to explain or provide insight into some aspect of the phenomenon in question; e.g. the growth of reality TV, propaganda, audience measurement, TV violence, advertising, etc. While a list of possible topics is provided below they are not intended to be exhaustive. You must consult at least four substantial resources (i.e. books or journal articles) beyond those utilized in the course. Other material (e.g. news reports available online) may be used in addition to these resources, but not in their place. If you are uncertain about whether a topic you are considering is an acceptable one, please visit me during my office hours to discuss it.

Possible Topics (suggestions only):

- 1) A case study involving the effects of advertising either on a specific audience or demographic in an 'information-based' society such as Canada, Japan or the US, or in relation to a more traditional culture or cultures in the developing world. You will want to consider such matters as how relevant behaviours or attitudes appear to have been affected, and whether and to what degree advertising appears to be the main force behind these changes.
- 2) David Gauntlett has expressed dissatisfaction with the methods and conclusions associated with traditional studies of media effects upon behavior. As an alternative, he has attempted to develop new approaches for assessing the effects of media exposure upon various audiences, particularly children. Critically assess the new approaches which he, or other researchers have adopted in terms of their potential to overcome the limitations and short-comings often associated with previous studies in this area.
- 3) Joseph Kony, leader of the Uganda-based Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) has long been a figure well known to the United Nations and to human rights organizations. Recently, he became much more familiar to westerners after the release of the u-tube video 'Kony 2012'. What does the impact of this 'viral' video release tell us about the possibilities and limitations of 'digital activism'?
- 4) There has been a considerable amount of research aimed at proving the existence or non-existence of a link between exposure to pornography and male violence against women. Evaluate the evidence on both sides of this debate by considering the strengths and weaknesses of relevant studies. In which direction does the strongest evidence point?

- 5) Critically appraise Neil Postman's ideas concerning the historic relationships between literacy, television viewing and changing conceptions of childhood. Your critique would need to take into account alternative points of view on this subject, and criticisms of Postman's arguments made by other researchers.
- 6) Consider the Internet's potential capacity to serve as a 'global public sphere'. What exactly is implied by this notion, and how likely is it that such a phenomenon will take shape? Assess the evidence and arguments cited on both sides of the issue when making your case.
- 7) Review Canada's past cultural policies and regulations pertaining to such media as newspapers, magazines and television. How are these policies likely to evolve with the growth of digital media (or how should they change) and with what implications?
- 8) The highly popular (in the Arab Middle East) television news network *Al-Jazeera* has proven to be a thorn in the side of American foreign policy planners, many of whom claim the network promotes anti-American propaganda. By contrast, its supporters note that *Al-Jazeera* is one of the only 'free' news networks in the Arab world, having escaped the direct control of any government. Examine the controversies surrounding *Al-Jazeera*'s success, and its potential significance in light of globalization and debates about cultural imperialism.
- 9) Compare and critically examine the arguments of Benedict Anderson and Ernest Gellner concerning the relationship(s) between the development of print media and the rise of nationalism in the modern world.
- 10) Web-based fan sites of one kind or another have become commonplace online. They include forums dedicated to rock bands, science fiction series, reality TV shows and celebrities, although there are many more examples. How do such sites provide alternatives to the products of the culture industries and/or how might industry benefit from their existence?

Journal resources available online (not exhaustive):

Critical Studies in Media Communication

Democratic Communiqué

Information Communication and Society

International Journal of Communication

Media Culture and Society

New Media and Society