

St. Francis Xavier University
Department of Sociology

MASS MEDIA EFFECTS (SOCI 331)

Fall 2016

Lecture room:

Time: Wednesdays 9:45am – 11:00am; Fridays 8:15am – 9:30am

Instructor: Stephen Marmura

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

Pre-requisites

Introduction to Sociology (SOCI 100); six two-hundred level SOCI credits

Required Course Material

CSPI Coursepack: SOCI 331 *Media Effects*

Available at the campus bookstore

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Concerns about the effects of mass media content on human attitudes, beliefs and behavior date back to the early 20th century, gaining sustained academic attention after the First World War. Traditional 'scientific' approaches to the study of media effects continue today, even as they have been harshly criticized by proponents of alternative approaches to the study of media and culture. This course considers a broad array of issues and controversies arising from studies of media effects, and explores the strengths and limitations of relevant approaches to the subject matter. Considerable attention is devoted to the topic of propaganda, the original driver of early research on mass media effects, and its relationship to life in modern mass societies. We also consider long-standing areas of debate surrounding such issues as media effects on childhood violence, perceptions of sex, gender and race, and the formation of public opinion. Attention is then devoted to alternative approaches to media which place greater emphasis on cultural context, the role of the active audience, and user generated content. These concerns are in turn drawn upon to shed light on the changing character of advertising and audience segmentation in the new 'reflexive economy'. We finish by considering controversies pertaining to global media, and how these both extend and move beyond those derived from purely western contexts.

Evaluation:

Tests (15% x 2) = 30%

Final exam: 40%

Final Assignment: 30%

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

COURSE OUTLINE

Sept. (7) Introduction: communication, media and mass media

No reading

Sept. (14,16) (21, 23) Early Concerns: War, Propaganda and the rise of Mass Societies

The Fine Art of Propaganda

The Institute for Propaganda Analysis

The Theory of Political Propaganda

Harold Lasswell

The Conditions for the Existence of Propaganda

Jacques Ellul

Sept. (28, 30); Oct. (5, 7) Propaganda, Media and Democracy

Judith Miller, the *New York Times* and the Propaganda Model

Oliver Boyd-Barrett

Media, Citizenship and Civic Culture

Peter Dahlgren

Propaganda and the Ethics of WikiLeaks

Randal Marlin

Oct. 12 **Test 1** (15% of final grade)

Oct. (14) (19, 21) Strong vs. Weak media effects: an unresolved debate

The Impact of Television: A Canadian Natural Experiment

Tannis M. MacBeth

Cultivation Analysis: An Overview

George Gerbner

May the weak force be with you: The power of the mass media in modern politics

Kenneth Newton

10 Things Wrong with the Media 'Effects' Model

David Gauntlett

Oct. (26, 28) Nov. (2, 4) The Cultural Studies Approach to 'Text' and Audience

Women Read the Romance: The Interaction of Text and Context

Janice Radway

Representation and Popular Culture: Semiotics and the Construction of Meaning

Christine Geraghty

Woman as Sign in Television News

Rakow & Kranich

Encoding/decoding

Stuart Hall

Nov. 9 **Test 2** (15% of final grade)

Nov. 11 *remembrance day – no class*

(16, 18) Advertising and the rise of the 'reflexive economy'

Consumption, Narcissism and Mass Culture

Christopher Lasch

The Work that Affective Economics Does

Mark Andrejevic

Nov. (23, 25) Nov. 30; Dec. 2 Media and Globalization

From Hard Goods to Soft Goods
Benjamin Barber

A Universal Civilization? Modernization and Westernization
Samuel Huntington

Al-Jazeera English: A conciliatory medium in a conflict driven environment
Mohammed el-Nawawy and Shawn Powers

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.

Final Assignment

30% of final grade
Due: Dec. 5
Length: 8 – 10 pages

Late penalty: Barring exceptional circumstances such as medical emergencies, a 2% 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 effects which you find particularly intriguing. You will need to devise a thesis and engage in critique which goes beyond a mere summary of relevant research. You must consult at least four substantial resources (i.e. books or journal articles) beyond those utilized in the course. Other material, including course readings or examples drawn from popular media, may be utilized in addition to these resources but not in their place. The topics listed below are **suggestions only**. Pick any topic that interests you, as long as it deals with some aspect of media effects.

Please Note: Students are expected to be familiar with the academic integrity policy concerning plagiarism as set out in the StFX Academic Calendar.

Possible Topics (suggestions only):

- 1) Select a case study involving the success or failure of a particular advertising or propaganda campaign in any given geographic or historic context. What factors appeared to hold the key to its success or lack thereof? What lessons does your example teach us about the notion of media effects more generally?
- 2) 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'?
- 3) 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 and arguments. In which direction (if any) does the strongest evidence point?
- 4) Eating disorders, like many social ills, are often argued to be directly linked to messages associated with various media (magazines, movies, TV shows, etc.). What is actual evidence for such a link, and what other factors (if any) need be taken into account to make sense of it?
- 5) David Gauntlett remains unimpressed with traditional approaches to the study of media effects. He has attempted to develop alternative approaches, particularly with regards to media and children. Critically assess the new ideas he puts forward.
- 6) Canadian institutions such as the CBC and CRTC were designed to ensure that Canadians are not deluged by American media content. Does a steady diet of American television and film pose a genuine threat to Canadian national identity? Consider this question in light of the historic evidence.
- 7) Assuming it's effects are real, when if ever can propaganda be considered ethical?
- 8) What does Manuel Castells mean by 'mass self-communication'? To what extent will/does this phenomenon appear able to alter or displace processes associated with mass communication?
- 9) Critically appraise Neil Postman's ideas concerning the historic relationships between literacy, television viewing, and changing understandings of childhood.

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