Mass Communication “Theory” II
J395 (Unique No. 07945)
Spring 2015

Class: Wednesday, 9-11:45 a.m., CMA 3.130
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COURSE DESCRIPTION:
This is the second of two courses in mass communication “theory” required for the
School of Journalism’s Ph.D. and research/“theory” M.A. students. This second semester
focuses on critical and cultural perspectives, which sometimes complement and other times
challenge conventional social science approaches. These critical/cultural approaches resist
the functionalist tradition in sociology and usually are associated with critiques of the
systems of domination and subordination that structure the modern world (patriarchy, white
supremacy, capitalism, imperialism). Scholars working in critical/cultural traditions typically
reject the illusory neutrality that is the norm in conventional academic scholarship.

By the end of the semester, you should be able to:
• understand critical and cultural perspectives on mass communication;
• evaluate the perspectives used in the research of others; and
• articulate your “theoretical” perspective and use it in your research on mass
communication systems, messages, and effects.

That’s the standard formulation of the course. You may have noticed, however, the
quotation marks around “theory,” which is intended as a reminder of the loose way we use
that term in the academic disciplines focused on human beings and societies. Attempts at
expanding our understanding of human systems and practices do not produce theory in the
sense that the term is used in the natural sciences, with an expectation of significant
predictive and/or explanatory power. Ironically, the value of “theory” building in social
science expands dramatically when we recognize the limits of theorizing about the
complexity of human attitudes and behavior. When we stop pretending to be scientists, we
can become more social—and potentially more useful.

This challenge to the hubris of social science is not an endorsement of the equally arrogant
intellectual fads in the humanities that cluster around the term “postmodernism.” This
course is grounded in the conviction that we can craft a sensible approach to understanding
mass communication—and human endeavors more generally—that steers clear of the
illusions of positivism and the delusions of postmodernism.

Rather than pretending to be scientific, we can strive to be careful, rigorous, and systematic
in our research, and still recognize our intellectual limits. Rather than abandoning collective
standards, we can recognize our intellectual limits and still strive to be careful, rigorous, and
systematic in our research. None of this requires trumped-up claims about “theory.” The
attempt to understand mass communication is neither science nor art, but an intellectual
craft. As in any craft, one learns from the traditions and learns that it is sometimes necessary
to go beyond traditions.
Freed both from the unrealistic expectations of scientism and the self-absorption that often comes with rejecting scientism, we can wrestle honestly with crucial questions about power. Where does real power lie in a society? How do the systems and structures of power actually operate? Is the distribution of power and wealth in a society consistent with moral principles? How are contemporary forms of mass communication implicated in these systems? Can those same forms be sites of resistance?

In short: If we stop taking ourselves so seriously, we dramatically increase the possibility of doing serious work. In this course we will try to deepen our intellectual lives (forming the questions most meaningful to us, which guide our search for knowledge), find our place in the scholarly world (fitting into the organization of knowledge-seeking in the contemporary academy), and cope with professional realities (the delicate balance between resisting the absurdity of much of academic life and finding a job someday).

To achieve this we will use the patented Koplin Method, which I will describe in more detail during the semester. The Koplin Method integrates epistemology and ethics, focusing our attention on what counts as knowledge and how knowledge is used, always in historical context. The Koplin Method reminds us that our struggles today over the shape and direction of an academic discipline are not new. Consider this assessment of the state of a similarly situated discipline, psychology, more than four decades ago:

I do not think that what goes on in orthodox graduate and undergraduate education can continue much longer. Our students are asked to read and memorize a literature consisting of an endless set of advertisements for the emptiest concepts, the most inflated theories, the most trivial “findings,” and the most fetishistic yet heuristically self-defeating methods in scholarly history—and all of it conveyed in the dreariest and most turgid prose that ever met the printed page. For these riches, they must exchange whatever curiosity about the human condition may have carried them into the field; whatever awe or humility they may feel before the human and organismic universe; whatever resources of imagination or observational sensitivity they may bring to the study of that complex universe; whatever openness to experience—their own or that of others—they may have. Fine or ardent sensibilities will no longer seek out such debasement (p. 697).


This is a faith-based course. While I cannot prove it, I believe it is possible to minimize—if not completely transcend—the debasement of the contemporary academy in the United States. I trust in the fine and ardent sensibilities of students, who persevere in the face of these institutional obstacles. Bring your sense of awe and imagination to class and we will use the Koplin Method to nurture rather than negate our curiosity.

If you still are not entirely sure what this course is about, don’t worry. This syllabus does not attempt to describe what the course will cover in any detail; more important is what we will discover, which cannot be mapped out precisely ahead of time. What we discover together depends very much on who we are, not only individually but collectively in the classroom. The experience will take shape as we move through it.

Caminante, no hay camino. Se hace el camino al andar.
[Searcher, there is no road. We make the road by walking.]

BOOKS:
Required

Recommended

Resource

READINGS:

GRADES:
At the end of the semester, I will arbitrarily assign a grade based on a completely subjective judgment of your intellectual ability, influenced mostly by my own unpredictable mood swings, which will be heavily influenced by how much you have pretended to believe that I am really smart and perfected the ability to nod in tacit agreement as I say things that make no sense to you or anyone else.
[Just kidding.]
GRADES (seriously):
Your grade will be based on three writing/presentation requirements and your overall contribution to the intellectual vitality of the class.

--Written report and presentation on textbook (30 points)
For each section of *The Theory Toolbox*, a team of students will take the lead. There are three components to this assignment. No later than Monday morning, the team will send a list of five questions to the class to guide discussion. At the beginning of class, the members of the team will turn in a 1-2 page (double-spaced) answer to each of those five questions (written collectively or separately). Finally, members of the team will lead the discussion in class.

--Written report and presentation on research question (20 points)
Formulate a research question that draws on one or more of the intellectual perspectives discussed in this class. Prepare a 2-3 page (double-spaced) report that you will share with the class. This is due on February 23.

--Written report and presentation on key book (30 points)
Select a book that is widely considered to be important in the field and is relevant for your research program. Prepare a 4-5 page evaluation (double-spaced) that you will share with the class. Along with a description of the book’s main points, read and summarize at least three substantive reviews of the book, concluding with your assessment of the book and its critics/supporters. An outline is due on March 9 and a final version on April 13.

--Class participation (20 points)
This portion of your grade will be based on your: (a) familiarity with readings; (b) ability to hear and understand what others say; (c) ability to express yourself clearly; (d) ability to synthesize the thoughts of others to form new insights, conclusions, or questions; (e) ability to disagree constructively; and (f) cooperation in building a stimulating and supportive intellectual atmosphere in class.

UNIVERSITY POLICIES and INFORMATION

Scholastic Dishonesty: The University defines academic dishonesty as cheating, plagiarism, unauthorized collaboration, falsifying academic records, and any act designed to avoid participating honestly in the learning process. Scholastic dishonesty also includes, but is not limited to, providing false or misleading information to receive a postponement or an extension on a test, quiz, or other assignment, and submission of essentially the same written assignment for two courses without the prior permission of the instructor. By accepting this syllabus, you have agreed to these guidelines and must adhere to them. Scholastic dishonesty damages both the student’s learning experience and readiness for the future demands of a work-career. Students who violate University rules on scholastic dishonesty are subject to disciplinary penalties, including the possibility of failure in the course and/or dismissal from the University. [http://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/sjs/acint_student.php](http://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/sjs/acint_student.php)

University of Texas Honor Code: The core values of The University of Texas at Austin are learning, discovery, freedom, leadership, individual opportunity, and responsibility. Each member of the university is expected to uphold these values through integrity, honesty, trust, fairness, and respect toward peers and community.

Religious Holy Days: A student who misses classes or other required activities, including examinations, for the observance of a religious holy day should inform the instructor as far in advance of the absence as possible, so that arrangements can be made to complete an assignment within a reasonable time after the absence.

Students with Disabilities: The University of Texas at Austin provides upon request appropriate academic accommodations for qualified students with disabilities. For more information, contact Services for Students with Disabilities at 471-6259 (voice) or 232-2937 (video phone). [http://www.utexas.edu/diversity/ddce/ssp/](http://www.utexas.edu/diversity/ddce/ssp/)

Helpful UT Resources:
Sanger Learning Center: [http://www.utexas.edu/ugs/slc](http://www.utexas.edu/ugs/slc)
Center for Strategic Advising & Career Counseling: [http://www.utexas.edu/ugs/csacc](http://www.utexas.edu/ugs/csacc)
Undergraduate Writing Center: [http://uwu.utexas.edu/](http://uwu.utexas.edu/)
Counseling & Mental Health Center: [http://cmhc.utexas.edu/](http://cmhc.utexas.edu/)
Student Emergency Services: [http://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/emergency/](http://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/emergency/)
SCHEDULE  
J395/Spring 2015

WEEK 1: January 21  
topic: power and privilege in intellectual life  
reading/viewing: Chomsky, Chomsky (video)  
discussion question: What are the political assumptions of the courses you have taken in the School of Journalism so far?

WEEK 2: January 28  
topic: systems and complexity  
reading: Meadows, Mitchell

WEEK 3: February 4  
topic: what are we doing?  
reading: The Theory Toolbox, Chapters 1-5  
presenters:

WEEK 4: February 11  
topic: what’s power got to do with it?  
reading: The Theory Toolbox, Chapters 6-9  
presenters:

WEEK 5: February 18  
topic: what kind of power?  
reading: The Theory Toolbox, Chapters 10-13  
presenters:

WEEK 6: February 25  
*research proposal due Monday*  
Topic: student research proposals

WEEK 7: March 4  
topic: case study—the propaganda model  
reading: Herman and Chomsky, Herman

WEEK 8: March 11  
*book evaluation outline due on Monday*  
book evaluation presentations  
presenters:
Spring break: March 16-20

WEEK 9: March 25
  book evaluation presentations
  presenters:

WEEK 10: April 1
  book evaluation presentations
  presenters:

WEEK 11: April 8
  book evaluation presentations
  presenters:

WEEK 12: April 15
  *final book evaluation due on Monday*
  video screenings:
    http://www.mediaed.org/cgi-bin/commerce.cgi?preadd=action&key=407
    ---Media Education Foundation/Sut Jhally, “The Codes of Gender.”
    http://www.mediaed.org/cgi-bin/commerce.cgi?preadd=action&key=238

WEEK 13: April 22
  topic: patterns of ignorance
  reading: Frye, Jackson

WEEK 14: April 29
  topic: motivation
  reading: Baldwin, Trebilcot

WEEK 15: May 6
  topic: individual meetings