Mass Communication “Theory” II  
J395 (Unique No. 07940)  
Spring 2013

Class: Wednesday, 9 a.m. to noon, CMA 3.128  
Office: BMC 3.304; 471-1990  
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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 typically 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 research.

By the end of the semester, you should:

• 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 use of 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 predictive power. Ironically, the potential benefits of our efforts in “theory” building expand 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.

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 terms post-structuralism, deconstruction, and postmodernism. This course is grounded in my 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 and contain—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.]

TEXTBOOK:

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 pretend to believe that I am really smart, nodding in agreement as I say things that make no sense to you or anyone else.
Just kidding.
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 readings.
For each section of the Keyworks text, one or two students will take the lead. There are three components to this assignment. No later than Monday morning, the discussion leader(s) will send a list of 3-5 questions to the class to guide discussion. No later than the class meeting, the discussion leader(s) will distribute a 3-5 page summary (double-spaced) of that section of the text to the class. Finally, the discussion leader(s) will lead the discussion in class.

--Written report and presentation on a book.
Pick a book that is generally regarded as important in the field and is important to your research program. Prepare a 3-5 page summary (double-spaced) that you will share with the class. This is due on February 18.

--Written report and presentation on a research project.
Formulate a research project. Prepare a 5-10 page report (double-spaced) that you will share with the class. This can be in the form of an essay that poses a research question or a formal literature review. A rough draft is due on March 4 and a final version on April 8.

--Class participation.
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.
SCHEDULE
J395/Spring 2013

WEEK 1: January 16
  topic: intellectual life
  reading: Chomsky, Scott

WEEK 2: January 23
  topic: surveying the field
  reading: Keyworks, “Adventures…”

WEEK 3: January 30
  topic: Culture, Ideology, and Hegemony
  reading: Part I

WEEK 4: February 6
  topic: Social Life and Cultural Studies
  reading: Part II

WEEK 5: February 13
  topic: Political Economy
  reading: Part III

WEEK 6: February 20
*book summary due on Monday*
  student book discussion (Jensen out of town)

WEEK 7: February 27
  topic: The Politics of Representation
  reading: Part IV

WEEK 8: March 6
*research summary draft due on Monday*
  student research discussion (Jensen out of town)
Spring break: March 11-15

WEEK 9: March 20  
  topic: The Postmodern Turn  
  reading: Part V

WEEK 10: March 27  
  topic: Globalization and Social Movements  
  reading: Part VI

WEEK 11: April 3  
  research presentations

WEEK 12: April 10  
*final research summary due on Monday*  
  research presentations

WEEK 13: April 17  
  topic: intellectual integrity and career planning  
  guest speaker: Amy Reynolds

WEEK 14: April 24  
  topic: The Big Picture  
  reading: Frye, Jackson, Baldwin

WEEK 15: May 1  
  topic: individual meetings
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

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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/ssd/

Helpful UT Resources:
Learning and Career Center: http://lifelearning.utexas.edu/
Undergraduate Writing Center: http://uwc.utexas.edu/
Counseling & Mental Health Center: http://cmhc.utexas.edu/
Student Emergency Services: http://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/emergency/