

## **J384 F14 SYLLABUS**

**Course:** Journalism 384, Mass Communication Theory

**Unique No.:** 08090

**Meetings:** Tuesdays & Thursdays, 3:30 to 5 p.m. in CMA 6.146.

**Instructor:** George Sylvie, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Office BMC 3.370.

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**Office Hours:** Mondays and Wednesdays from 10:30 a.m. to 12 p.m., and by appointment.

**Course Description:** Mass Communication Theory (J384) is the first of two basic graduate courses in mass communication theory. It introduces the student to mass communication theory and research, and focuses on theories of audience and effects (the second course, Mass Communication Theory II (J395), focuses on theories of media structures and processes, and on mass media content and meaning).

### **Learning Objectives:**

- Understand the scientific method, what it is and how it differs from other ways of knowing.
- Use the scientific method to evaluate different communication theories and the evidence supporting them. We want to identify those theories most promising in explaining or predicting how mass communication works.
- Use theory to identify powers the mass communicator wields. We want to explore ways to utilize these powers effectively.
- Use theory to identify limitations the mass communicator faces. We want to explore ways to overcome these limitations.
- Use theory to become better media producers and consumers.

**Course Requirements:** Two examinations that cover course readings, presentations and other course material; a term paper and term paper class presentation due near the end of the semester; a research article extended abstract; a research article extended abstract class presentation. Deadlines and details on these assignments are given below.

All assignments are due at the beginning of class. Assignments turned in late are penalized, depending upon lateness and the nature of the assignment. If you have any questions about course requirements, check with the instructor well before the due date. If anything interferes with your ability to learn, let the instructor know. If you have questions about anything, please do not hesitate to ask.

*Manuscript format:* Please double space all work, include page numbers, put your full name at the top of the first page, identify the assignment and staple in top left corner. Do not provide cover pages or other frills.

*Examinations:* The examinations will consist mainly of essay questions. Each exam will be 90 minutes. The first examination will be on October 10. The second exam will be on December 5. The second examination will focus on material covered after the first examination.

*Research Article Extended Abstract Assignments:* You will summarize and critique a research article from a recent (past five years) issue of an academic research journal that presents original research on mass communication (not an essay, critique, review, etc.) The article should relate to your term paper topic. Show how the article led you to develop your term paper topic. These journals are good sources for articles that present original research on mass communication:

- ✓ Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly
- ✓ Journal of Communication
- ✓ Communication Research
- ✓ Communication Theory
- ✓ Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media
- ✓ Newspaper Research Journal
- ✓ International Journal on Media Management
- ✓ Journal of Media Economics
- ✓ Journalism Studies
- ✓ Journal of Media Business Studies
- ✓ Journalism Practice
- ✓ Journalism & Mass Communication Educator
- ✓ Mass Communication & Society
- ✓ Public Opinion Quarterly
- ✓ International Journal of Public Opinion Research

On Sept. 10, turn in a complete and legible photocopy of the research journal article you propose to examine. The paper must be on an article that takes a hypothesis-testing approach (i.e., either tests an explicit hypothesis or hypotheses or addresses one or more explicit research questions).

On Sept. 24, submit your research article extended abstract. In four to five pages (see manuscript format rules above), provide the following information: (1) a complete article reference that includes the author's full name; article title; journal name, number, volume and year of publication, and page numbers; (2) the author's statements of the hypotheses tested or the research questions addressed. (3) the author's definitions of each of the key concepts mentioned in the hypotheses and research questions; if a key concept is not defined by the author then you define it as you think the author intended; (4) a brief description of the method(s) the author(s) used to obtain the data analyzed (that is, the information from which the findings were drawn; in this assignment, please do not focus on methodological details but simply identify the population studied, whether and how it was sampled, and the research method(s) used; and (5) a summary of the study's results. In addition, if you feel comfortable doing so, you may add (6) your own brief critique of the research, evaluating the quality and appropriateness of the theoretical framework, the strengths and weaknesses of the evidence presented and the importance of the findings; feel free to include suggestions for ways to advance study on this topic.

On Sept. 29 and Oct. 1, give a five-minute presentation on the research article you studied, accompanied with a one-page class handout that includes a complete article reference, a summary of the study's results and a brief statement of what you learned about the topic. Make enough copies for all class members.

*Term Paper:* In writing your term paper, you may take one of two approaches:

(1) The Topical Paper. Select a single major topic relevant to communication research. Propose theories that help explain that topic. For example, if your topic is children and television then you might elaborate on theories of cognitive development, moral development and social learning, among others. If your topic is screen violence then you might elaborate on theories of cultivation, desensitization, catharsis, imitation, modeling and social learning, among others. If your topic is news learning then you might elaborate on theories of learning, cognition, schemas, framing, priming and agenda setting. The challenge here is to identify an important topic of current interest and then to identify relevant theories that you believe help advance our understanding of the topic.

(2) The Theory/Model/Construct Paper. Select a single communication theory, model or construct (major general concept). Provide a critical literature review of the theory, model or construct. A critical literature review identifies, organizes and presents the existing literature, and then offers a critique of that literature, with the goal of illuminating directions for future research. The term paper will be about 15 pages, including any bibliography, notes, illustrations, appendices, etc. On Oct. 8, turn in a one-page term paper prospectus. In your prospectus, outline your topic and identify which of the two approaches you expect to take. Also note what library research you have done to date and attach a tentative bibliography. This is not a graded exercise. I will provide you feedback on whether the scope of the paper seems appropriate and whether other literature should be cited. On Nov. 19, submit your term paper and give a five-minute presentation on the paper, accompanied by a one-page class handout; make enough copies for all class members.

*Grading:*

Exam I	25 percent
Exam II	25 percent
Term Paper & Presentation	30 percent
Research Article Extended Abstract & Presentation	15 percent
Participation	5 percent

*Text:*

Werner J. Severin and James W. Tankard Jr., *Communication Theories* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.), Longman.

*Class Schedule: (Subject to change as the need arises)*

Aug. 27 – *introduction to course & mass communication theory*

- who we are; what we do; expectations
- what theory can do for media producers and consumers)

Sept. 1 & 3 – *scientific method & scientific models*

- how science differs from other ways of knowing; research methods; reliability and validity
- uses of models; classic communication models
- reading: Chapters 2 and 3

Sept. 8 & 10 – *perception & semantics*

- factors affecting perception; other factors limiting our ability to observe and report
- misuses of language; slanting; objectivity
- reading: Chapters 4 and 5
- photocopy of research journal article due

Sept. 15 & 17 – *propaganda & persuasion*

- propaganda techniques
- attitude change; credibility
- reading: Chapters 6 and 8

Sept. 22 & 24 – *agenda setting & knowledge gaps*

- how news coverage affects public agenda; issue salience
- societal consequences of unequal diffusion of information
- reading: Chapters 11 and 12
- research article extended abstract due

Sept. 29 & Oct. 1 – *class presentations on research articles*

- 1-page class handouts on research journal article due

Oct. 6 – *Exam I*

Oct. 8 – *values theory*

- field versus lab experiments
- consistency theories
- comparative feedback
- reading: Chapter 13, pp. 262-266
- term-paper prospectus due

Oct. 13 & 15 – *spiral of silence, third person effect & social learning theory*

- political outspokenness
- censorship
- perceptions of media effects
- how people learn from media
- reading: Chapter 13, pp. 272-277

Oct. 20 & 22 – *group dynamics & interpersonal communication theory*

- group pressures
- voting & other decision-making behaviors
- diffusion of innovations
- reading: Chapters 9 and 10

Oct. 27 & 29 – *framing, determinism, hegemony & media uses & gratifications*

- how media frame political objects
- structures of dominance
- how we use media
- reading: Chapters 13, pp. 277-283, and Chapter 14

Nov. 3 & 5– *cultivation theory*

- cumulative and long-term effects
- reading: Chapter 13, pp. 266-272

Nov. 10 & 12 – *media violence*

- fear; desensitization; catharsis; imitation
- reading: Chapter 13, pp. 283-289

Nov. 17 – *individual meetings*

Nov. 19 – *class presentations on term papers*

- term paper due, plus one-page class handouts on term paper

Nov. 24 – *Exam II prep session & TBA*

Nov. 26 – Thanksgiving holiday

Dec. 1 – *Exam II*

Dec. 3 – *course wrap-up & evaluation*

**Emergency Preparedness:** In this era of accidental and provoked emergencies, the University of Texas at Austin has provided instructions for appropriate and deliberate action when an emergency strikes a building, a portion of the campus, or entire campus community. Emergency preparedness means we are all ready to act for our own safety and the safety of others during a crisis. It takes an effort by all of us to create and sustain an effective emergency preparedness system. Your support is important to achieving the best possible outcomes during a crisis event. In addition to our review of these instructions in class, if you require assistance in evacuation, please let your instructor know writing of your needs during the first week of class. If you would like more information regarding emergency preparedness, visit <http://www.utexas.edu/safety/preparedness/>. Finally, if you have an emergency on or off campus you should call 911 to report the situation.

**Religious Holy Days Observance Policy:** The Texas Education Code specifies that an institution of higher education shall excuse a student from attending classes or other required activities, including examinations, for the observance of a religious holy day, including travel for that purpose. A student whose absence is excused under this subsection may not be penalized for that absence and shall be allowed to take an examination or complete an assignment from which the student is excused within a reasonable time after the absence. 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 arrangements can be made to complete an assignment within a reasonable time after the absence.

<http://www.utexas.edu/student/registrar/catalogs/gi03-04/ch4/ch4g.html#attendance>

**Students with Disabilities:** Please notify your instructor of any modification/adaptation you may require to accommodate a disability-related need. You will be requested to provide documentation to the Dean of Student's Office in order that the most appropriate accommodations can be determined. Specialized services are available on campus through Services for Students with Disabilities. <http://www.utexas.edu/diversity/ddce/ssd/>

**Policy on 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).

**The 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, fairness, and respect toward peers and community.