

Mass Communication “Theory” II

J395 (Unique No. 08395)

Spring 2014

Class: Wednesday, 9-11:45 a.m., CMA 6.146

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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 Koplín Method, which I will describe in more detail during the semester. The Koplín Method integrates epistemology and ethics, focusing our attention on what counts as knowledge and how knowledge is used, always in historical context. The Koplín 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).

Sigmund Koch, “Reflections on the State of Psychology,”
Social Research, 38: 4 (Winter 1971), pp. 669-709.

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 Koplín 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.]

Antonio Machado, *Selected Poems*, trans. Alan S. Trueblood
(Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

BOOKS:

Required

--Jeffrey Nealon and Susan Searls Giroux, *The Theory Toolbox: Critical Concepts for the Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012).

Recommended

-- Stuart Firestein, *Ignorance: How It Drives Science* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). (e-book available through UT Library)

Resource

--Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner, eds., *Media and Cultural Studies: KeyWorks*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA.: Blackwell, 2012). (available from Jensen or in UT Library)

READINGS:

--Noam Chomsky, "Intellectuals and Social Change," in Peter R. Mitchell and John Schoeffel, eds., *Understanding Power: The Indispensable Chomsky* (New York: New Press, 2002), pp. 224-248. (on Canvas)

--Noam Chomsky (video), "On the Responsibility of Intellectuals: Redux," September 22, 2011. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PK9W5DE7ZtQ>

--Donella H. Meadows, *Thinking in Systems: A Primer* (White Junction, VT: Chelsea Green, 2008), pp. 1-34. (on Canvas)

--Melanie Mitchell, *Complexity: A Guided Tour* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 3-55. (on Canvas)

--Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon, 2002), "Introduction/Preface," pp. xi-lxiv; "A Propaganda Model," pp. 1-35; "Conclusions," pp. 297-307. (on Canvas)

--Edward S. Herman, "The Propaganda Model: A Retrospective," *Against All Reason*, 1 (December 2003): 1-14. <http://human-nature.com/reason/01/herman.html>

--Marilyn Frye, *Willful Virgin: Essays in Feminism* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1992), "The Possibility of Feminist Theory," pp. 59-75. (on Canvas)

--Wes Jackson, "Toward an Ignorance-Based Worldview," *The Land Report*, Spring 2005, pp. 14-16. <http://www.landinstitute.org/vnews/display.v/ART/2004/10/03/42c0db19e37f4>

--James Baldwin, "As Much Truth As One Can Bear," in Randall Kenan, ed., *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings* (New York: Pantheon, 2010), pp. 28-34. (on Canvas)

--Joyce Trebilcot, *Dyke Ideas: Process, Politics, Daily Life* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), "Ethics of Method: Greasing the Machine and Telling Stories," pp. 59-66. (on Canvas)

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 17.

--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 3 and a final version on April 7.

--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

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/ssd/>

Helpful UT Resources:

Sanger Learning Center: <http://www.utexas.edu/ugs/slc>

Center for Strategic Advising & Career Counseling: <http://www.utexas.edu/ugs/csacc>

Undergraduate Writing Center: <http://uwc.utexas.edu/>

Counseling & Mental Health Center: <http://cmhc.utexas.edu/>

Student Emergency Services: <http://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/emergency/>

SCHEDULE
J395/Spring 2014

WEEK 1: January 15

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 22

topic: systems and complexity
reading: Meadow, Mitchell

WEEK 3: January 29

topic: what are we doing?
reading: *The Theory Toolbox*, Chapters 1-5
presenters:

WEEK 4: February 5

topic: what's power got to do with it?
reading: *The Theory Toolbox*, Chapters 6-9
presenters:

WEEK 5: February 12

topic: what kind of power?
reading: *The Theory Toolbox*, Chapters 10-13
presenters:

WEEK 6: February 19

research proposal due Monday
student planning session (Jensen out of town)

WEEK 7: February 26

topic: case study—the propaganda model
reading: Herman and Chomsky, Herman

WEEK 8: March 5

book evaluation outline due on Monday
student research proposal presentations

SCHEDULE
J395/Spring 2014

Spring break: March 10-14

WEEK 9: March 19

book evaluation presentations
presenters:

WEEK 10: March 26

book evaluation presentations
presenters:

WEEK 11: April 2

book evaluation presentations
presenters:

WEEK 12: April 9

final book evaluation due on Monday

video screenings:

--Media Education Foundation/Stuart Hall, "Race: The Floating Signifier."

<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 16

topic: patterns of ignorance
reading: Frye, Jackson

WEEK 14: April 23

topic: motivation
reading: Baldwin, Trebilcot

WEEK 15: April 30

topic: individual meetings