

St. Francis Xavier University  
Department of Sociology

## **MEDIA EFFECTS (SOC 331.10)**

Fall 2022

Lecture room: SCHW 289

Time: Mondays 8:15 – 9:30am; Thursdays 9:45 – 11:00am

Instructor: Stephen Marmura

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Office Hours: Office Hours: Wednesdays 1:30pm-2:30pm; Thursdays 12:00pm-2:00pm;  
Fridays 10:30-11:30am

### COURSE DESCRIPTION

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. Considerable attention is devoted to the topic of propaganda, the main driver of early research on media effects, and its relationship to life in modern 'mass societies'. We also consider longstanding 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 approaches to the media that 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 how the various problems we have considered tie in to larger questions concerning informed citizenship and meaningful democracy.

### **Required Course Material**

All materials for this course are provided on the SOCI 331 Moodle page.

### **Evaluation:**

Test: 25%

Final exam: 40%

Final Assignment: 35% (see related outline at back of syllabus)

*Statement on Drop Date:* Students may drop a course, online in Banner, on or before November 2, 2022.

## COURSE OUTLINE

Sept. (8); (12, 15); (19, 22) Early Concerns: Mass Media, Mass Societies and the rise of Propaganda

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. (26, 29); Oct. (3, 6) Strong vs. Weak Effects: an unresolved debate

Violence, Media, and Criminology  
*Nickie Phillips*

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*

Oct. (10) *Thanksgiving* – no class

Oct. (13) **Test** 25%

Oct. (17, 20) (24, 27, 31) Beyond 'Effects': The Cultural Studies Approach to Media

Culture Industry Reconsidered  
*Theodore Adorno*

Encoding/decoding  
*Stuart Hall*

Representation and Popular Culture: Semiotics and the Construction of Meaning  
*Christine Geraghty*

Woman as Sign in Television News  
*Rakow & Kranich*

Women Read the Romance: The Interaction of Text and Context  
*Janice Radway*

Nov. (7, 10) Fall Study Break

Nov. (14, 17) (21, 24) Advertising, consumerism and 'reflexive culture'

Consumption, Narcissism and Mass Culture  
*Christopher Lasch*

The Work that Affective Economics Does  
*Mark Andrejevic*

Avoiding the Echo Chamber about Echo Chambers  
*Guess, Lyons, Nyhan & Reifler*

Nov. (28, 30); Dec (5) Media and Democracy

The Herman–Chomsky Propaganda Model  
*Andrew Mullen and Jeffery Klaehn*

Russiagate, WikiLeaks, and the Political Economy of Posttruth News  
*Stephen Marmura*

Media System, Public Knowledge and Democracy: A Comparative Study  
*Curran et al*

### ***Final Assignment***

35% of final grade

Due: end of term – exact date TBA

Length: 7 – 10 pages

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, draw on relevant theory and engage in critique that goes beyond a mere summary of existing 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 (mass) media effects.

*Late penalty:* Barring exceptional circumstances such as medical emergencies, a 2% penalty will be deducted per late day including weekends.

*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 failure? What lessons does your example teach us about the notion of media effects more generally?
- 2) There has been a considerable amount of research aimed at proving the existence or non-existence of a direct 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?
- 3) 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 the actual evidence for such a link, and what other factors (if any) need to be taken into account to make sense of it?
- 4) How do debates about 'filter bubbles' and 'echo chambers' mimic older debates about media effects? What is the best way to approach or understand these phenomena?
- 5) Assuming its effects are real, when if ever is the use of propaganda ethical?
- 6) Critically appraise Neil Postman's ideas concerning the historic relationships between literacy, television viewing, and changing understandings of childhood.