

St. Francis Xavier University
Department of Sociology

MEDIA EFFECTS (SOCI 331.10)

Fall 2020

Lecture room: PS 3046

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

Instructor: Stephen Marmura

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Office Hours: Office Hours: Tuesdays 10:00am-12:00pm; Wednesdays 10:00-11am;
Fridays 10:00-11:00am (arrange appointment through *Teams*)

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)

COURSE OUTLINE

Sept. (14, 17) (21, 24) 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. 28; Oct. 1) (Oct. 5, 8) 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. (12) *Thanksgiving* – no class

Oct. (15) **Test** 25%

Oct. (19, 22) (26, 29) Nov. (2, 5) 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. (9,12) (16, 19) Advertising, consumerism and 'reflexive culture'

Consumption, Narcissism and Mass Culture

Christopher Lasch

The Work that Affective Economics Does

Mark Andrejevic

The Impact of the Internet on Society: A Global Perspective

Manuel Castells

Nov. (23, 26, 30) Media and Democracy

The Propaganda Model: A Retrospective

Edward S. Herman

WikiLeaks' American moment: The DNC emails, Russiagate and beyond

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 5% 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) David Gauntlett remains unimpressed with traditional approaches to the traditional study of media effects. Choose any one or two of his “Ten things wrong with the media ‘effects’ model” and offer a comprehensive critique (for or against) his position.
- 5) Assuming its effects are real, when if ever is the use of propaganda ethical?
- 6) What does Manuel Castells mean by ‘mass self-communication’? To what extent will/does this phenomenon appear able to alter or displace processes associated with mass communication?
- 7) Critically appraise Neil Postman’s ideas concerning the historic relationships between literacy, television viewing, and changing understandings of childhood.