

St. Francis Xavier University
Department of Sociology

SOCIOLOGY OF MASS MEDIA (SOCI 325)

Fall 11/Winter 12

Wednesday 9:45am – 11:00am; Friday 8:15am – 9:30am

Lecture Room:

Instructor: Stephen Marmura

email: smarmura@stfx.ca

Office Hours: Mondays, Tuesdays, & Fridays 10:00am – 12:00pm

(or by appointment) Office: Annex 111C

Required Course Material

Coursepack: SOCI 325 – *Sociology of Mass Media*

Available at the campus bookstore

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Sociology 325 introduces students to a broad range of topics dealing with the key role played by the mass media in relation to virtually all aspects of social life. The fall term begins by focusing on historic developments in mass communications and their relationship to social/cultural change. Particular attention is devoted to the relationship between mass media and nation-building, with emphasis on the case of Canada. Issues and controversies concerning the nature and significance of propaganda are then examined in light of related debates about the character of 'mass societies'. We also consider the importance of the news media in liberal democracies, with attention to state, corporate and popular influences on news content. The term ends by considering the ways in which widespread use of the internet has been tied to changes to civil society.

The winter term builds on the groundwork established in the fall, with emphasis on the interrelationships between contemporary media products, media audiences, and popular culture. We begin by considering long-standing controversies about media influences on behaviour. This is followed by a more comprehensive look at the cultural roles played by media within their wider social/political contexts, including the growth of consumer capitalism, multiculturalism, and globalization. Competing perspectives are drawn upon to assess the capacity of older and new media to either facilitate cultural/political domination and mass conformity, or conversely, to encourage divergent expressions of identity and enhance grassroots challenges to existing relations of power.

Evaluation:

Class Participation 5%

Two short in-class tests (10% x 2) = 20%

Test 1: Oct. 14

Test 2: Jan. Feb. 1

Fall exam = 20%

Date: TBA

Spring exam = 20%

Date: TBA

Final Assignment = 35%

Due date: April 6/11

Note: Additional comments regarding assignments and course expectations are included at the back of this syllabus.

COURSE OUTLINE

Fall 2011

INTRODUCTION

(Sept. 9) Introduction to Course

COMMUNICATION MEDIA AND SOCIO-HISTORIC CHANGE

(Sept. 14, 16) (Sept. 21, 23) Media, Knowledge and Perception

Interpreting Aboriginal Cultures

Gerald Friesen

In Plato's Cave

Susan Sontag

(Sept. 28, 30); (Oct 5, 7) 'Media Impact' and the Problem of Determinism

Introduction (Empire and Communications)

Harold Innis

Harold Innis and 'the Bias of Communication'

Edward Commor

The Medium is the Message; Media Hot and Cold

Marshall McLuhan

(Oct. 12) **Test 1** (in class)

MASS MEDIA AND THE NATION-STATE

(Oct. 14); (Oct. 19, 21); (Oct. 26, 28) The Nation as an 'Imagined Community'

The Origins of National Consciousness

Benedict Anderson

True Stories of Canada: Tim Hortons and the Branding of National Identity

Patricia Cormack

Technological Nationalism

Maurice Charland

Made in America: The Problem of Mass Culture in Canada

Paul Rutherford

(Nov. 2, 4) 'Mass Societies' and the Rise of Propaganda

The Conditions for the Existence of Propaganda

Jacques Ellul

(Nov. 9); (Nov. 16, 18); (Nov. 23, 25) News, Media and Democracy

Judith Miller, *The New York Times* and the Propaganda Model

Oliver Boyd-Barrett

The News Media and the Democratic Process

Michael Schudson

Media, Citizenship and Civic Culture
Peter Dahlgren

(Nov. 30, Dec. 2) What about the Internet?

Who Controls Digital Culture?
Mark Poster

Netscapes of Power: Convergence, Network Design, Walled Gardens and Other
Strategies of Control in the Information Age
Dwayne Winseck

Winter 2012

MEDIA EFFECTS AND MEDIA AUDIENCES

(Jan. 4, 6); (Jan. 11, 13) The 'Media Effects' Tradition

Cultivation Analysis: An Overview
George Gerbner

The Impact of Television: A Canadian Natural Experiment
Tannis M. MacBeth

Pornography in the Mass Media and the Panic over Sex Crimes in Canada
Augustine Brannigan & Kelly Hardwick

Tales of 9/11: What Conspiracy Theories in Egypt and the United States tell us about
'media effects'
Stephen Marmura

(Jan. 18, 20); (Jan. 25, 27) Marxist Cultural Critique

The Cultural Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception
Max Horkheimer & Theodor Adorno

The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction
Walter Benjamin

Feb. 1 **Test 2** (in class)

The Cultural Studies Tradition (Feb. 3); (Feb. 8, 10); (Feb. 15, 17)

Encoding/decoding

Stuart Hall

Representation and Popular Culture: Semiotics and the Construction of Meaning

Christine Geraghty

Women Read the Romance: The Interaction of Text and Context

Janice Radway

Knowledge and Power

Edward Said

Feb. (22, 24) **Midterm recess**

MASS MEDIA AND 'POSTMODERNITY'

(Feb 29, Mar. 2); (Mar. 7, 9); (Mar. 14, 16)

Consumption, Narcissism and Mass Culture

Christopher Lasch

Simulacra and Simulations

Jean Baudrillard

The Masses: The Implosion of Meaning of the Social in the Media

Jean Baudrillard

Authors Analogue and Digital

Mark Poster

MEDIA, IDENTITY AND GLOBALIZATION

(Mar. 21, 23); (Mar. 28, 30); (Apr. 4 – last class)

From Hard Goods to Soft Goods

Benjamin Barber

A Universal Civilization? Modernization and Westernization

Samuel Huntington

Contra-Flow from the Arab World? How Arab Television Coverage of the 2003 Iraq War was Used and Framed on Western International Channels
Hartmut Wessler and Manuel Adolphsen

Mexico's Zapatistas: The First Informational Guerilla Movement
Manuel Castells

The Google Doctrine
Evgeny Morozov

COURSE EXPECTATIONS AND ASSIGNMENTS

PLEASE NOTE: For reasons of security as well as practicality I do not email grades to students on an individual basis. If you have a question about a mark you already received or if you want to know your grade on a test or paper which you weren't able to pick up on the date it was returned, please come to see me during my office hours.

Class Participation:

5% of final grade

Students are expected to attend class regularly, to be attentive during lectures, and to contribute to discussions. The latter may take the form of group exercises or more open class discussion. Please remain aware that keeping up with weekly readings is essential both in terms of class participation and in terms of overall success in this course. The readings are sometimes highly theoretical and/or abstract, and it is during lecture periods that we work through the ideas and concepts that they deal with systematically. Students are responsible for creating and maintaining their own lecture-based notes. I do not make these available online.

Research Assignment:

35% of final grade

Due: April

Length: 10 – 12 pages

Late penalty: Barring exceptional circumstances such as medical emergencies or other equally serious situations, a 5% penalty will be deducted per late day including weekends.

This assignment requires that you investigate a major issue or area of controversy pertaining to mass media which you find particularly intriguing. You will need to build a critique which goes beyond a mere summary of the relevant literature. This will entail evaluating competing theories and/or methodological approaches developed by media researchers concerned with some aspect of a particular issue or phenomenon e.g. the growth of reality TV, propaganda, audience measurement, TV violence, advertising, etc. While a list of possible topics is provided below they are not intended to be exhaustive. You must consult at least four substantial resources (i.e. books or journal articles) beyond those utilized in the course. Other material (e.g. news reports available online) may be used in addition to these resources, but not in their place.

Please note that this assignment is given out in September for a reason; namely to give you time to identify subject matter that interests you and to make sure that sufficient material is available for the topic you selected. To plan effectively and do well with this assignment, you should have chosen a topic and developed some kind of preliminary outline by the end of the first semester. If you are uncertain about whether a topic you are considering is an acceptable one, please feel free and visit me during my office hours to discuss it. This should be done before the Midterm recess in February at the very latest.

Possible Topics (suggestions only):

- 1) The effects of advertising on consumer behavior in 'information-based' societies such as Canada, Britain, Japan or the US, or in terms of its effects upon traditional cultures in the developing world. There is a growing body of literature with regards to each of these areas. This option could involve an in-depth look at a particular audience or community affected by advertising, or deal with the larger controversy concerning the true extent of advertising's influence upon individual and group behavior.
- 2) David Gauntlett has expressed dissatisfaction with the methods and conclusions associated with traditional studies of media effects upon behavior. As an alternative, he has attempted to develop new approaches for assessing the effects of media exposure upon various audiences, particularly children. Critically assess the new approaches which he, or other researchers have adopted in terms of their potential to overcome the limitations and short-comings often associated with previous studies in this area.
- 3) Several films produced by Michael Moore including *Bowling for Columbine* and *Fahrenheit 9/11* have met with great popularity. Moore has also been attacked by conservative politicians and commentators (and some leftists) who claim that he is nothing more than a 'vulgar propagandist'. The 'Moore phenomenon' could be examined from a number of possible angles including the political economy of the mass media, propaganda theory, the growth of infotainment, the media's alleged role in 'fragmenting' the public, and/or with respect to populist, grassroots uses of

the media. You might wish to broaden your analysis to include attention to the growing prominence of popular television pundits and radio personalities (eg. Rush Limbaugh, Howard Stern, Dr. Phil, etc) more generally.

- 4) Critically appraise Neil Postman's ideas concerning the historic relationships between literacy, television viewing and changing conceptions of childhood. This critique would need to consist of more than a book review, and take into account alternative points of view on this subject, and criticisms of Postman's arguments made by other researchers.
- 5) Examination of the Internet's potential capacity to serve as an alternative 'public sphere' which may, or may not serve to strengthen democratic forms of social/political exchange and a more politically engaged and informed public. Any such analysis would need to move beyond a narrow consideration of 'Internet communities', 'cyber-culture', or social networking and take into account the possible role of the World Wide Web in relation to broader questions of citizenship, democracy and the public space.
- 6) Another variant of the above (suggestion 5) would be to consider debates about the possibility that a 'global public sphere' will soon emerge or is emerging. What exactly is meant by this, and how likely is such a phenomenon to arise? Assess the evidence and arguments cited on both sides of the issue.
- 7) Contrast and critically evaluate the views of alleged propaganda 'advocates' such as Harold Lasswell, Walter Lippman, or Edward Barneys vs. critics of propaganda such as Jacques Ellul, John Dewey or Noam Chomsky in light of competing claims about the nature of democracy and/or 'mass education'. Contrasting the views of historic contemporaries and adversaries such as Dewey and Lippman might prove fruitful in this regard.
- 8) An exploration of a particular Canadian magazine such as *Chatelaine* or *Macleans* in terms of its publishing and editorial policy, its target audience in terms of size and socio-economic characteristics, the impact of its dependence upon advertising in terms of its ability to compete with American periodicals, and the extent of its reliance on government protection. This should be tied to consideration of the character and efficacy of relevant Canadian cultural policies.
- 9) Have mass media such as newspapers, radio and television done more to reinforce or damage Canadian national identity? Explore this issue with reference to relevant research in this area (e.g. by Robert Babe) and in relation to changing Canadian regulatory policies dealing with telecommunications and cultural protectionism. You might wish to emphasize the relative importance or unimportance of public broadcasting in this regard.
- 10) The highly popular (in the Arab Middle East) television news network *al-Jazeera* has proven to be a thorn in the side of American foreign policy planners, many of whom

claim the network promotes anti-American propaganda. By contrast, its supporters note that *al-Jazeera* is one of the only 'free' news networks in the Arab world, having escaped the direct control of any government. Examine the controversies surrounding *al-Jazeera's* success in the Middle East, and its potential significance in light of globalization.

- 11) Compare and critically examine the arguments of Benedict Anderson and Ernest Gellner concerning the relationship(s) between the development of print media and the rise of nationalism in the modern world.
- 12) There has been a considerable amount of research aimed at proving the existence or non-existence of a 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. In which direction does the strongest evidence point?
- 13) Web-based fan sites of one kind or another have become commonplace online. They include forums dedicated to rock bands, science fiction series, reality TV shows and celebrities, although there are many more examples. How do such sites provide alternatives to the products of the culture industries and/or how might industry benefit from their existence?