

SYLLABUS¹

Jour 490: Mass Communication Theory

Class meets: TFr, 15:35 pm - 16:55 pm, Room 321

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Course description

This course is designed for communication and other majors as a solid introduction into the theories of mediated communication, including the theories based on normative, critical/cultural, and social-scientific approaches. We will discuss the historical development of the major Western philosophical perspectives regarding the media and their role and impact in a society, placing special emphasis on the current and newly emerging theories applied to the digital age. Students will understand and consider the application of these perspectives and theories and potentially incorporate them into their own communication scholarship and research, as well as their own media production, media consumption and civic involvement.

Course learning objectives

As a result of this course, students should be able to:

- Develop awareness and basic understanding of a broad range of theories that deal with mediated communication.
- Trace the historical development of media theories and link this development to historically important societal, political, and technological events or issues such as the Great Depression, rise of totalitarianism, World War II, the Cold War, Civil Rights Movement, and development of various media technologies.
- Develop a personally meaningful and well-developed perspective on mass media—a perspective that will enable them to make better use of media to achieve valued goals.
- Develop a critical understanding of new media so that students can make effective use of new technology and media as they become available.
- Develop understanding of the strengths and limitations of various types of media theories, including normative, critical, and scientific theories.
- Acquire awareness of recurring criticisms made of media and the limitations of these criticisms, such as, for example, the recurring debate over the effects of media portrayals of sex or violence.
- Know and understand how media professionalization developed, its grounding in normative theory, its use in defending media industries from criticism and censorship, and its limitations.

¹ The syllabus and class schedule are tentative. Changes may be introduced as necessary.

- Understand how conceptualizations of the media role have changed over the years and assess the advantages and limitations of these ideas, as well as consider how these conceptualizations will change as new media evolve over the next decade.
- Improve general media literacy skills and apply learned theories to everyday life and specific media cases for explanation and guidance as a media consumer, potential media content producer, and engaged citizen.

Required Text:

Baran, Stanley J. & Dennis K. Davis. (2003). *Mass Communication Theory: Foundations, Ferment, and Future. 2003.*

Additional articles and texts will be provided electronically via Ecourse.

Course requirements

The course is designed as a lecture with in-class discussion introducing large amounts of material in each class. For better understanding and discussion of the course content, students are expected to read the course material in advance and actively engage in class discussions, and group exercises in particular. To facilitate the discussion of course material, students will be expected to participate in on-line discussions on Ecourse by submitting questions and ideas and keeping up the discussion as moderators. Both roles will be assessed as a part of the *participation* grade. The detailed guidelines for participants and moderators of on-line discussions are available on Ecourse.

The major assignments in this course are two *non-cumulative exams* directly testing the students’ retention of the material presented in the textbook, during lectures, and in-class assignments, as well as probing the students’ understanding and synthesis of the material. Each exam will consist of two parts: the first part comprised of multiple-choice, fill-in-the blank, and true-or-false questions, and the second part – of short essay and critical thinking questions.

The minor assignments will include 1) a media disruption report, where students will be asked to disrupt the use of their favorite medium for at least a week and report how the changes affected their life and moods; 2) a 3-page critical thought paper on a topic relating to mass communication theory of their choice; and 3) a review of a book relating to mass communication theories from the list provided by the instructor and/or students. Thought papers and book reviews can be substituted by participation in in-class debated exercises on topics selected by students.

Extra credit of up to three points can be earned with participation in events at university, Ecourse exercises, group discussions outside of class and other opportunities.

Grading. The table bellow will help you to keep track of your points and overall course performance:

<i>Assignment</i>	<i>Maximum Points</i>	<i>Your Points</i>
Participation in online discussions	15	
Media disruption report	5	
Thought paper/ debate	10	
Book review/debate	10	
Exams	2 @ 30 points/ea = 60	Midterm _____ Final _____
Extra credit	3 @ 1 point/ea = 3	
Total	103	

Important policies

Attendance. In an intensive lecture-discussion class regular attendance is crucial for your understanding of the course content. I will allow only three excused absences for a valid reason (illness, family circumstances, scheduled prior commitments, etc). If you have to miss a class, please make sure that you notify me either in person or by email BEFORE the class. If I do not receive an advance notification, I will not allow making up for a missed assignment or exam. The fourth absence (excused or unexcused) will result into automatic lowering of your grade by a whole letter.

Please see me early in the course if you have any commitments (playing for AUCA sports team, for example) that may result into four or more absences – you may have to take the course in another semester. Being late for the class will not be appreciated because it always disrupts the discussion. Being late by 30 min or more counts as absence from the class.

Academic honesty. All students must follow the standards of AUCA Student Code of Conduct. Cheating or plagiarism on exams or quizzes for this course will not be tolerated and will automatically result into the grade of “F.” It is the responsibility of the student to know what constitutes cheating and plagiarism, but as a reminder, individual assignments such as media diaries must be completed and written up individually even if you discuss them with your classmates.

Doing well in class. A student who receives a grade of “A” will have missed almost no classes, completed all assignments on time, participated in class discussions, and accumulated at least 98 points throughout the course.

My goal is for everyone in the class to succeed, and I will do everything I can to help you master the content of the course. If you feel that my guidance and assistance alone is not sufficient, please feel free to consult on a confidential basis with Gulnura Toralieva about the problems you are facing and possible solutions and strategies to complete the course. Everyone at the Department of Journalism and Mass Communications is greatly interested in your completing the courses and earning your degree, so please do not hesitate to ask for help when you need it.

Distractions. In a large class, it is important for both the instructor and students to stay focused on the course material. Ringing cell phones are a major distraction, so please keep them off or in a silent mode during the class. Texting during the class is strictly prohibited. Use of laptops is allowed only for class-related activities, such as taking notes, but not for surfing the Internet, which will not be a part of this course. Discussions and talking among students will be appreciated only during the times specified for the group discussions.

Communication. Please make sure to communicate to me your concerns and suggestions about the course, its content, or any other course-related issue. When you feel you need to write me, please use *your official AUCA email* so that I know that your message relates to the course and is important. Please keep in mind that NO email submissions of media diaries and extra credit assignments will be accepted by email. All course assignments must be submitted through Ecourse. Also please remember that students’ evaluations help the instructors to improve the quality of teaching, so make every effort to evaluate the course content and my performance at the end of the semester.

Tentative class schedule

Dates	Topic	Reading
Week 1	Introduction. Understanding and Evaluating Mass Communication Theory. Enduring questions about the role of media. Understanding and evaluating media theory. Post-positivist, interpretive, critical, and normative theory.	Chapter 1
Week 2	Four Eras of Mass Communication Theory. Mass Society & Mass Culture. Limited Effects. Cultural Perspectives. Meaning-Making.	Chapter 2
Week 3	Rise of Media Industries and Mass Society Theory. Challenges posed by media. Cycles of media development.	Chapter 3
Week 4	Rise of Media Theory in the Age of Propaganda. Threat posed by political propaganda. Early and contemporary propaganda theories. Reactions against propaganda theories.	Chapter 4
Week 5	Normative Theories of Mass Communication. From libertarian theory to social	Chapter 5

responsibility theory.

Professionalization. Recent theories.

Public interest and the Internet.

Week 6	Rise of Limited-Effects Theory. Paradigm shift away from mass society theory. Importance of Lazarsfeld and Hovland research. Information flow. Klapper's reinforcement theory. Elite pluralism.	Chapter 6
Week 7	Moving Beyond Limited Effects: Focus on Functionalism and Children. Functional analysis. Systems theory. TV violence theories. Adulthood of Children.	Chapter 7
Week 8	Midterm Week. Possible midterm exam or midterm break.	
Week 9	Emergence of Critical and Cultural Theories. Marxism and neo-Marxism. Textual and literary analysis. The Frankfurt School. Political economy theory.	Chapter 8
Week 10	Audience Theories: Uses, Reception, and Effects. Uses and gratifications. Reception analysis. Feminist reception studies.	Chapter 9

Information processing. Moderate effects.
Entertainment theory. Social marketing theory.

Week 11 Media and Society: The Role of Media in the
Social World. Diffusion. Framing.
Media dependency, knowledge gap.
Agenda-setting, spiral of silence. Chapter 10
News production, media intrusion.

Week Media and Culture Theories: Meaning-Making
12/13 In the Social World. Social semiotics.
Symbolic interactionism, pragmatism.
Social constructionism, framing theory. Chapter 11
Cultivation analysis, commodification
of culture, media literacy.

Week Afterword: The Future of Media
14 Theory and Research.
Rise of media theory. Chapter 12

Week 15 Summary and final examination.