COMMUNICATION 209.002: Communication and Society

Spring 2009
M/Th 12:45pm - 2:00pm
MGC 324

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Office Hours: Mon. 2:30pm – 5:30pm & Wed. 4:00pm – 7:00pm

OVERVIEW AND OBJECTIVES

This course introduces students to the theoretical models used to study communication, with an emphasis on mass communication and its effects. An understanding of the theoretical processes that explain communication's influence in society is critical to developing effective communication strategies and to adapting these strategies to new audiences and contexts. Theory allows us to anticipate, and therefore manage, the consequences of communication – both intended and unintended – on individuals and society.

The course is divided into four broad topical areas, which include (1) the history and foundational principles of mass communication theory and research; (2) communication in a diverse society; (3) advertising and society; and (4) communication in the changing media environment. The course will address such issues as the role of the media in election campaigns, how media representations shape our perceptions of social groups, the effects of advertising on children’s health, how the internet and social network sites like facebook are impacting community, and the rise of late-night comedy as an important source of political information. The course is designed as a combination of lecture and active student discussion. In the final third of the course, students will participate in a series of in-class debates on several current controversies in the field of communication.

The course’s key objectives are to help students:

- Develop an understanding of key communication theories and apply these theories to contemporary issues and problems in communication research and strategy.

- Use social scientific principles to critically evaluate the assumptions, theories, and empirical evidence that support conclusions about media’s impact in society.

- Use scholarly, theoretical, and empirical evidence to craft oral and written arguments about the interactions between communication and society.
READINGS

There is no textbook for this course. Readings will instead be drawn from a variety of sources, including academic journals, book chapters, newspapers and magazines. All readings will be available on Blackboard.

There is a lot of reading for this course, some of which will be difficult. It is therefore extremely important that you read the material prior to the class session for which it is assigned and come to class prepared to discuss the material. Feel free to ask questions about anything that you do not understand. Remember that if you do not understand something it is very likely that many of your classmates do not either.

To help guide you in your reading and prepare effectively for class discussion, I will post questions on Blackboard that apply to each session’s assigned readings. You should approach the readings with these questions in mind and attempt to articulate answers to these questions prior to class. The key to remembering the material and integrating it into your knowledge is to actively connect the theories and concepts in the readings with what you already know, with current issues and events, and with material from your other courses. Engaging in class discussion will help to reinforce your knowledge of the readings and contribute to your success in the course.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Attendance and Informed Participation (10%): You are expected to come to class and make active and informed contributions to class discussion. The quality of your contributions to class will be evidenced by keeping up with the readings, sharing examples, asking appropriate questions, and providing feedback to other students throughout the course. You will be graded each day for your participation, and your participation grade at the end of the semester will be based cumulatively on your daily contributions. If you miss class without an excused absence, you have the opportunity to make up for participation that day through a written assignment. If you miss class and would like to make up for your participation, please contact the instructor via email to make arrangements.

Short Writing Assignments (10%): Prior to the midterm exam, you must complete two short papers (2 typed pages, double-spaced) responding to the assigned readings for a particular class session. It is your choice which sets of readings you write about; however, papers must be turned in at the beginning of the class period during which the readings will be covered. Each paper should briefly summarize the reading(s) for the day and then offer a critique or extension of the ideas presented in the readings. You may use the discussion questions posted on Blackboard to guide your responses (though you are not required to do so). You are welcome to address all of the readings assigned on a given day, or you may focus on just one. Your grade will be based on the extent to which your paper reflects an understanding of the reading(s), your ability to extend the reading(s) in a thoughtful and critical way, and the quality and coherency of your writing. Each paper is worth 5% of your final grade.
Midterm Exam (20%) / Final Exam (20%): Two closed-book, in-class exams will be given. The exams will cover the readings, lectures, and discussion topics and are designed to assess whether you have done the required work and understood the basic course ideas. The midterm will cover material from the first half of the semester. The final will cover material from the midterm onward. The exams will include a combination of multiple choice, true/false, short-answer, and essay questions. The midterm exam will be given on Thurs., March 5. In accordance with the University’s final exam schedule, the final will be given on Thurs., April 30.

In-Class Debate (10%): You will be assigned to teams of 4-5 students and will participate in one of three in-class debates during the final third of the semester. Debate topics include: (1) the effects of negative political advertising; (2) the role of social network sites in shaping community; and (3) the impact of late-night comedy on young audiences. Each team will be assigned a position to take on the topic at hand and, as a team, will develop and present an evidence-based argument in defense of this position. A one-page summary handout of each team’s arguments and key points of evidence will be due in class the day of the scheduled debate. Specific details about the format and requirements for the debate will be provided later in the semester.

Research Paper (20%) and Proposal (10%): Students will write a research paper (8-10 pp.) on some particular effect of the mass media of interest to them. The paper should be an argumentative essay that: 1) states a clear thesis about a particular, hypothesized communication effect; 2) outlines the theoretical process that might be responsible for the effect in question; and 3) critically evaluates research to date bearing on the effect and the processes hypothetically generating it. Completion of the paper will require consultation and integration of scholarly, theoretical, and empirical research sources (i.e., articles in academic journals and books) beyond those assigned in the course. It will also require meetings with me, and submission of a preliminary proposal (2-4 pp.). The proposal is due in class on Thursday, March 26, and the final, completed paper is due on the last day of class, Monday, April 27.

It is a good idea to start thinking about potential paper topics early in the semester and come see me to discuss your plans. While the topics on the syllabus may provide ideas to you in choosing a topic, you are not necessarily limited to what we discuss in class. A more detailed description of specifications for the paper will be distributed and discussed in class later in the semester.

SUMMARY OF ASSIGNMENT DUE DATES, DEBATES, AND EXAMS

- Jan. 22 – March 1: Two short writing assignments due
- Thurs., March 5: Midterm exam in class
- Thurs., March 26: Paper proposal due by start of class
- Mon., March 30: Debate #1 (Negative political advertising)
- Thurs., April 9: Debate #2 (Social network sites)
- Thurs., April 16: Debate #3 (Late-night comedy)
- Mon., April 27: Final paper due by start of class
- Thurs., Apr. 30: Final exam (11:20am – 1:50pm)
COURSE POLICIES

Academic integrity: The University’s policy on academic integrity can be viewed at www.american.edu/academics/integrity/code.htm. Please see me if you have any questions about the academic code as it relates to assignments for this course.

Seeking assistance: Students are urged to attend office hours or meet with me by appointment to discuss any questions pertaining to the course, the readings, exams and assignments, or career prospects and opportunities. Students should not hesitate to seek continuing assistance throughout the semester. My office hours are on Mondays from 2:30pm – 5:30pm, and Wednesdays from 4:00pm – 7:00pm. If for some reason you can’t make office hours, email me to schedule an appointment.

Students with disabilities: If you qualify for accommodations because of a disability, please notify me in a timely manner with a letter from the Academic Support Center or Disability Support Services so that we can make arrangements to address your needs.

Late or make-up work: Make-up exams will not be given unless they are the result of an excused absence (i.e., athletic commitments, religious holiday, etc.). Students who foresee a scheduling conflict should see me as soon as possible, so that appropriate alternative arrangements can be made (Note: leaving campus early for spring break does not constitute a scheduling conflict). Paper assignments are due in class at the beginning of the class session. If you will not be in class on the day an assignment is due, you must turn the paper into me prior to the due date, either in person or via email. Late papers will be marked down a grade for each day they are late.

Grading: Letter grades will be distributed on the following scale:

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<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>95-100%</td>
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<tr>
<td>A-</td>
<td>91-94%</td>
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<tr>
<td>B+</td>
<td>87-90%</td>
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<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>83-86%</td>
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<tr>
<td>B-</td>
<td>79-82%</td>
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<td>C+</td>
<td>75-78%</td>
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<td>C</td>
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<td>C-</td>
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<td>F</td>
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Cell phones / electronic devices: Out of respect for each other and for the learning environment, please be sure to turn off your ringer prior to class.

Amendments to this syllabus: I reserve the right to alter this syllabus with sufficient notice to students.
COURSE CALENDAR

I. History and Foundations

Jan. 12 (M)  Introduction and Course Overview

Jan. 15 (Th)  Thinking Critically about Concepts and Arguments
Readings:
  Sparks, G. G. (2001). A scientific approach to the study of media
effects. In Media effects research: A basic overview (pp. 1-
  D. W. Stacks (Eds.), An integrated approach to
  communication theory and research (pp. 15-32). Mahweh,
  NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Jan. 19 (M)  No class – Martin Luther King, Jr. Day

Jan. 22 (Th)  Communication in Campaigns: History and Basic Models
Readings:
  mass communication and persuasion. Health
  Communication, 3, 205-215.

Jan. 26 (M)  Functions of Mass Communication in Society
Readings:
  communication, popular taste, and organized social action.
  In J. Hanson & D. J. Maxcy (Eds.), Sources: Notable
  selections in mass media (pp. 11-21). Guilford, CT:
  Dushkin/McGraw-Hill.
  communication. In J. Hanson & D. J. Maxcy (Eds.),
  Sources: Notable selections in mass media (pp. 50-59).
  Guilford, CT: Dushkin/McGraw-Hill.

Jan. 29 (Th)  The Selective Audience: How Values, Predispositions, and Prior
Knowledge Shape our Exposure and Response to Mediated Messages
Readings:
  information campaigns fail. Public Opinion Quarterly, 11(3),
  412-423.

Feb. 1 (M)  The Social Structure of Communication I: Conformity & Social Influence
Readings:
  Noelle-Neumann & Peterson. (2004). The spiral of silence and the


Feb. 5 (Th) The Social Structure of Communication II: Opinion Leaders
Readings:

Feb. 9 (M) The Social Structure of Communication III: Diffusion Processes
Readings:
Recommended:

Feb. 12 (Th) Cognitive Effects of the Mass Media I: Agenda-Setting
Readings:

Feb. 16 (M) Cognitive Effects of the Mass Media II: Priming
Readings:

Feb. 19 (Th) Cognitive Effects of the Mass Media III: Framing
Readings:
II. Communication in a Diverse Society

Feb. 23 (M) Media Representations of Minority Groups I

Readings:

Feb. 26 (Th) Media Representations of Minority Groups II

Readings:

Mar. 2 (M) Race and the Media in Politics and Campaigns

Readings:

Mar. 5 (Th) Midterm Exam (in class)

Mar. 9 (M) No class – Spring break

Mar. 12 (Th) No class – Spring break

III. Advertising and Society

Mar. 16 (M) The Culture and Landscape of Consumer Advertising

Readings:
Mar. 19 (Th) Advertising’s Impact on Children
Readings:
Kaiser Family Foundation (2007, March). Food for Thought: Television Food Advertising to Children in the US (Executive Summary)

Mar. 23 (M) Political Advertising: An Introduction
Readings:

Mar. 26 (Th) The Rhetoric of Candidate Attack – Paper Proposal Due
Readings:

Mar. 30 (M) Negative Political Advertising: Good or Bad for the American Political Process? (Debate #1)
Readings:

IV. Communication in a Changing Media Environment

Apr. 2 (Th) Contemporary Media: A Landscape of Sex & Violence?
Readings:

Apr. 6 (M) (New) Media and Community
Readings:
Apr. 9 (Th)  Social Network Sites: Enhancing or Detracting from Social Capital?  
(Debate #2)  
Readings:  

Apr. 13 (M)  Fragmentation and Selectivity in the New Media Environment  
Readings:  

Apr. 16 (Th)  Late-Night Comedy: Fostering Engagement or Creating Cynicism?  
(Debate #3)  
Readings:  

Apr. 20 (M)  The Rise of Partisan News  
Readings:  
Apr. 23 (Th) Usage and Information Gaps

Readings:

Apr. 27 (M) Wrap-up and review for final – Final papers due