

St. Francis Xavier University  
Department of Sociology

**MEDIA EFFECTS (SOCI 331.10)**

Fall 2019  
Lecture room: MULH4022  
Time: Mondays 8:15 – 9:30am; Thursdays 9:45 – 11:00am

Instructor: Stephen Marmura  
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Office Hours: Wednesdays 10:00-12:00; Thursdays 11:00-12:00  
Fridays 10:00-11:00  
(or by appointment)

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**

SOCI 331 Coursepack: available in Campus Store

**Evaluation:**

Test: 25%

Final exam: 40%

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

## COURSE OUTLINE

Sept. (5) Introduction

Sept. (9, 12) (16, 19) (23, 26) Early Concerns: Mass Media, Mass Societies and the rise of Propaganda

Made in America: The Problem of Mass Culture in Canada

*Paul Rutherford*

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. 30; Oct. 3) (Oct. 7) 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) **Test** 25%

Oct. (14, 17) Thanksgiving & study break – no classes

Oct. (21, 24) (28, 31); Nov. (4, 7) 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. (11) Remembrance Day – no class

Nov. (14) (18, 21) 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. (25, 28) (Dec. 2) 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) Joseph Kony, leader of the Uganda-based Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) has long been a figure well known to the United Nations and to human rights organizations. Recently, he became much more familiar to westerners after the release of the u-tube video 'Kony 2012'. What does the impact of this 'viral' video release tell us about media effects, propaganda and/or the capacity of new (digital) media to perform a mass media role?
- 7) 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?
- 8) Critically appraise Neil Postman's ideas concerning the historic relationships between literacy, television viewing, and changing understandings of childhood.

**PLEASE NOTE:** for reasons of security as well as practicality, I do not email grades to students for tests, assignments or exams 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 couldn't pick up on the date it was returned, please come to see me during my office hours.