It is an indisputable fact that forms of mass media affect our lives in powerful ways, ways that often elude our own immediate understanding. In the past century or so, the Western world, and more recently other parts of the world as well, have increasingly become places in which mass media institutions and the cultural material they produce play a central role in the basic socialization of human beings. We learn fundamental things about ourselves and our world from mass media (although what we learn is very frequently unrelated to reality, a point of no small importance). Our perceptions of the world are distinctly shaped by mass media products, which occupy more and more of the spaces in our lives as new technologies make colonizing of our leisure and work time easier.

This course explores mass media from an intellectual perspective that seeks to understand the social and cultural structures and meanings that affect our lives. We will look at mass media from a number of angles: the political economy of mass media, the organizational and other factors that affect how media production is done, and the actual media objects themselves and what we know about their effects on our everyday lives and attitudes.

**COURSE OBJECTIVES:**

By the end of this course, you should be able to:

1) name and describe various theories of mass media production and reception;
2) critically read mass media products as cultural objects, i.e., you should be able to understand how media messages are encoded with information about society, the individual, social relations, social stratification, and the possibilities of social life; and
3) formulate research questions in the sociology of mass media.
REQUIREMENTS:
Attendance is essential in this course. Virtually every class meeting has at least some focus on discussion of reading and related matters and you cannot profit from this element of the course if you are not here. Additionally, we will see in whole or part a number of videos, some of which are not in the library collection and which I therefore cannot make available for you to see if you miss the class session in which they are viewed. I will take attendance daily. Every class you miss will count against your grade. All absences that are not for documented health reasons are unexcused. If you feel you cannot attend class consistently, this is probably not the class for you.

To be in attendance in this class means not simply to be physically present, but to be here now. When John Lennon was asked to describe the meaning of the Beatles’ music in a nutshell, he replied “Be here now.” This is a simple yet powerful idea: to experience the moments of your life truly, authentically, fully, rather than walking about in a kind of half-present trance, failing to actually live life because one is constantly elsewhere, perhaps dwelling on a past that cannot be altered, perhaps anticipating a future that may not even come. Lennon’s idea is one I take as fundamental for the experience we share in our collective meetings in this class. I promise that I will be here now, and I insist that you do the same.

Being here now is not as easy as it might sound, perhaps especially in the present age. Much of the communicative technology that now exists in our world, and indeed many other elements of our contemporary culture work hard against being here now. Many people (including many students on this campus) seem almost never to be here now; they are so busy texting and checking Facebook and generally living in a virtual space presented to them by their portable communicative technology that they find it difficult to actually be present in many of the situations of their lives. Additionally, too frequently, students do not adequately prepare themselves for being here now in the classroom because they do not rest properly and they wind up half-sleeping through classroom experience.

To facilitate being here now, the following is my policy in this class. Laptop computers may not be used during class, period. If you bring one to class and turn it on, expect that I will ask you to turn it off. In my experience, laptops in the classroom encourage passivity and draw students away from what is happening in the classroom to other virtual entertainments. If you own a cell phone or other small communicative device, I strongly advise you not to bring it to class. If you insist on doing so, it must be turned off. If I see you consulting your cell phone or other such device while we are holding class, or if you appear to be sleeping (i.e., your eyes are closed for more than a few seconds in succession, or you are emitting a sound I identify as snoring), you may expect a displeased reaction from me.

On two occasions during the term, you will be responsible (with two of your classmates) to lead the discussion of readings for the day—a tentative schedule is posted on Blackboard. On those days, it is imperative that you come to class exceptionally prepared. For each class meeting, one of you will be given formal responsibility for
taking notes and posting them to Blackboard. On these notes, I expect a polished and elaborated document, not simply an outline or collection of bullet points, so you will have to be prepared to record a lot of information and also make some of your own elaborations and observations. Your class notes from your assigned day combined with your class attendance are worth 10% of your final grade, and the two reading discussion days are worth another 10%.

A very large percentage of the course grade consists of a course journal that you should begin keeping on the first day of class. This is where you will write up your notes, commentary, and reflections on the reading. You may also write about other course-related thinking here. Your journal must be complete, that is, you must have at least one entry for every single book chapter or article that we read and each entry should be written before the class meeting in which we discuss the related reading. This is a total of 54 entries for the term. You should give each journal entry a unique number to make counting them simpler. The due dates are indicated below. If you turn the journal in late, the penalty is one full grade per calendar day (i.e., if it is two days late, a journal that would have received an A will turn into a C). I have provided you with a sample of a journal entry on Blackboard.

I will informally check your journals once at the beginning of the term to see how you are progressing. At two points during the term, once at mid-term and once at the end of the term, I will formally evaluate your journal (i.e., you will receive a grade). At each of these times, I am looking for

a) completion (the journal should be up-to-date with readings that we have completed at the time I check the journal); and
b) volume and substance of entries (i.e., the entries should be more than just brief and disorganized notes and they should demonstrate close reading of the relevant text).

You are not limited to talking narrowly about the readings or what happened in class on a given day in your journal; you might also write down thoughts on how one could apply some idea or concept from class to a contemporary event, or just record questions you have about something we have read or discussed in class. You must however summarize and demonstrate an effort to understand the reading in question. Your course journal must be a minimum of 15,000 words by the end of the term, which is an average of about 275 words per entry. These words should be your own, which means (and this is quite important) you should not quote the texts you are reading beyond a few words here and there. If you insist on filling up your journal with mere repetition of the actual text itself, your grade will suffer.

I will talk more about course journals on the first day of class. At this point, it is probably enough to note that if you do not take the course journal sufficiently seriously from the beginning of the course, it will be almost impossible to get a decent grade in the course. Unlike exams or substantively-evaluated papers, the course journal is not evaluated according to how well you master or interpret material; it is evaluated simply
on the basis of how diligent you have been in completing entries for each reading. If there is a method of evaluation that leaves more power in the student’s hands, I do not know of it. Simply putting in the time and energy on a regular basis ensures you will do well on this very substantial portion of the course grade. If you are lazy or procrastinate, however, there will be serious consequences.

Please note that all journals should be turned in as emailed text files. I do not want hard copies. Needless to say, you should back up all files routinely throughout the term, and you are solely responsible for doing so and for the consequences of failing to do so (i.e., if you lose your course journal because your computer melts down and you didn’t have the file backed up somewhere).

In addition to the course journal, attendance, the class note day, and the two reading discussion days, we will have two in-class exams. Each is worth 20% of your overall grade. The first exam will cover material in the first half of the course, while the second will require you to draw from material covered over the second half of the course. The format of both exams is a combination of matching, multiple choice, and short answer. I will allow you to bring one 8.5” by 11” sheet of notes to each exam, but no books may be used.

Here then is a brief summary of the grade breakdown:
1. Attendance and Class notes = 10%
2. Two presentations of readings with group = 10%
3. Course journal = 40% (20% first half of term; 20% second half of term)
4. First In-Class Exam = 20%
5. Second In-Class Exam = 20%

BOOKS (AVAILABLE AT BOOKSTORE AND SOME ARE ALSO ON RESERVES AT LIBRARY):
1. Media Unlimited: How the Torrent of Images and Sounds Overwhelms our Lives, Todd Gitlin
2. Ugly War, Pretty Package: How CNN and Fox News Made the Invasion of Iraq High Concept, Deborah Jaramillo
3. Framing Class: Media Representations of Wealth and Poverty in America, Diana Kendall
4. Fighting for Air: The Battle to Control America’s Media, Eric Klinenberg
5. The Sociology of News, Michael Schudson
6. What Media Classes Really Want to Discuss, Greg Smith

There are also assorted materials on Blackboard.
January 19: Introductory Remarks

We will endeavor in the first section of the course (which runs from this first meeting through February 2) to discuss some of the basic theories and frameworks of understanding for the sociological study of the mass media. I will begin that discussion today.

- Reading: none
- By next class, you should post a brief (at least a few sentences) autobiographical statement about yourself to Blackboard. Tell me something about your interest in mass media and its role in your life.

January 24: Basic Sociological Theories of Mass Media

Sociologists and social theorists have been thinking about mass media for at least a century. In this class meeting, we want to examine some of the foundational social and cultural theories that have endeavored to make sense of the role played by mass media in contemporary Western life, including the thought of Georg Simmel, Karl Marx, and Jürgen Habermas.

1. Media Unlimited, introduction
2. Ibid., chapter 1
3. The Sociology of News, chapter 4

January 26: Critical Theory of Mass Media

The Frankfurt Institute for Social Research contributed some important ideas to the study of mass media, and we examine those ideas today.

4. “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” (Blackboard)

January 31: Critical Theory of Mass Media II: Propaganda Model

Beyond the Frankfurt School, there are other critical theories of mass media that we should explore. One important such theory is the propaganda model of mass media presented by Herman and Chomsky.

5. “A Propaganda Model” (Blackboard)
6. “Legitimating versus Meaningless Third World Elections” (Blackboard)

February 2: Postmodernist Theories of Mass Media

A wide ranging body of more recent theory on mass media can, with some risks, be labeled “postmodernist theory of mass media.” Jean Baudrillard was one of the central figures here, and today we look at his work.

7. “The Masses: The Implosion of the Social in the Media” (Blackboard)
8. “Requiem for the Media” (Blackboard)
February 7: Social Class in the Mass Media

One of the foundational categories of analysis in sociology is that of social class. Over the next two class meetings, we will explore some of the ways in which social class is presented to us in mass media and discuss consequences of this framing.

9. *Framing Class*, chapter 2

February 9: Social Class in the Mass Media II

See last class meeting.

12. *Framing Class*, chapter 4

February 14: Mass Print Literature

Mass print literatures, whether popular fiction, tabloids, comic books, or other such media products, are the first forms of mass media properly speaking. Over the next two class meetings, we look at some of the history of these media in the US and examine a few examples.

14. “Literature as Commodity: A Close Look at the Gossip Girl Series” (Blackboard)

February 16: Mass Print Literature II

See last class meeting.

15. “Tabloids as Folklore” (Blackboard)

February 21: Television and Film: Introduction

Film and television (which were created in that order) are probably still the two most important forms of mass media in the West, though other newer media products are now challenging their hegemony. We will spend a few weeks dealing with these important media products, looking both at how they are produced and how they are consumed. The first few classes dedicated to this topic will look at some broad theoretical issues involved in the study of television and film.

16. *Media Unlimited*, chapter 2
17. *Ibid.*, chapter 4

February 23: Television and Film II

See last class above.

18. *What Media Classes Really Want to Discuss*, chapter 3
19. *Ibid.*, chapter 4
February 28: Television and Film: Focus on Film

We now turn to a focus on film, examining some specific films and exploring their cultural meanings and impact. Reading film sociologically requires interpretive techniques not commonly applied to the medium, so we will spend a bit of time discussing such techniques.


March 2: Television and Film: Focus on Film II

See last class above.

22. *What Media Classes Really Want to Discuss*, chapter 5

March 7: First In-Class Test and Mid-Term Journal Due Date

March 9: Television and Film: Focus on Film III

See class of March 2 above.

23. *Hollywood Blockbusters*, chapter 6
24. *What Media Classes Really Want to Discuss*, chapter 6

March 21: Television and Film: ‘Reality’ in TV and Film

The recent omnipresence of the phenomenon of reality television is something that has fascinated social scientists who study mass media. We explore some of that work over the next few class meetings.

25. *What Media Classes Really Want to Discuss*, chapter 2

March 23: Television and Film: ‘Reality’ in TV and Film

See last class above.

26. *What Media Classes Really Want to Discuss*, chapter 8
27. “The Promise of the Digital Revolution” (Blackboard)
28. “Access to the Real” (Blackboard)

March 28: Television and Film: ‘Reality’ in TV and Film

See last class above.

29. “*Survivor* and Uncanny Capitalism” (Blackboard)
March 30: News and Talk Radio

Much social scientific interest in mass media has centered on the media institutions most directly connected to the realm of politics: news and political media. Over the next several weeks, we will look closely at key debates and discussions in this field. One of the central issues here has to do with how such mass media affect political viewpoints, and we will want to look in detail at this aspect of the study of news media.

30. The Sociology of News, chapter 1
31. Ibid., chapter 3

April 4: News and Talk Radio II

See last class above.

32. Media Unlimited, chapter 3
33. The Sociology of News, chapter 5
34. Ibid., chapter 6
35. Ibid., chapter 8
36. Ibid., chapter 9

April 6: News and Talk Radio III

See last class above.

37. Ugly War, Pretty Package, introduction
38. Ibid., chapter 1
39. Ibid., chapter 2

April 11: News and Talk Radio IV

See last class above.

40. Ugly War, Pretty Package, chapter 3
41. Ibid., chapter 4
42. Ibid., chapter 5

April 13: News and Talk Radio V

See last class above.

43. Fighting for Air, chapter 1
44. Ibid., chapter 2
45. Ibid., chapter 3

April 18: News and Talk Radio VI

See last class above.
April 20: Special Topics: 9/11 in the Mass Media

The last topic we will look at this term has to do with a media event of enormous significance in American society and culture: the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001. We will explore how the event was covered in mass media, both during and after the actual attack, as a kind of case study in the cultural study of mass media.

49. The Sociology of News, chapter 10

April 25: Special Topics: 9/11 in the Mass Media II

See last class above.

50. Ugly War, Pretty Package, chapter 6
51. “‘Chosen to be Witness’” (Blackboard)
52. “Entertainment Wars” (Blackboard)

April 27: Special Topics: 9/11 in the Mass Media III

See last class above.

53. “Commodifying September 11” (Blackboard)
54. “‘America’s Under Attack’” (Blackboard)

May 2: Second In-Class Test and End of Term Journal Due Date