

SOCIOLOGY OF THE MEDIA (SO251R)  
TISCH 202  
FALL 2015  
M 12:20 PM – 1:15 PM  
WF 12:20 PM – 1:40 PM

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### **Introduction**

“In a society that fancies itself the freest ever, spending time with communications machinery is the main use to which we have put our freedom.” – Todd Gitlin

These days, we encounter media in the form of our Facebook feed on smartphones while we eat breakfast, on our computers throughout the day, and on public radio as we fall asleep. Given the near omnipresence of mass media in contemporary society, it has become an increasingly important institution for sociologists to study. In this class, we will ask a variety of significant and timely questions about the relationship between media and society, such as what groups and individuals have power to shape media content? What type of messages and information do media outlets communicate (particularly in terms of race, class, and gender)? Do people blindly accept media messages or do we have some agency? What possibilities does the Internet offer for democracy? In considering these and other questions, we will explore major theories of mass media as well as the dominant methodologies researchers have used to begin to find answers.

This course will also cultivate several skills that will be of use to students in the future. First and most importantly, students will be encouraged to think creatively and approach readings in the spirit of critical inquiry, digging deep into texts and challenging assumptions. Secondly, in keeping with Skidmore’s strategic goal of preparing students to be “informed, responsible citizens,” we will think closely about how we can be more critical media consumers and consider ways in which mass media might be reformed. Finally, students will be expected to put complex ideas into coherent language through regular writing assignments. Training students to be great writers is one of the fundamental hallmarks of a liberal arts education and well-honed writing skills will give successful students a serious edge over the competition in almost any career path.

### **Learning Outcomes**

Students completing SO251R should be able to:

1. Describe major sociological concepts and theories of mass media production, content, and effects.
2. Critically use major concepts of media sociology to understand contemporary mass media content.

3. Critically interpret and evaluate the findings of quantitative and qualitative research on media sociology (e.g., ethnography, analysis of ratings and economic data, content analysis, experimentation).
4. Analyze the effects of stratification in media production processes, content, and audience reception.
5. Use digital communications and research tools to construct an argument supported by evidence.

### **Required Texts**

All readings for the course are available on the course's Blackboard site (<http://learn.skidmore.edu>).

### **Requirements**

The following are the course assessments:

1. **Scholarly Attitude** (10%) – Many faculty members evaluate “participation” as a part of students’ course grades. But mere “participation” – how much you do or don’t talk, sit up or fall asleep – isn’t really what most of us want from our students. Instead, most of us hope to see students accept our invitation to “the life of mind” by adopting a “scholarly attitude.” Having a “scholarly attitude” involves developing intellectual curiosity and a genuine engagement with the ideas presented in the course. Students with a scholarly attitude take the role of the student seriously and demonstrate their commitment to academic pursuits by actively engaging in the material, reflecting deeply on the readings, raising thoughtful questions and comments in class, bringing unsolicited materials to share that are directly relevant to the topics being covered, come early and/or stay late to raise their own questions about the material, and generally go above and beyond the requirements of the course. Students who lack a scholarly attitude passively complete the readings and responses, occasionally engage in other activities during lecture (playing with phones, texting, daydreaming, and so on), and are primarily concerned with obtaining a particular grade in the course. I will send you a course grade report several times over the course of the semester that includes a current scholarly attitude score.
2. **Exams** (35%) – There will be two non-cumulative examinations testing material covered both in the readings and in class. The first will be held during the official exam period. Exams will incorporate definitions, short answer, and essay questions.
3. **Media Lab** (30%) – Every Monday will be a Media Lab where we will learn to use a new digital tool to help us explore and communicate about the social world. Students are expected to attend all lab sessions, but will submit lab reports for five labs. All lab reports are due no later than a week after the corresponding Media Lab. No late reports will be accepted. See Media Lab assignment sheet for details.
4. **Multi-Modal Essay** (25%) – The main project for this course is to develop a “multi-modal essay” – a piece of writing meant to be read on the screen that makes use of the technological capabilities of that medium. The essay will combine prose, empirical evidence from original research, and multimedia tools to advance an argument about contemporary

mass media. There are several components of this project with due dates throughout the semester. See Multi-Modal Essay assignment for details.

**Summary:**

- 10% Scholarly Attitude
- 35% Two Exams
- 30% Media Lab
- 25% Multi-modal Essay

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100% Final Grade

**Grades:**

94%-100%	A	90-93%	A-	87-89%	B+
84-86%	B	80-83%	B-	77-79%	C+
74-76%	C	70-73%	C-	67-69%	D+
64-66%	D	60-63	D-	<60	F

**Course Policies**

**Disabilities:** If you are a student with a disability and believe you will need academic accommodation, you must formally request accommodation from Meg Hegener, Coordinator for Student Access Services. You will also need to provide documentation which verifies the existence of a disability and supports your request. For further information, please call 580-8150 or stop by the office of Student Academic Services in Starbuck Center. I would also encourage you to communicate with me about any accommodations well in advance of exams and due dates.

**Electronic Devices:** Unless directed to do so, I expect that students will not use laptops or other electronic devices in class. Many studies have shown that people are extremely poor multi-taskers. Looking at Facebook, Twitter, Wikipedia, etc. or even doing Google searches that may seem relevant all distract from lecture and discussion. Moreover, most people retain information better when taking handwritten notes. If you feel that your learning will be hampered by not having access to your laptop for note-taking or other legitimate purposes, please speak to me privately. Otherwise, keep your laptop as well as your cell phone and any other devices will be turned off and stowed away during class. Obviously, Monday Media Lab is an exception to this rule.

**Late Policy:** Media Lab reports and peer feedback for the multi-modal essay will not be accepted late. For other components of the multi-modal essay, your grade will be reduced by one unit for each day late (e.g., 1 day, from A to A-; 2 days, B+; 3 days, B, and so on). After two weeks from the due date, you will receive a zero for the assignment.

**Missed Exam:** Students who will miss an exam date due to an official school absence must schedule an alternative exam date and time *in advance*. As a general rule, I do not allow students with unscheduled exam absences to reschedule. In extreme circumstances, a make-up exam will be given at my discretion and I reserve the right to change the format.

**Cheating and Plagiarism:** By enrolling at the college, all students have agreed to abide by the *Skidmore Honor Code*, which says, "I hereby accept membership in the Skidmore

College community and, with full realization of the responsibilities inherent in membership, do agree to adhere to honesty and integrity in all relationships, to be considerate of the rights of others, and to abide by the College regulations.” Part of that code means not to misrepresenting others’ work as your own. Please review the detailed description of the rules and regulations surrounding cheating and plagiarism as described in the *Skidmore College Student Handbook* ([http://www.skidmore.edu/student\\_handbook/honor-code.php](http://www.skidmore.edu/student_handbook/honor-code.php)). If you are unclear on what constitutes plagiarism and/or cheating, please discuss it with me in advance of due dates or exams. In the case of a violation, the offending student will receive a zero (“F”) for the assignment and I am required to report all offenses to the Dean of Academic Studies, which may result in disciplinary action. Please don’t let this happen!

**Civility and Respect:** The *Skidmore Honor Code* also has important implications for how students ought to treat each other. This course will include discussions of class, nationality, religion, gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality. I expect students to show respect toward all the subjects of our study. More importantly, I expect you to treat your classmates and your instructor with respect and dignity at all times – especially when you disagree with them.

### **Course Outline**

All listed readings are required. Please let me know immediately, if you have difficulty accessing the electronic files.

#### **Week 1: State of the Media**

Sept. 9            Introductions  
                      -Madrigal, “2013: The Year ‘the Stream’ Crested”

Sept. 11          No Class

#### **Week 2: Theories of Media Production**

Sept. 14          Media Lab 1: Multi-modal writing

Sept. 16          “The Media” and Societies  
                      -Starr, Excerpt from *Creation of the Media*

Sept. 18          Producers, Audiences, and Objects  
                      -Griswold, “Culture and the Cultural Diamond”

#### **Week 3: Who Pays For It?**

Sept. 21          Media Lab 2: Social photographs

Sept. 23          For-Profit Ownership Models  
                      -Lindner, “Who Pays For It?”

Sept. 25          Capitalism and the Medium  
                      - Adorno and Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry"

#### **Week 4: In The Hands of a Few**

- Sept. 28      Media Lab 3: Audio storytelling
- Sept. 30      The Homogenization Hypothesis  
-Klinenberg, Excerpt from *Fighting for Air*
- Oct. 2         Who's Afraid of Media Monsters?  
-Rossman, Excerpts from *Climbing the Charts*

#### **Week 5: Alternative Media Models**

- Oct. 5         Media Lab 4: Video storytelling
- Oct. 7         The Public Alternative  
-Benson and Powers, *Public Media and Political Independence*
- Oct. 9         The Californian Ideology  
-Marwick, Excerpt from *Status Update*

#### **Week 6: Big Brother Knows You're Watching**

- Oct. 12        Media Lab 5: Basic content analysis
- Oct. 14        States and Regulation  
-Croteau and Hoynes, "Political Influence on Media"  
**Due: Multi-modal essay pitch**
- Oct. 16        Spy Games  
-Bamford, "They Know Much More Than You Think"

#### **Week 7: The Makers and the Breakers**

- Oct. 19        Media Lab 6: Survey research
- Oct. 21        How To Succeed in Hollywood Without Really Trying  
-Grazian, "Risky Business: How the Media and Culture Industries Work"  
- NPR's *Morning Edition*, "Drummer's Book Takes Shine off Rock-Star Life"
- Oct. 23        Journalism in the Digital Age  
-Wiedeman, "How The New York Times Works"

#### **Week 8: Exam Week**

- Oct. 26        Open Lab
- Oct. 28        Review Day
- Oct. 30        **Examination #1**

## **Week 9: Ideologies in Media**

- Nov. 2            Media Lab 7: Data Visualization
- Nov. 4            Advertising and Consumption  
-Ewen, Excerpt from *PR!: A Social History of Spin*  
-*Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, “Native Advertising”
- Nov. 6            Fear and Loathing on Cable News  
-Sobieraj and Berry, “From Incivility to Outrage: Political Discourse in Blogs, Talk Radio, and Cable News”

## **Week 10: Unequal Images in an Unequal Age**

- Nov. 9            Open Lab
- Nov. 11           Media as a Mirror  
-Croteau and Hoynes, “Social Inequality and Media Representation”
- Nov. 13           Representations of Race, Gender, and Class  
-Wohlwend, “Damsels in Discourse: Girls Consuming and Producing Identity Texts through Disney Princess Play”  
**Due: Multi-modal essay materials**

## **Week 11: Living Digitally**

- Nov. 16           Disruption!  
-*Contexts* Forum, “On the Sharing Economy”
- Nov. 18           The Digital Divide(s)  
-Hargittai and Hsieh, “Digital Inequalities”
- Nov. 20           Does Technology Make Teens Anti-Social?  
-Boyd, Excerpt from *It’s Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens*

## **Week 12: Drafts and Collaborations**

- Nov. 23           Media Lab 8: Reading and collaborating online  
**Due: Full draft of multi-modal essay**
- Nov. 25-29       Thanksgiving Recess

## **Week 13: Are We Robots Or Are We Rebels?**

- Nov. 30           Peer Review Day  
**Due: Peer Feedback**

Dec. 2            Media Effects Theories  
                      -Iyengar, “Framing Responsibility for Political Issues: The Case of Poverty”

Dec. 4            Media Effects with Interactive Media  
                      -Thompson, “The Shazam Effect”

**Week 14: The Far Side of the Cultural Diamond**

Dec. 7            Open Lab

Dec. 9            Active Audiences  
                      -Srinivas, “The active audience: spectatorship, social relations and the  
                      experience of cinema in India”

Dec. 11          Navigating the Torrent  
                      -Gitlin, Excerpt from *Media Unlimited*  
**Due: Final draft of multi-modal essay**

**Exam Week**

Dec. 12-14      Study Days

Dec. 15-18      Final Examination