

# ***THE INSTITUTE OF ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL STUDIES***

*LONDON*

## **MEDIA, SOCIETY AND CONTEMPORARY CULTURE**

*“We cannot evade media presence, media representation. We have come to depend on our media, both printed and electronic, for pleasure and information, for comfort and security, for some sense of the continuities of experience, and from time to time also for the intensities of experience.” (Silverstone, *Why Study the Media?* 1999, pp. 1-2).*

Much hype surrounds the media: the challenges and promises of Public Service Broadcasting in a multi-channel era, their liberating and empowering potential, their educational role and their responsibility for true public deliberation, their overwhelming presence in our lives and their irresistible seductiveness. Yet, at the same time, suspicion and criticism of the media are growing. Television is often accused of “dumbing down” culture, of offering nothing but poor entertainment, escapism and diversion, rather than creating a meaningful, critical public debate. Corporate media giants are depicted as the new missionaries of capitalism and cultural imperialism, promoting commercial values while denigrating journalism and culture. The Internet is said to increase levels of loneliness and erode any sense of community. The global coverage of suffering is seen to create “compassion fatigue” and alienation. The media are sexist, we are told. And so on and so forth. In short, the media have a pervasive social presence that deserves close scrutiny, and media literacy is now as significant as traditional literacy.

The goal of the proposed course is to offer theoretical tools for thinking critically about the media, by analysing its relationship with social, cultural, historical, political and economic processes and structures. It will examine the centrality, power and influence of media as institutions, industries, texts and technologies.

The course will start by examining the relevance of the Frankfurt School’s critique of the “culture industries” for the analysis of contemporary media and their power. It will then discuss the role of the media in the creation and sustainment of a public sphere, and examine why media representations matter. Rather than looking only at what the media do, the course will also look at what audiences do with the media, focusing on audience research and reception theory. On that basis, the course will then examine three key areas in the evaluation of contemporary media: media and gender, media and its relationship with community and national identity, and finally Internet and Computer Mediated Communication. The course will conclude with a critical discussion of the ethical and moral impact of media in contemporary culture and society.

### **Topics**

- 1 Introduction – Why Study the Media?
- 2 Media and Power: The Frankfurt School Critique  
*Discussion question: How useful is Frankfurt School’s critique of the culture industries for the analysis of contemporary media?*
- 3 Media and the Public Sphere: Public Service Broadcasting and Talk Shows  
*Discussion question: How far are talk shows mere entertainment, offering a harmless diversion for inattentive audiences, or do they contribute to a meaningful public debate?*

#### 4 Media and Representation

*Discussion question: How should we evaluate factual media reports in light of the notion of “the fiction of objectivity”?*

#### 5 Media and Globalisation

*Discussion question: What role do the media play in the increasing centrality of globally mediated experiences and interactions?*

#### 6 Media Audiences and Reception Theory

*Discussion question: To what extent and in what ways are audiences active?*

#### 7 Media, Community and National Identity

*Discussion question: How do the media contribute to the creation of an “imagined community”?*

#### 8 Media and Gender

*Discussion question: To what extent can the media truly challenge gender stereotypes?*

#### 9 The Internet and Computer Mediated Communication

*Discussion question: To what extent and in what ways is the Internet an emancipatory medium?*

#### 10 The Moral Impact of the Media

*Discussion question: Bauman (2001) argues that the media gave us “artificial eyes”. How far is this true, and can they also give us “artificial hands”?*

#### 11 Course Review

### **Course Structure**

This course will consist of lectures, student presentations and seminar discussions. There will be a reading assignment for each week. Students will be expected to have done all the indicated reading before class (a detailed list will be distributed during the first lecture). Students will also be expected to do class presentations based on the assigned reading, as indicated by the teacher.

### **Assessment**

Seminar discussion

Class presentation and written work based on assigned reading (mid-term)

Final paper of not less than 2500 words

Note: If enrolment for this particular course is too low for it to be held as a two hour seminar with two required essays per semester it may be possible to run it as a one hour supervision with three essays per semester.

### **Key Texts**

Corner, J. *Communication Studies – An Introductory Reader* (1992).

Curran, J. & Gurevitch, M. *Mass Media and Society* (2000, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition).

Silverstone, R. *Why Study the Media?* (1999).

Thompson, J. B. *The Media and Modernity* (1995).