

THE INSTITUTE OF ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL STUDIES

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 representations of suffering, media and globalisation, media and its relationship with community and national identity. The course will conclude with a critical discussion of the ethical and moral impact of media in contemporary culture and society.

Course Structure

This course will consist of seminar discussions. There will be a reading assignment for each week, with specific questions that are intended to guide you in your reading. Students will be expected to have done all the indicated reading before class (see below). Students will also be expected to do class presentations based on the assigned reading, as indicated by the teacher. Students are encouraged to show examples of media materials in their presentations (e.g. video clips, advertisements, newspaper articles etc.). The presentations will be allocated in the first seminar.

Key Texts

Boyd-Barrett, O. & Newbold, C. (eds). *Approaches to Media: A Reader*. (1995).
Curran, J. & Gurevitch, M. *Mass Media and Society* (2000, 3rd edition).
Silverstone, R. *Why Study the Media?* (1999).
Thompson, J. B. *The Media and Modernity* (1995).

Assessment

Students are required to write three essays of not less than 2,500 words each on topics that will be provided by the teacher. Please note that the 'questions to guide your readings' are NOT similar to the essay questions. The teacher will circulate handouts with two essay questions in each seminar.

Deadlines for essay submission:

Essay 1: week 2 (please submit in the beginning of the seminar). This essay should cover one topic from a choice of three topics that were taught in seminars 1 and 2:

1. Why study the media?
OR
2. Media and power
OR
3. Media and the public sphere

Essay 2: week 4 (please submit in the beginning of the seminar). This essay should cover one topic from a choice of two topics that were taught in seminar 3:

1. Media and representation
OR
2. Media and gender

Essay 3: week 6 (please submit in the beginning of the seminar). This essay should cover one topic from a choice of four topics that were taught in seminars 4 and 5:

1. Media audiences and reception theory
OR
2. Media and Suffering
OR
3. Media and Globalisation
OR
4. Media and National Identity\

5. Seminar Outline

Reading legend:

[E*] - Everybody has to read

[S1] – Student 1

[S2] – Student 2

[S3] – Student 3

Seminar 1

A. Introduction – Why Study the Media?

[E*] Silverstone, R. (1999). *Why Study the Media?*
Chapter 1 (pp. 1-12) & Chapter 2 (pp. 13-18)

[S1] Thompson, J. B. (1995). *The Media and Modernity*.
Chapter 3 (pp. 81-118).

[S2] Curran, J. & Gurevitch, M. (2000). *Mass Media and Society*.
Chapter 19 by Corner (p. 376-396).

B. Media and Power: The Frankfurt School Critique

[E*] Boyd-Barrett, O. & Newbold, C. (eds) (1995). *Approaches to Media: A Reader*.
Chapter 8 by Adorno and Horkheimer (pp. 77- 80).

[S3] Curran, J. & Gurevitch, M. (2000). *Mass Media and Society*.
Chapter 4 by Golding and Murdock (pp. 70-92)

Question to guide your reading: How useful is Frankfurt School's critique of the culture industries for the analysis of contemporary media?

Seminar 2

Media and the Public Sphere: Public Service Broadcasting and Talk Shows

[E*] Boyd-Barrett, O. (ed.) (1995). *Approaches to Media: A Reader*.
Chapter 28 by Habermas (pp. 235- 244) & Chapter 29 by Garnham (pp. 245-251).

[S1] Livingstone, S., and Lunt, P. (1994) *Talk on Television: Audience Participation and Public Debate*. Chapter 2 & 3 (pp. 9-69). London: Routledge

Question to guide your reading: How far are talk shows mere entertainment, offering a harmless diversion for inattentive audiences, or do they contribute to a meaningful public debate?

Seminar 3

A. Media and Representation

[E*] Hall, S. (ed) (1997). *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. Chapter 1. London: Sage.

Two examples of Ofcom and Broadcasting Standards Commission research on television representation:

[E*] (optional)

The representation and portrayal of people with disabilities on analogue terrestrial television, 13 December 2005

See: <http://www.ofcom.org.uk/research/tv/reports/portrayal/>

OR:

[E*] (optional)

Sreberny, A. *Include Me In*. December, 1999.

See: <http://www.ofcom.org.uk/static/archive/bsc/pdfs/research/Include.pdf>

*Question to guide your reading: Why do media representations matter?
Why do we need to study them?*

B. Media and Gender

Gill, R. (2007). *Gender and the Media*

[E*] Chapter 1: Gender and the Media (pp. 7-41)

[S2] Chapter 3: Advertising and Postfeminism (pp. 73- 112).

Question to guide your reading: To what extent can the media truly challenge gender stereotypes?

Seminar 4

A. Media Audiences and Reception Theory

Boyd-Barrett, O. (ed.) (1995). *Approaches to Media: A Reader*.

[E*] Chapter 64 by Boyd-Barrett (pp. 498-504)

[S3] Chapter 66 by Radway (pp. 512-517)

Question to guide your reading: To what extent and in what ways are audiences active?

B. Media and Suffering

[S1] Cohen, S. (2001). *States of Denial*. Chapter 7: *Images of Suffering* (pp. 168-195).

[S2] Moeller, S. (2006). Regarding the pain of others: Media, bias and the coverage of international disasters. *Journal of International Affairs*, 59 (2): 173-196.

[S3] Tierney, K., Bevc, C., and Kuligowski, E. (2006). Metaphors matter: disaster myths, media frames and their consequences in Hurricane Katrina. *Annals*, AAPSS, 604: 57-81.

See also (optional):

Silverstone, R. (2007). *Media and Morality*. Chapter 1: Morality and Media (pp. 1-24). Cambridge: Polity Press.

Question to guide your reading: How can media representations of suffering create compassion and encourage audiences to 'do something' about the suffering they see?

Seminar 5

A. Media and Globalisation

[S1] Curran, J. & Gurevitch, M. (2000). *Mass Media and Society*.

[S2] Chapter 5 by Sreberny (pp. 93-119)

[S3] Thompson, J. B. (1995). *The Media and Modernity*.

Chapter 5 (pp. 149-178).

Question to guide your reading: What role do the media play in the increasing centrality of globally mediated experiences and interactions?

B. Media and National Identity

[S1] Curran, J. & Gurevitch, M. (2000). *Mass Media and Society*.

[S2] Chapter 14 by Lee et. al. (pp. 295-309).

[S3] Silverstone, R. (1999). *Why Study the Media?*

Chapter 11 (pp. 96-104).

Question to guide your reading: How do the media contribute to the creation of an "imagined community"?

Seminar 6

Course Review and the Moral Impact of the Media

[E*] Bentely, T. & Stedman, J. (eds) (2001). *The Moral Universe*. London: Demos.

Essay by Bauman (pp. 51-56).

Question to guide your reading: Bauman (2001) argues that the media gave us "artificial eyes". How far is this true, and can they also give us "artificial hands"?