



Politics, Society, and the Mass Media (POLS-3000)

Winter Semester, Wednesdays, 6-8.45 PM

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This course examines the evolving relationship between media institutions and socio-political processes, tracing the transformation from broadcast mass media to platform-mediated communication. Students will investigate mass media systems, including broadcast, social, and algorithmic media, analyzing how they create and shape political awareness, influence behaviour and values, and increasingly mediate our collective understanding of truth and reality. Topics include media ownership and platform governance, surveillance capitalism and the attention economy, electoral politics, propaganda and manufactured consent, algorithmic curation and filter bubbles, synthetic media and epistemic crisis, media in global contexts, and public opinion in the digital age.

***Prerequisite:** 30 credit hours of university-level studies, including six credit hours in social science.*

Objectives:

- Identify media institutions and what they do
- Understand critical perspectives of sociological, political, and communications theorists
- Apply theories to conduct rhetorical analysis of media discourse
- Describe the reciprocal persuasive influence of mass culture and social/political institutions
- Interpret one's own production and consumption of media to enhance self-understanding

Deadline for withdrawal without academic penalty: Nov 18

Reading List

REQUIRED TEXTS

Saylor Academy. (2012). *Understanding media and culture: An introduction to mass communication*.

https://saylordotorg.github.io/text_understanding-media-and-culture-an-introduction-to-mass-communication/

Kellner, D., & Share, J. (2019). *Media studies 101: Concepts, tools, and critical perspectives*. Open Textbook Library.
<https://open.umn.edu/opentextbooks/textbooks/media-studies-101>

REFERENCED TEXTS

Hirst, M., Harrison, J., and Mazepa, P. *Communication and New Media: from Broadcast to Narrowcast*. Toronto: Oxford, 2014. Available [here](#).

REQUIRED READING (chapters assigned - see website schedule for up-to-date refinements)

Carr, N. (2010). *The shallows: What the Internet is doing to our brains*. W. W. Norton & Company.

Davis, E. (2017). *Post-truth: Why we have reached peak bullshit and what we can do about it*. Little, Brown and Company.

Herman, E. S., & Chomsky, N. (1988). *Manufacturing consent: The political economy of the mass media*. Pantheon Books.

Hwang, T. (2020). *Subprime attention crisis: Advertising and the time bomb at the heart of the Internet*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Korpela, L. (2025). *Epistemic Collapse in the Age of the AI-Generated Hyperreality*. Epistemic Security Studies.

McLuhan, M. (1994). *Understanding media: The extensions of man*. MIT Press. (Original work published 1964)

Ong, W. J. (1982). *Orality and literacy: The technologizing of the word*. Methuen.

Postman, N. (1985). *Amusing ourselves to death: Public discourse in the age of show business*. Penguin Books.

Public Policy Forum (Canada). (2022). *The shattered mirror revisited: News, democracy and trust five years on*.

Rini, R. (2020). Deepfakes and the epistemic backstop. *Philosophers' Imprint*, 20(24), 1–16.

Zuboff, S. (2019). *The age of surveillance capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power*. PublicAffairs.

Assignments and Grades

Letter	Percentage	Grade Points	Descriptor
A+	90–100	4.5	Exceptional
A	85–89	4.25	Excellent
A-	80–84	4.0	Great
B+	77–79	3.5	Very Good
B	73–76	3.25	Good
B-	70–72	3.0	Satisfactory
C+	67–69	2.5	Competent
C	63–66	2.25	Acceptable
C-	60–62	2.0	Adequate
D	50–59	1	Marginal
F	0–50	0	Failure

Participation (inc. attendance, discussion)	10%
Media Log (Feb 11 / Apr 6) - ongoing	10%
Learning prompts - in class, ongoing	10%
Mid-term test (take-home; due Feb 25)	10%
Media project outline (due Mar 11)	10%
Presentation (sign up for your timeslot)	20%
Final media project (due Apr 6)	30%

An “excellent” assignment (A) would display:

1. Original thinking and a superior grasp of the subject matter
2. A highly developed capacity for critical evaluation, synthesis, and creativity
3. Appropriate descriptions and quotations
4. Organizing and subordinating information well; writing and/or speaking clearly
5. The use of research sources using *any* recognized style format. For reference, see: Hacker, Diana. *A Pocket Style Manual*. Eighth edition. Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2018

Class participation: Your participation (attendance; discussion) grades will be posted at the middle and the end of the semester. You will be graded on the quality and quantity of interaction – that is, not only the volume of interaction, but quality and consistency as well.

Media log: You will be expected to gauge and discuss your usage of the media in an informal media log consisting of one submission per class (approx. 100 words), using current events and their framing and distribution as a basis for discussion. Media sources include legacy or independent podcasts, news sites, radio, TV, books, movies, and social media. In class, you will be asked to comment on the following: Did you interact with a short-format or long-format medium? How much time did you spend interacting with it? Did you consume news, sports, gaming, or entertainment? Was the platform independent or a legacy

outlet? Did the media piece appear to have a propaganda function; if so, who paid for it? Did you interact consciously (opening a book or newspaper at a dedicated time) or unconsciously (clicking on a headline while performing another task)? *Please note that class readings may also count towards your media log entries.* Media logs should be recorded weekly. A first summary reflecting on your media consumption patterns will be due February 11, and a final comprehensive summary will be due April 6 alongside your final project.

Media fast: At some point over the duration of the course, you will be expected to go on a 'media fast' for 48 hours (or more, if you can), during which you will avoid contact with electronic media. It's suggested that you find a partner to do it with at the same time and schedule the exercise early in the semester. You should shut your mobile phone off for the duration of the fast. Please include a 500-word summary of the experience in your media log, and pro-actively report on the experience during in-class discussion.

Learning prompts: From time to time, I will pose questions for your response in class. Short periods of class time will be allocated to complete those reflections. *Note that your attendance will be gauged partly based on your submissions.*

Presentation: For each chapter, students will prepare a presentation that summarizes the main argument of the reading in order to catalyze in-class discussion. Presentations are intended to be substantive, yet conversational. Those performing the summary will be asked to consider and summarize: the main argument/point; the sub-sections in support of the main argument/point; the implications and conclusion. Please also provide a critical analysis, including a series of questions to engage discussion. We will be asking for you to consider whether there was a problem with the author's argument. Is there something that wasn't considered? Questions should lead the class to defend/critique the reading and may be posed throughout the presentation or at the end of it. Be sure to sign up early for your timeslot, and *please note that a media log entry will not be required on the date of your presentation. Note also that a portion of your grade will be provided by your peers, but that peer reviews are accepted as recommendations to the instructor. Final grades will be vetted and adjusted by the instructor.*

Media Project Proposal (inc. annotated bibliography): In preparation for your final media project, you are invited to conduct research on a theme that we covered in class (but not one that you have presented on). For the final project, you are able to use a number of different media modes, including (but not limited to): a traditional essay, a video project, an interactive website, a narrated slideshow, or another mode of presenting ideas (for visual formats, please include accompanying scripts). You will still need to create a "thesis" and scope out your research (a problem / research question) so that you can make good judgments about what to include. Please consult 10-12 sources and list them bibliographically regardless of medium chosen; include 3-4 academic sources (peer-reviewed articles or books), 2-3 contemporary sources, and relevant course readings.

Media project / essay 2000 + words): Based on your research, you will elaborate upon your thesis for your final product using one of the modes explained above, with particular attention to the implications for politics and society.

Policies, Guidelines, and Support

Final grades: Grades submitted by instructors become final only after they are vetted by the Dean's Council. That process occurs early in January for fall semester grades and early in May for winter semester grades.

Academic integrity: ALL sources in ALL student writing must be appropriately referenced. Plagiarism is a serious matter. Students should be aware of CMU Academic Policies, particularly those regarding academic misconduct (plagiarism and cheating), which apply to all University courses. These are detailed on [CMU's website](#) and in the [CMU Calendar](#). Please note that CMU has adopted the following style guide for all academic writing: Hacker, Diana. *A Pocket Style Manual*. Ninth edition. Macmillan Learning, 2021.

For more information on CMU policies regarding grades, academic misconduct, appeals, and other matters, please see [CMU's Academic Calendar](#).

Accessibility: CMU strives to provide a fair and supportive learning environment for academically qualified students with disabilities. If you are eligible for these services or have questions about becoming eligible, please contact Sandra Loeppky, Coordinator of Accessibility Programs at sloeppky@cmu.ca or 204.487.3300 x.340.

In recognition of individuals with asthma, allergies and severe environmental/chemical sensitivities, CMU is striving to become a scent-free campus. Students, staff and guests are asked to refrain from wearing fragrances and scented personal care products at CMU. This includes perfumes, colognes, aftershave and scented hair products. Your cooperation is greatly appreciated by those affected.

Counselling: University students face many challenges and at times may benefit from having a trained professional to talk to. There are qualified counsellors at CMU who volunteer their services free of charge to students on the CMU campus. Students wishing to book an appointment with a counsellor are asked to contact the North Side Receptionist at 204.487.3300 or info@cmu.ca. Confidentiality is maintained at all times. The counselling office is located at C365 (north side) and is free for CMU students.

Continuity plan: Faculty and students should plan to stay home when ill. If students can't come to class, please notify the instructor and undertake to collect notes from the class note-taker. If the instructor is ill, arrangements will be made to conduct the class asynchronously or live online.

Course Schedule (also on Agora website)

		Text //	Hirst et al //	Supplementary
	Dialectics of Communication			
Jan 7	Digital dilemmas: clashes + the creation of new ideas	1	Intro	
14	Political economy of media and communications	2	1-2	Chomsky, Ch. 1
	A Brief History of Media			
21	The human-machine dialectic	3	3	McLuhan Ch. 1
28	A brief history of print media	4-5	4	Ong Ch. 3-4
Feb 4	A history of graphic media and television	6-7	5	Postman Ch. 6-7
11	Tech evolution, mass communication, and the culture industry	8-9	6-7	Horkheimer + Adorno
	<i>Media log due; test assigned</i>			
18	<i>Reading week - no class</i>			
	Contemporary Issues in Media			
25	Digital media: its evolution, promise, and impact	10-11	8	Carr, Ch. 5-6
Mar 4	Government regulation of communication	12	9	Public Policy Forum reader
11	Journalism "post-truth"	13	10	Davis, Ch. 1 + 11; Rini
	<i>Media project outline due</i>			
	Surveillance Political Economy + Platform Governance			
18	Social media and the surveillance society	14	11	Zuboff
25	Electoral politics in a platform-dominated attention economy	15	12	Hwang
Apr 1	Synthetic media, AI, and the end of shared reference	16	13	Korpela
6	<i>Media log summaries + final assignments due</i>			

Notes:

"Text" refers to chapter numbers in Understanding Media and Culture (Saylor) for basic definitions.

Hirst et al refers to chapters in *Communication and New Media* (supplementary) which are not assigned but will be referenced considerably in order to understand the Canadian media context.

I would recommend focusing on the "text" for basic definitions and making sure you read the supplementary ("canonical") readings in media ecology. Media log submissions are required weekly but only to be handed in on Feb 11 and Apr 6 for review.