course objectives

This MA-level course provides an overview of the main topics, approaches, and methodologies in the study of political communication. It explores the range of actors involved in political communication and how the information flows between them matter for democratic politics.

We critically examine key concepts such as democratic performance of the media, media logic, mediatization, public sphere, media system characteristics, pluralism, polarization, fragmentation, information quality, political bias, accuracy, media effects, agenda setting, priming, framing, gatekeeping.

For each topic we disentangle the interactions between citizens, mass media, and political actors in the production, transmission, and reception of political messages. We look at how these interactions depend on the characteristics of each of the three, and on contextual societal and political differences. We will reflect on how these issues travel to the new internet environment and how the changes brought by the internet link up to the fundamental questions of how citizens can make sense of politics and relate to democratic political processes.

The course provides students with a postgraduate-level understanding of:

- selected concepts and research methods in political communication, political marketing, and election campaign studies;
- current techniques used by political and social actors in traditional media as well as online political communication; and
- critical perspectives on and issues in political communication, political marketing, and election campaigns.

Learning outcomes

- A basic understanding and critical review of the social science literature in the field of political communication.
- Conceptual frames and research skills for the analysis of political communication in contemporary political systems.
- Skills to identify and analyze media framing and agenda setting as well as campaign and information effects on public opinion.
Course format and class participation:
The course will alternate lecturing with applied exercises and will link big theoretical and
normative questions with real world examples. Class participation is essential as interactivity
and learning from each other are at the core of what should be an enjoyable and not just use-
ful experience. Active participation involves comments and questions based on the required
literature, the lecture, and the seminar presentation(s). Questions and comments on the class
website are also welcome but not part of the grading.

Course requirements and grading
30 % - note taking / summaries
You have to submit separate notes for each reading and a minimum of 12 submissions is nec-
essary to consider that you have completed the submission requirement. Summaries should
be uploaded on the e-learning, on the day prior to the class.

For each submitted notes you can get
Fail = 0
Acceptable = 0.5
OK = 0.75
Good = 1

To pass you need to collect 8 points from all submitted assignments.

Comments on the weekly assignments can be obtained during office hours. Grades will not
be posted on a weekly basis and it is up to you to decide the number of submissions beyond
the minimum required.

Most people should be able to receive an OK for all of the summaries and all of you can easi-
ly get the maximum points for this component.

The notes ensure that you read each week but fundamentally their goal is to help you get a
grip of the readings, see what you do and do not understand. They allow you to have struc-
tured notes for the seminar discussion. Last but definitely not least, they provide very useful
long-term skills from the ability to complete tasks within deadlines, to critically engage with
potentially new and complex written materials with an eye to derive the main points, argu-
ments, methods, and to present them briefly and clearly, as well as to quickly and confidently
be able to identify and point out problems or useful ideas. These are all skills that are often
lacking in the training of many undergraduates but are essential in any workplace and further
education programs you may want to pursue.

The length of a summary should not exceed 700 words. The style is up to each student; but
make sure to include simple, clear, (even bullet point style) summary of the main question,
main ideas, arguments, and findings.
Include notes on points that you found unclear or unconvincing, as well as of things that you
found particularly interesting or relevant from a democratic theory, comparative or methodo-
logical perspective, or for a real life situation you know of; provide if you feel like examples
from what you know or read elsewhere that pertain to the topic and arguments; these would
be particularly useful to discuss in class.
Do not avoid raising points you did not understand or listing as a main idea something that
seems unclear to you. The goal is to understand the materials and be able to do the task, not
just try to get a better grade; you cannot really cover up how much you really engaged with the topic and understood it! Honest struggle to understand is valued more than chasing a top grade through avoidance of thorny issues.

**30% - In class exercises (and participation)**

Group and/or individual exercises will be assigned; the aim of the exercises is to apply key concepts from readings and cases presented in class to similar examples and real-life problems that students should be able to critically analyze. Detailed instruction for exercises will be given prior to the tasks.

Grading will also take into consideration the active (and meaningful) participation of students in class discussions.

**15% outline for Final Paper**

An outline of the final paper should be submitted in week 8. The outline follows the structure of a research proposal, in that it should serve to:

- identify the context of the research problem
- present a preliminary account of the literature on the topic, including its gaps and limitations
- identify the research question(s)
- provide (preliminary) examples, cases, data for analysis
- show the intended contribution of the paper to the existing scholarship on the topic

Details about the length of the outline will be agreed upon in class.

**25% final paper or closed book final exam**

Following consultation with the course instructor on the outline, students can decide whether to submit a final paper (25%) or to sit for a closed book final exam, covering the entire course material (25%).

Writing a final paper is particularly recommended for students whose thesis topic is closely connected to the material covered in this class. Students who prefer not to write a final paper or whose outline was unsatisfactory can opt for the final exam after consulting with the course instructor.

**Final paper (25%)**

2500 - 3000 words, depending on the topic. The final paper is based on the submitted outline and on the feedback received on the outline. Further guidelines for the final paper will be provided in due time. The deadline for the final paper will be agreed upon in class.

or

**Final exam, closed-book (25%)**

The exam will include 1) a few questions that require very brief answers on definitions or basic concepts and 2) one analytical question that refers to more than one concept. You will have a choice between two options for the analytical question and your answer is supposed to
be a concise, well written essay (you can use examples in the essay that are not only based on the assigned readings). Your answers will have to incorporate a tight argument while evaluating different positions from the scholarly literature.
The exam is a closed book test. Course-related materials, reading notes and the like will not be admitted.
The final exam will take place in week 12.

**Late submission policy** – Notes not received before the class following the deadlines announced on e-learning cannot be submitted later unless there is a compelling and documented reason.
Course-related books on library reserve:


Recommended online readings

These are all short, easy to read articles meant to give you a flavor of political communication questions and approaches; they are meant to be read throughout the course but it would be useful to go through as many as you can and especially the first three for the first week. They also give you an idea of interesting online sources for debates relevant to this the field, not necessarily academic ones. The list will be updated as the course progresses.

http://voices.ansa-eap.net/2010/12/media-government-accountability-and.html


http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/are-our-media-threatening-public-good

http://www.voxeu.org/index.php?q=node/841


http://moreintelligentlife.com/content/ideas/tim-de-lisle/can-guardian-survive?page=full
COURSE STRUCTURE AND MANDATORY READINGS

Note:
The mandatory readings may be changed as the course goes along depending on the kind of interests that exist among the students; the order of the topics might also be subject to variations. At all times, students will find the most up-to-date version of the syllabus on the e-learning site.

Recommended readings for specific topics will be provided during the term. They will include scholarly review pieces, classic and state-of-the-art scholarly research, theoretically or practically relevant non-academic research, opinion, and discussion pieces as fitting.

WEEK 1: Political Communication. Key issues in a fast changing world
(September 22, September 23)


WEEK 2: Media influence. A history lesson with an eye on today
(September 29, September 30)


EXERCISE

WEEK 3: Framing. Learning
(October 6, October 7)


WEEK 4: Message and Messenger. Negativity, advertising, information, mobilization (October 13, October 14)


EXERCISE

WEEK 5: Media roles and structure. History and contemporary challenges (October 20, October 21)


or


EXERCISE
WEEK 6: Biases. Partisanship, Polarization, Misinformation
(October 27, October 28)


EXERCISE

WEEK 7: ‘Deliberative systems’ of contemporary democracies: deliberation and everyday political talk
(November 3, November 4)


WEEK 8: Political discussion networks offline and online. Selective exposure and its complications
(November 10, November 11)


Week 9: Political discussion and media as complementary sources of political influences (November 17, November 18)

Scheufele, Dietram A. 2002. ‘Examining differential gains from mass media and their implications for participatory behavior’ in Communication Research, 29, pp. 46-65

Hardy, Bruce W. and Dietram A. Scheufele. 2009. ‘Presidential Campaign Dynamics and the Ebb and Flow of Talk as a Moderator: Media Exposure, Knowledge, and Political Discussion’ in Communication Theory, 19, pp. 89-101


Week 10: “Here comes everybody”… or not. Citizens, mass media and political actors in the digital age (November 24, November 25)


Week 11: Citizens, mass media and political actors in election campaigns. A review of key issues in political communication (December 1, December 2)


or


Or

Week 12: The study of political communication in the era of new information and communication technologies
(December 8, December 9)
