Course description

Political communication is an interdisciplinary field found at the intersections of communication, media and journalism studies, political science and sociology. Its theoretical foundations and empirical approaches are diverse, drawn as they are from those different fields. And as one of the field of communication’s primary subfields, it is characterized with its focus on developing and answering research questions rather than the development of unified intellectual traditions.

Given this, the course is designed to introduce students to major works and topics in this interdisciplinary field. Its reading list is designed to include both ‘classics’ in the field and state-of-the-field work. Political communication’s breadth and diversity makes it difficult to claim comprehensiveness in such a survey, and the choices made here necessarily reflect the interests and expertise of the instructor.

The course’s overarching structure follows three major themes: the role of media in society, with particular focus on journalism and news media, how their work is done, and relationships to citizens; the media effects tradition, and what it has contributed to our understanding of media’s impacts on public opinion; and the place of political communications in civic life, with particular concern for media’s role in larger social structures, political communication outside of the media, and the future of citizenship and civic engagement in new media.

Assignments

*Research paper (40%)
*Discussion leadership (20%)
*State of the field presentation (10%)
*Comment papers (20%)
*Participation (10%)

1 Note: Concept and text in some assignments borrowed and developed from Dhavan Shah, Syllabus for Political Communication seminar, Spring 2011
Research paper

The major requirement for this course is an original research paper written individually by each student and presented to other seminar participants. The paper should grow out of one of the topics or theories covered in the course and contain the following sections: (1) brief introduction, (2) literature review, (3) statement of hypothesis or research model, (4) actual or proposed methodology, (5) results or proposed analysis, (6) concluding discussion about what was or will be learned. The methodology may be quantitative or qualitative. The goal of the paper is to contribute, however modestly, to research in the area of political communication. The paper can present findings based on existing and available data sets (e.g., National Election Study, General Social Survey, DDB Life Style Archive, The Pew Internet and American Life Project, the National Annenberg Election Study, the Mass Communication Research Center Archive, etc.) or the collection of original data. Some of you may wish to extend projects you have developed elsewhere or to refine ideas toward completion of Master’s or Doctoral theses; please consult with me if this is the case.

Your paper will be evaluated on whether it integrates the concepts encountered in class into coherent and testable propositions that have implications for theory in political communication. Your research paper should reflect an original extension of the ideas we have encountered in class, not a simple recapitulation of past work. A two-page prospectus for your seminar paper is due on April 15. Seminar presentations, in the form of 12-minute conference presentations, will be held during the last class period and one out-of-class session. The final paper is due Monday, May 13th by 4:00 P.M. and should be between 15-20 pages of text, not including cover, references, tables, and figures.

Discussion leadership

Every student will serve as a discussant for two class sessions. Discussants will write a 6 to 8 page summary and critique of the week’s readings (including recommended readings) and provide a brief list of questions to facilitate discussion. As a discussant, you will be responsible for spurring but not necessarily leading student discussion of the readings by pointing out what you believe are the strengths and weaknesses of the readings and encouraging debate about your reflections. Ideally, you will choose a week that coincides with your broader interests. That way, your review of the reading materials will be useful to you when preparing your paper. Review reports will be sent to the class listserv as an .rtf or .pdf at least 6 hours before class.

State of the field presentation

Each student, during one of the sessions in which they are a discussion leader, will conclude the class by offering a state of the field presentation. This presentation should present to the class a very recent article (published in last 24 months) not on the syllabus that builds on the literature and ideas of the week’s readings. The student will have 12 minutes to present the article, which will be followed by questions—like a conference presentation, but presenting another’s work. A powerpoint or other visual presentation would be appropriate, including key charts or data presented in the article. In their presentation, students should present the theoretical and
empirical advancements made in the article, with particular focus on the ideas in the week’s readings and the discussion that has just taken place. They also should critique the argument and method of the article.

Comment papers

Every week, with the exception of the weeks you prepare review reports, you will produce a brief set of written comments on the readings. You may miss 4 weekly comment papers (that is, you will complete six comment papers, omitting the two weeks you will be producing review reports). These comment papers should be 1-2 pages in length. Papers do not need to follow any particular format or necessarily cover all the readings, as long as they illustrate that you made an effort to process that week’s reading and have reflected on the research you encountered. Some of you may use these comment papers to summarize the key points of each of the readings into notes for their own future use. Others may organize their comments into critical essays or critiques on the general themes of the week. Yet others may focus on detailed reviews of a few readings or even a single reading, digging deeply into a topic of particular interest. Bring your comment papers to class and turn them in to me at the end. If you do not complete your comment paper for a particular week, do not avoid class. Come to seminar, listen and learn, and comment when you can.

Participation

The final 10% of the course grade is based on seminar participation. Students are expected to attend class every week prepared to discuss the readings. There will be many opportunities for participation—from responding to the instructor’s lectures, to attempting to answer discussant’s questions, to asking questions of the presenter of the state of the field report. This portion of the grade will based on engagement with class readings and discussion.

Readings

Readings consist of required books, listed below, and articles, listed in the schedule. Students should buy the books; articles will be made available by the instructor at a secure web location.

All readings should be considered ‘required’ and should be completed before class. That said, in weeks with many readings the instructor will highlight some readings to read thoroughly and others to skim.

Books
Lippmann, *Public Opinion*
Delli Carpini & Keeter, *What Americans Know About Politics and Why It Matters*
Putnam, *Bowling Alone*
Gamson, *Talking Politics*
Eliasoph, *Avoiding Politics*
Bimber, *Information and American Democracy*
Karpf, *The MoveOn Effect*
Schedule

Week 1, January 21 (NO CLASS)

Week 2, January 28 **Introductions**

Week 3, February 4 **Foundations, continuity and transformation**

* Lippmann, *Public Opinion*

Week 4, February 11 **Communication and the citizen: Who learns? When?**

* Delli Carpini & Keeter, *What Americans Know About Politics*

Week 5, February 18 **The news—and how it got that way**

Week 6, February 25  **Agenda setting and priming**


Week 7, March 4  **Framing**

**Individual-level**


**Media-level**


Week 8, March 11  **Information processing and biases**


Week 9, March 18 **Polarization and contentious politics**

doi:10.1177/0002764211433793
* Further reading TBA

Week 10, March 25 **Spring break**

Week 11, April 1 **Media in the social fabric**

doi:10.1080/13621020600955033

Week 12, April 8 **Political communication beyond media: Discourse**

Week 13, April 15 The network society and what it means for political communication


Week 14, April 22 Communicating in an era of changing civic norms

* Wells TBA
* Thorson TBA

Week 15, April 29 Communicating collective action


Week 16, May 6 Presentations