

Introduction to media studies

Comm 3211 // Fall 2026

Mon & Wed // 11:15a-12:30p // Blegen 10

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Overview

This course provides a basic introduction to **critical** media studies: the analysis of media texts, institutions, audiences, and practices with a focus on the historical, cultural, political, and economic contexts in which those phenomena operate. The media play significant -- and powerful -- roles in our daily lives: enough so that trying to understand contemporary US society without a solid understanding of the media would be nearly impossible. Our readings and lectures this semester will provide an overview of different analytical and theoretical approaches to the study of the media that scholars have taken in the past, as well as a survey of recent shifts in the media terrain that will have (and are already having) significant impact on the future of media studies.

Contact information

The most reliable way to reach either of us is via email, using the addresses at the top of the page above. We will try to respond to your emails within 24-48 hours after we see them (which may be several hours later, especially if you send them after 10:00 pm or over the weekend).

Past experience suggests that students rarely (if ever) attend formal office hours, so we have not scheduled any of those. Both of us would still be happy to meet with you if you have questions about the course that we can help with. Simply email whichever one of us you want to meet with, and we will find a mutually agreeable day, time, and modality for that to happen.

Choose your adventure

You will choose between two different Paths for how to take this course. Both Paths require the same readings and the same recorded video lectures, all of which will be available on the course Canvas site.

- **Path #1** will be completely **remote** and **asynchronous**. The only graded work for Path #1 will be multiple-choice Quizzes that will be based on both the lectures and the readings. Path #1 comes with a **hard cap of C+ on the final grade** you can earn.
- **Path #2** will **require in-person participation** during our scheduled class meetings, **online participation** via Canvas discussion forums, and **at least 2 1000-word papers**, all of which will factor into your final grade. Path #2 does **not** include any zoom/hybrid/remote options, and has no cap on the final grade.

By default, you will begin the semester on Path #1. In order to follow Path #2, you **must** submit the Reflection Essay (described on p. 4 below) by **5:00 pm on 21 Sep**.

The precise requirements for Path #2 will -- necessarily -- depend on how many students choose it, but you can safely assume that all of the following will factor into your final grade if you choose this Path:

- **In-class participation.** You will need to attend class regularly and to come prepared to engage in discussions about the required readings and lectures. Your participation will need to be significant, thoughtful, and on-topic.
- **Online participation.** You will need to make at least one 250+ word post to the course's online discussion forums every week (on average). Your posts need to engage with major concepts, issues, and themes from the course material, and they need to do so in significant and thoughtful fashion.
- **Essays.** You will need to write at least two 1000+ word essays in addition to the Reflection Essay. These essays will be responses to specific prompts that will require you to apply major concepts from the required readings and lectures to specific media examples.

Complete details for Path #2 requirements and assignments will be made available after 21 Sep.

Other important rules and advice

- If you want to follow Path #2, you **must** submit the Reflection Essay and you **must** do so on time. After that deadline, you can **not** switch from Path #1 to Path #2.
- If you choose Path #2, but then decide you would prefer to follow Path #1, you have until 12:01 am on 18 Oct (i.e., 24 hours before the start of Quiz #1) to **notify me via email** that you want to switch back to Path #1. If you make this choice, it is irreversible. Your final course grade will depend entirely on the Quizzes and have a hard cap of C+/. You will also not receive credit for any Path #2 work you have done.
- There is neither sin nor shame in choosing Path #1. By design, it is a much easier option than Path #2. This is why it comes with a cap on the final grade. And some (many? most? all?) of you may have good reasons to prefer a Path through the course that requires less work but still allows you to earn credit.
- Choosing Path #2 does **not** guarantee you any particular final grade. It simply means that you have the opportunity to do the kind and amount of work that can earn you a final grade higher than a C+.

Time

The University assumes that 1 credit hour equals 3 hours of work/week, and so you should plan on **working at least 9 hours/week** on this course. This is both an **estimate** (reading/writing speeds vary) and an **average** (workloads vary from week to week), and it reflects the **minimum** work needed to earn a **passing** grade.

All scheduled events and deadlines are listed in **US Central Time**, and will be automatically enforced by Canvas. If you are in some other time zone when you take a Quiz (Path #1) or submit a paper (Path #2), you will still need to adhere to the U's clock to complete that assignment properly.

Canvas

Log in to the [U's main Canvas page](#) and select "COMM 3211" from either the Dashboard or the Courses menu. Canvas offers additional information about how to use the platform in both [text](#) and [video](#) formats. We will use Canvas for several things this semester:

- access to the official course documents
- access to all the required readings
- access to all the required lectures
- taking the Quizzes (Path #1)
- submitting required essays (Path #2)
- submitting required contributions to the online discussion forums (Path #2)
- a repository for media examples relevant to our required readings
- business-related announcements about the course

There are Canvas phone apps, which can push notifications/reminders to you and help you access (some) course content. But even Canvas(!) advises against using them as the primary platform for navigating a course.

Readings and lectures

These will all be made available on Canvas, and all of them are **required**, regardless of which Path you are on. In general, there will be 2-3 video lectures every week, each lasting roughly 15-20 minutes. These will normally be available on Canvas no later than 12:00 noon on the Sunday at the start of the week. If you are on Path #1, you have some leeway in terms of when you do the readings and/or watch the lectures. In general, though:

- You would be wise to do the readings and watch the lectures in the order they are listed. All of them will present concepts, issues, and/or arguments that you will need to know in order to do well on the Quizzes.
- Watching the lectures will **not** serve as a substitute for doing the readings -- and vice versa. The lectures will complement and augment the readings, rather than summarize them.
- Doing the readings and watching the lectures **as soon as you can** after they are available will give you time to think about them carefully, to ask Asa and/or me questions about them, and to review them prior to the Quizzes.
- The captions for the video lectures are generated automatically. Given the limitations of the technology, they are relatively accurate. But they are definitely still imperfect, and you should treat them strictly as a supplement to the lectures, rather than a substitute for them.

Quizzes (Path #1)

There will be 3 Quizzes, one each on 19 Oct, 23 Nov, and 23 Dec. Each Quiz will consist of 25 multiple-choice questions and will be semi-cumulative: i.e., it will focus on required readings and lectures from the 4-5 week period immediately preceding, but that material will often depend on material from earlier in the semester.

Each Quiz is worth up to 50 points, and only your two highest Quiz scores count toward your final grade. Quiz totals will translate to final course grades as follows:

- 90-100 = C+
- 80-89 = C
- 70-79 = C-
- 60-69 = D+
- 50-59 = D
- 0-49 = F

Please note that **no make-up Quizzes will be offered**. If you miss (or fail) one Quiz, you still have two other opportunities to earn the maximum grade possible for Path #1.

Quizzes will take place on Canvas. For any given Quiz:

- It will be available for 24 hours: from 12:01 am on the day of Quiz until 12:01 am on the following day.
- You have 90 minutes from the moment you start an Quiz to complete it. There is **no** option to pause an Quiz once you have begun. If you want the full 90 minutes available to complete an Quiz, make sure to start it no later than 10:31 pm, as Quizzes will automatically shut down when their scheduled time ends.
- Questions will focus on major concepts, issues, and arguments from the 4-5 week period immediately preceding the Quiz (5 weeks for Quizzes #1-2, 4 weeks for Quiz #3).
- The 25 questions that comprise your version of each Quiz will be drawn at random from a question bank containing 35-50 different questions. Questions will be presented in random order, and potential answers for any given question will also be shuffled randomly.

You are free to consult whatever resources you want while you take the Quizzes: e.g., the readings, the lectures, your notes, your classmates. That said, the time that you have for any given Quiz will **not** be enough time for you to depend entirely on such “lifelines.” To do well on the Quizzes, I strongly recommend the following:

- **Study.** This is old-fashioned advice, but it’s still worthwhile. The better you know and understand the major concepts of the course, the easier any given Quizzes will be for you.
- **Study together.** Create study groups with your classmates. Your individual Quizzes will all be slightly different, but study groups are a good way to help everyone improve their understanding of the material.
- **Create your own study guides.** A one-page summary of the Big Ideas from the course will be more useful to you during a Quiz than a dozen pages of notes.
- **Be prepared.** If you want to consult the readings during an Quiz, have them downloaded and open (or, if you prefer, printed) before you start. You don’t want to lose 10 minutes of Quiz time waiting for a download to complete or a print job to finish so that you can consult a reading.
- **Focus.** Because the Quizzes happen online, in theory, you can take them anywhere that you have internet access. But be more selective than that. Take each Quiz in a quiet room, with as few distractions as possible, so that you can concentrate on answering the questions well. Make sure you have stable internet access, and use a laptop or desktop computer, rather than a phone or tablet.

Reflection essay (RE) (Path #2)

In a well-crafted, thoughtful, and persuasive essay of **at least 1000 words**, explain (1) what you think is the most serious **media-related problem** facing the world today and (2) **why** you think this problem is more important than any other. This is not a research paper. It is a deliberately open-ended essay in which you make and support a significant claim related to the course’s central theme, based on your existing knowledge of the world.

Important things to remember while writing your essay:

- Your essay needs to focus on a phenomenon where media is **central** to what makes that phenomenon a problem. Climate change, for example, would be a poor choice for this essay. It’s a serious problem, but what makes it such a problem isn’t directly related to media practices, representations, institutions, etc.
- Your answer to the second part of the prompt above should constitute the bulk of your essay. In most cases, you should be able to answer the “what” question (i.e., part 1) in no more than a paragraph, but answering the “why” question (i.e., part 2) requires you to justify the choice you made in part 1 -- and that means supporting your claim with evidence and logic.
- There is no single correct answer I am looking for that your essay needs to provide. That said, your essay really does have to fit the prompt and meet the requirements described here.
- Don’t procrastinate! This is, by design, the simplest bit of formal writing you will do for this course. It does **not** require you to do additional research -- or even to engage directly with the required readings. In theory, it’s an essay that you are fully capable of writing before the semester even begins.

This essay is due by **5:00 pm on 21 Sep**. This essay will be **ungraded**, but you **must** submit it by the deadline in order to complete the course following Path #2. **Absolutely no late submissions will be accepted.** Essays that fall short of the required word count and/or that stray too far from the prompt will **not** count as successful REs, and will require you to complete the course following Path #1.

Essays (Path #2)

Precise details about the Essays required to complete Path #2 successfully -- including due dates -- will be made available after 21 Sep. All Essays (including the RE) must meet the following technical requirements

File formats

Acceptable formats are:

- LibreOffice (.odt)
- Microsoft Word (.doc or .docx)
- Rich Text Format (.rtf)

Essays submitted in other formats (PDFs, Microsoft Works, etc.) or as links to online files (Google Drive, Dropbox, etc.) will **not** be accepted.

Word counts

- The word count requirement for any given Essay represents the **minimum** writing necessary to produce acceptable work. Your goal should be to write **strong** Essays, rather than simply reaching whatever word count is required and then stopping.
- The minimum word count requirement for any given Essay is **firm**. If what you've written falls short of that requirement by even a single word, you will **not** receive credit for that Essay.
- Different apps use different rules for counting words. Submitting Essays that are just long enough runs the risk that they will fall short of the minimum requirement when Asa or I check those counts.
- Don't pad out your Essays with "empty" words. If more than 10% of any Essay you submit consists of filler prose, **only the non-filler words will count** toward meeting the word count requirement.
- Only the main body of your text counts. Headers, footers, titles, and reference lists do not count. Quotes from other sources do count, but only if those are trimmed to an appropriate length (e.g., do not quote a 75-word passage if only 10 of those words are actually necessary for your argument to work well).

Scholastic dishonesty

The following is a partial list of examples of scholastic dishonesty:

- plagiarism in any of its forms
- copying another student's work (in whole or in part)
- having someone else do any of the course's required work on your behalf
- knowingly assisting someone else in their efforts to engage in any of the above practices

Penalties for scholastic dishonesty range from no credit for the relevant assignment to a final course grade of F. These penalties are independent of any that might be imposed by the U. For more details, please see the U's [student conduct code](#) and the information page on [potential consequences](#) for code violations.

If you choose to use AI "assistants" (e.g., ChatGPT, Bard, Perplexity, etc.) in connection with your work for this course -- and to be as clear as possible, I would **strongly** recommend that you do **not** do this -- do so with **extreme** care. While such tools can potentially be helpful for brainstorming ideas and sharpening your own arguments, using them to do the major thinking or writing that you need to do yourself means that you're not actually learning what you should be -- and that you run the serious risk of **not** earning credit for any affected assignment. Remember that AI tools have a number of known weaknesses:

- They "hallucinate" in ways that generate false, misleading, and even dangerous information.
- They produce vague, generic prose rather than thoughtful, critical arguments.
- They mimic the appearance of human thought without actually engaging in such thought themselves.
- They are **not** trained to understand or analyze the kind of readings you will need to understand and analyze in order to complete the course successfully.

There is no penalty for using AI tools in this course (much like there is no penalty for using "spell check"), but it is **very** unlikely that you will be able to count on AI to do the required work for this course in a satisfactory fashion.

Disability accommodations

If you have an accommodation letter from the U's Disability Resource Center (DRC), I will be happy to make accommodations for you that are consistent with the course's major learning outcomes and the major goals of the assignments. To that end, here are some important considerations:

- Please share your DRC letter with me **as soon as you can**, since I cannot make accommodations happen retroactively, nor can I make them happen without having received a copy of your letter.
- DRC letters are intended to open up **an ongoing dialogue between us** about how best to ensure that you have a fair opportunity to succeed in this course. I will email you after reading your letter with my sense of how/if the requested accommodations match up with the course, and you should respond with any questions or concerns you may have, so that we can reach a happy mutual understanding.
- Individual accommodation letters can (and do) vary, but they are also largely put together from a range of common accommodations. Many of the most common requests either do not apply to this course or they are already built into the syllabus for everyone.
- The most commonly requested accommodation is for flexible deadlines. This does **not** work for Quizzes (Path #1) or the RE (Path #2), but it **can** be applied to the other required Essays (Path #2).
 - Accommodation-related extensions are **not** automatic. You need to **contact me in advance** to request them, and we need to agree on a new deadline for the Essay in question.
 - Such extensions have unavoidable "domino" effects. The semester doesn't (and can't) get extended, and Asa and I will provide feedback on a "first in, first back" basis. Taking an extension on an Essay means you will get feedback on that Essay deeper into the semester, and that you will have less time to incorporate that feedback into your work on subsequent Essays.

General tips

- **Read the syllabus.** It contains the basic rules for the course. If you find yourself dealing with major life emergencies, I may be willing to bend the rules, but failing to know the rules is **not** such an emergency.
- **Do not overburden yourself.** There are only 168 hours in a week. If your schedule requires 80+ hours/week for school, work, and other major responsibilities (e.g., jobs, internships, family care), then you may want to find ways to ease your load.
- **Contact us if you need help.** If the reading has you baffled, if you want to discuss an idea you have for an assignment, or if you have questions/concerns about the course, set up a Zoom meeting with me and or Asa. We're happy to help if we can.
- **Stay on schedule.** The topics we cover early on will set up topics we will cover later in the semester. If you fall behind, make sure to catch up on whatever material you missed/skipped as quickly as possible.
- **Plan ahead.** The work you need to do for this course takes time. The semester will go by **much** faster than you think, so plan accordingly. Trying to cram most of your work right before Quiz dates or paper deadlines will not serve you well.
- **Do the required reading and watch the required lectures.** Your ability to do well in this course depends on you approaching the required material with care and thought. If you simply skim that material -- or blow it off -- both your learning and performance will suffer.
- **Prioritize well.** There are lots of things in this world more important than this course. But most of those won't excuse you from the course requirements -- and the ones that will tend to be major life emergencies. This course shouldn't matter more than everything else in your life -- but your coursework will suffer if you put it too low on your priority list.
- **Your chance to earn your grade ends on 23 Dec.** The only exceptions to this rule involve major life emergencies. In such cases, you will need to provide independent verification of the emergency in question, and you will receive a final grade of "I" pending the completion of the work that you've missed.
- **The semester lasts fifteen weeks -- and they all count.** This course is set up so that it's possible to recover from a slow start and still succeed. But overcoming a slow start successfully **will** require you to work extra hard at the end of the semester.

Miscellaneous

- We will cover topics that may evoke strong differences of opinion. I don't expect the group to agree on everything, but I do expect our discussions to be characterized by mutual respect and collegiality. Strong opinions are acceptable, but verbal bullying and personal attacks will **not** be tolerated.
- The content of this course -- both in-person and online -- is not intended for public circulation or distribution. You can make audio and/or video recordings of class meetings for your personal use, provided you do so without invading anyone's privacy or disrupting the ordinary flow of the class. You can download copies of online materials to help you complete the course successfully, but not otherwise. The purchase and/or sale of either written notes or recordings of class meetings is strictly prohibited.
- Significant disruptions of the normal flow of course-related business -- e.g., using cell phones in class, excessive side chatter, premature leave-taking behavior -- may result in grade penalties.
- I will do my best to accommodate your needs relating to religious holidays and/or documented disabilities. By University policy, you **must** provide me with written notice (for religious holidays) and/or official documentation (for disabilities) with **enough lead time** for such accommodations to be arranged.
- The [Center for Writing](#) offers a range of services designed to help you with research and writing projects.
- [Student English Language Support](#) offers a range of services to help international students.
- Please pay attention to the U's official notices regarding:
 - [policy statements for syllabi](#)
 - [policy regarding makeup work](#)

Schedule

- All readings and lectures will be made available on Canvas.
- Lectures will normally be available no later than 12:00 noon on the Sunday at the start of each week.
- Path #2 students should be prepared to discuss the readings for any given week on Monday, and the lectures for any given week on Wednesday.
- Due dates for Path #2 essays will be announced after 21 Sep.

Week 1 9 Sep

Introduction

- no readings

Week 2 14-16 Sep

Keywords: Media / Communication

NO CLASS MEETINGS

- Couldry, "Introduction" and "Connecting"
- Carey, "A Cultural Approach to Communication"

Week 3 21-23 Sep

Keywords: Culture / History

Path #2 21 Sep (5:00 pm)

Reflection Essay due

- Williams, "Culture Is Ordinary"
- Carey, "Historical Pragmatism and the Internet"

Week 4 28-30 Sep

Keywords: Representations / Interpretations

- Couldry, "Representing"
- Nealon & Giroux, "Reading"
- McCloud, "The Vocabulary of Comics"

Week 5 5-7 Oct

Keywords: Semiotics / Myth

- Williamson, "A Currency of Signs"
- Williamson, "Three Kinds of Dirt"

Week 6	12-14 Oct	Keywords: Systems / Commodities
	- Williams, "Communications and Community" - Smythe, "On the Audience Commodity and Its Work"	
Week 7	19-21 Oct	Keywords: Intellectual Property / Privacy
Path #1	19 Oct (12:01 am)	Quiz #1 (90 minutes) available for 24 hours
	- Sinnreich, "What Is Intellectual Property?" - Vaidhyathan, "The Googlization of Us"	
Week 8	26-28 Oct	Keywords: Governing / Ideology
	- Couldry, "Governing" - Becker, "Ideology"	
Week 9	2-4 Nov	Keywords: Articulation / Hegemony
	- Hall, "The Whites of Their Eyes" - Williams, "Hegemony"	
Week 10	9-11 Nov	Keywords: Audiences / Effects
	- Couldry, "Sharing" - Vaidhyathan, "Are Cell Phones Really Destroying Kids' Mental Health?"	
Week 11	16-18 Nov	Keywords: Fans / Affect
Path #2	16 Nov	NO CLASS MEETING
	- Fiske, "Active Audiences" - Seigworth, "Sound Affects" - Rodman & Vanderdonckt, "Music for Nothing"	
Week 12	23-25 Nov	Keywords: Identities / Classification
Path #1	23 Nov (12:01 am)	Quiz #2 (90 minutes) available for 24 hours
	- Nealon & Giroux, "Differences" - Crawford, "Classification"	
Week 13	30 Nov - 2 Dec	Keywords: Appropriation / Globalization
	- Oh, "Theorizing Cultural Appropriation" - Pang, "Copying <i>Kill Bill</i>"	
Week 14	7-9 Dec	Keywords: Technology / Assemblages
	- Couldry, "Imagining" and "Conclusion" - Slack & Wise, <i>Culture and Technology</i> [selections]	
Week 15	14-16 Dec	Keywords: Digitalization / Algorithms
	- Fisher, "Do Algorithms Have a Right to the City?" - Noble, "A Society, Searching"	
Finals week		
Path #1	23 Dec (12:01 am)	Quiz #3 (90 minutes) available for 24 hours