Why do media matter? It is hardly controversial to suggest that the analysis of media should be a priority for the human sciences. But, in approaching media, what precisely is our object of study? Is it to be sought in the structure of institutions? In the signification of texts? Perhaps in the actions of individuals? Or even, somehow, in the totality of society itself? The central term in the problem—namely, ‘media’—seems curiously overdetermined, and so ambivalent. One finds for instance that, in the singular, the medium tends either to be idealized as an inert conduit for the transmission of a substantialized message (communication) or, alternatively, decried as the source of ideological distortion (alienation). The medium is implicitly extrinsic to its content. But we have also been told that it participates in the very substance of that which it conveys (‘the medium is the message’). We have learned that novels and newspapers provided the ground on which national communities were first imagined. And yet, in the plural, the media comprise that mysteriously unified agent that is said to mollify the masses through commodification and individualization. Media are at once the locus of grass roots organization and the perpetuation of bourgeois mythologie. They facilitate both the exercise of Public Reason as well as the effects of discursive infantilization. As an organ of free speech, the media are a bastion of democracy. As an instrument of the Culture Industry (or the Military Industrial Complex, Big Oil, etc.) they act as handmaiden to Capital. Seemingly, it is—or they are—simultaneously a metaphysical category, an institution, an instrument and an agent. It would behoove us to disentangle these associations. For as the Oxford philosopher and historian, R.G. Collingwood, once said of the various theories of Man, treatment of any one of them would easily fill a book. But which if any might help us to elucidate the social import of their ostensible object? This course offers a practical introduction to key developments in cultural and media studies as a first step toward trying to answer this question.

Course Requirements

• Complete and careful reading of all course material.
• Regular attendance and active participation in discussion.
• Three short papers of 1000, 1500 and 3000 words, as below (approx 20-25 pages in total). The due dates for these papers are listed below in the schedule. Please plan accordingly.
• All work must be submitted on time; no incompletes will be granted for this course, except on grounds of major life disruption.

Course Materials Available at the Seminary Cooperative Bookstore

• V is for Vendetta (DVD).

Additional Course Materials Available Through Chalk Website


**Background Reading on Cultural and Media Studies and Related Issues**


• Morley, D. & K. Chen (eds.) *Stuart Hall; Critical dialogues in cultural studies*. NY: Routledge.


SCHEDULE OF MEETINGS

1. Course Introduction: Why Do Media Matter?
   Tuesday, January 6

2. ‘Religion and Media’ in America
   Thursday, January 8

   Required text:

   Opening questions:
   • What is religion and when (or why) is it ‘funky’?
   • What were Clark’s primary concerns? Do they reflect broader debates on religion, media and society?
   • What is the referent for the term ‘media’? And why do media matter?

   Further reading:

3. Culture and the Idea of Authenticity
   Tuesday, January 13

   Required text:

   Opening questions:
   • When is authenticity?
   • What is the culture industry? And how is it related to the rest of social life?
   • Who or what is the subject of alienation? And how is emancipation related to the work of criticism?
   • How, if at all, are Horkheimer and Adorno relevant for a critique of contemporary American society?

   Further reading:
4. Myth Today
Thursday, January 15

Required text:

Opening questions:
• What is ‘myth’? And why did Barthes call it a ‘system of communication’?
• What is the nature of the relationship between Nature, History and criticism?
• What are the leading myths of our times? And to what extent are they susceptible to analysis in the terms described by Barthes (inoculation, the privation of history, identification etc.)?

Further reading:

5. The Consumer Society
Tuesday, January 20

Required text:

Opening questions:
• What is consumption and how is it related to the social order?
• What does it mean to describe consumer objects as ‘a system of signs’?
• When is freedom? (And how do you know?)

Further reading:

6. Mini-Conference I: Media and the Myth of Freedom
Thursday, January 22

The question for a short-response paper will be distributed in class on Tuesday, January 20. Your written response will be due online (details TBA) Wednesday, January 21, no later than 8pm. You should read carefully and be prepared to discuss posts from all other members of the class.
7. TV News: A Masculine Soap Opera?
Tuesday, January 27

Required text:

Opening questions:
• What is the news and how is it related to other genres of television programming?
• What might it mean to assert that ‘the story writes the journalist’?
• What is ‘objectivity’? Why did Fiske argue ‘bias’ makes for an inadequate critique of news coverage?

Further reading:

8. Politics and the Philosophy of Praxis
Thursday, January 29

Required text:

Opening questions:
• Who are the intellectuals?
• What is common sense? What is the philosophy of praxis? And why does it matter?
• What is the nature of the relationship between scholarship and the rest of life? Between criticism and politics? Knowledge and power?

Further reading:
9. On Ideology and Interpellation  
Tuesday, February 3

Reading:

Opening questions:
• What are ISAs and how do they work?
• Why might interpellation be important for an account of media and their social significance?
• How did Althusser explain the relationship between social structure and human agency?

Further reading:

10. Structure, Violence and the Limits of Denotation  
Thursday, February 5

Required text:

Opening questions:
• What is the theory of media underpinning Barthes’ account of ‘the photographic message’?
• What was he trying to accomplish by differentiating between photographic denotation and connotation?
• For Barthes, what was the significance of ‘truly traumatic photographs’? And how should we interpret this?

Further reading:
11. Chronotopes or How to Take the Textual Metaphor Seriously
Tuesday, February 10

Required text:

Opening questions:
• How is the configuration of space, time and agency related to the interpellation of subjects?
• Can a chronotopic analysis be used to develop further Fiske’s interpretation of the news as ‘masculine soap opera’?
• Did mainstream television news coverage of the recent US elections have a consistent chronotope?

Further reading:

12. Media Session: America Held Hostage
Thursday, February 12

Required text:

NB: The question for Tuesday’s short-response paper will be distributed in class today.

13. Mini-Conference II: Covering ‘Terrorism’
Tuesday, February 17

NB: The question for a short-response paper will be distributed in class on Thursday, February 12. Your written response will be due online (details TBA) Monday, February 16, no later than 12 noon. You should read carefully and be prepared to discuss posts from all other members of the class.
14. **Encoding/Decoding**

Thursday, February 19

**Required text:**


**Opening questions:**

- What is the purpose of intellectual work?
- Why, and precisely how, do media matter for the work of cultural studies?
- Under what conditions do the processes (or practices?) of encoding and decoding become accessible to scholarly analysis?

**Further reading:**


15. **Desperately Seeking the Audience**

Tuesday, February 24

**Required text:**


**Opening questions:**

- Did Anderson account adequately for the social and historical significance of media?
- What precisely is ‘imagination’? And how might Anderson’s argument be developed further?
- What is the referent for the phrase ‘the audience’? And why does it matter?
- What is precluded, and what becomes possible, as a consequence of Hartley’s critique?

**Further reading:**

**16. Television and Ethnography**  
Thursday, February 26

**Required text:**

**Opening questions:**
- On what grounds did Morley respond to Hartley and Fiske? Was his argument convincing?
- What claims are being made for ‘ethnography’? And to what end?
- What did Morley (1992: 170) mean when he argued that Hartley was ‘confus[ing] a problem of epistemology with one of ontology”? And what must one assume in order to sustain this position?
- What is the object of study in ‘media studies’?

**Further reading:**

**17. Religion, Media, (Counter)Public**  
Tuesday, March 3

**Required text:**

**Opening questions:**
- What is the nature of the cassette sermon as a medium?
- Under what conditions was the ‘Islamic counterpublic’ intelligible as an object of knowledge?
- How might Hirschkind’s analysis be compared with arguments from Morley, Fiske and Hartley on the nature of ‘the audience’?

**Further reading:**
18. Articulating Media and Society
Thursday, March 5

Required text:

Opening questions:
• What is articulation? And how does Hobart differentiate between the account offered by Hall and that of Laclau and Mouffe?
• Under what conditions do ‘media’ make for a coherent object of study?
• What are the implications of recognizing scholarship itself as a form of articulation?

Further reading:

19. Mini-Conference III: Media, Politics and the Social
Tuesday, March 10

NB: The question for your final paper will be distributed in class on Thursday, March 5. A rough draft will be due online on **Monday, March 9, no later than 12 noon**. You should read carefully and be prepared to discuss posts from all other members of the class.