



COM413 PUBLIC OPINION, PROPAGANDA, & THE MASS MEDIA

SPRING 2015

“Whoever controls the media controls the mind.” – Jim Morrison

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Class Time & Office Hours

Class meets Tuesdays/Thursdays, 3-4:50 p.m., in 6-227. Fall office hours:
Tuesdays/Thursdays 5-6 p.m.; Wednesdays 2-4 p.m. in 1-307.

Required Texts

McCombs et. al. (2011). *The News and Public Opinion: Media Effects on Civic Life*
Pratkanis, A., & Aronson, E. (2001). *Age of Propaganda: The Everyday Use and Abuse of Persuasion* (2nd ed.)

Optional Texts

Cook, C., & Goidel, K. (2011). *Political Polling in the Digital Age: The Challenge of Measuring and Understanding Public Opinion*.
Bernays, E. (2004). *Propaganda*.

Course Catalog Description

Techniques of sociological and political persuasion, mass media and public opinion in the United States; developments in international propaganda. Integrates disciplines of sociology and political science in application to operation of communication and communications media in society.

Course Objectives

First and foremost, COM413 is a lesson in critical thinking. This course draws from the communication, political science, sociology, and psychology disciplines to provide a foundational basis for exploring techniques of persuasion and the influence of mass media on public attitudes and behavior. Importantly, we'll grapple with the societal and

democratic implications of public opinion and propaganda, along with the ethical concerns that come with mass persuasion. We'll explore these concepts in a contemporary context and adopt an applied approach to learning, putting these theories into practice with original polling projects. Course objectives include:

- Cultivate critical thinking, media literacy skills.
- Discern the difference between scientific polls and credible measures of public opinion vs. tools of persuasion and propaganda.
- Understand origins and formation of mass public opinion, and the media's role in facilitating and influencing public opinion.
- Understand the state of public opinion on key issues of the day, and how various stakeholders intentionally and unintentionally influence opinion.
- Understand the theoretical underpinnings of propaganda, its societal influence, and its effects on democracy.
- Ability to critically dissect and analyze propaganda campaigns.
- Improve analytical and academic writing skills.
- Apply best practices and basic survey methodology to measure public opinion and synthesize findings for a public audience.

Expectations

This course is designed as an upper level seminar. This is an applied class that will consist of scholarly class discussions and various in-class activities; this is not a class based on lectures and slides. Thus, you should be motivated and intellectually curious. You are expected to make contributions to class discussions and fully participate in in-class activities. (Dead weight in the classroom is frustrating to me as well as your classmates). You are expected to complete all assignments and readings **on time**. All assignments are due at the **start** of class. Some course materials will be provided on Blackboard but these are not comprehensive; it is imperative that you read assignments and supplement discussions and readings with your own notes.

Written Work

All written work must be stapled, double-spaced (with tabs at the start of each paragraph), in 11 or 12-point Times New Roman font, unless otherwise specified. Papers must be free of factual errors, grammatical errors, spelling mistakes, and typos.

Technology Policy

Computers are for writing and note taking purposes only; Facebook, texting, gaming, and online shopping will *not* get you very far in the course. Mobile devices must be on silent

or remain off. Texting is prohibited; regardless of how discreet you think you are, the behavior is a distraction. If it is an emergency, excuse yourself from the classroom.

Academic Integrity

Academic integrity is held to the strictest of standards. The work you turn in is yours – and no one else’s. Academic misconduct includes, but is not limited to, cheating, plagiarism, collusion, falsifying academic records, and any act designed to give an unfair academic advantage to the student (such as submission of essentially the same written assignment for two courses without the prior permission of the instructors, providing false or misleading information in an effort to receive a postponement or an extension on an assignment), or the attempt to commit such an act.

Plagiarism is defined as the unacknowledged inclusion of someone else's words, structure, ideas, or data. When a student submits work as his/her own that includes the words, structure, ideas, or data of others, the source of this information must be acknowledged through complete, accurate, and specific references, and, if verbatim statements are included, through quotation marks as well. Failure to identify any source (including interviews, surveys, etc.), published in any medium (including on the internet) or unpublished, from which words, structure, ideas, or data have been taken, constitutes plagiarism. Please see me if you are unsure of what constitutes plagiarism or other examples of academic misconduct.

Attendance & Late Work Policy

I only excuse absences resulting from family emergency, illness, conference or other engagements I deem beneficial to your career; however, work shifts are no excuse for absences or late work. If an extension is necessary, you must request one at least **24 hours prior** to the class in which the assignment is due. No-shows do not have the luxury of make-up work unless the absence is due to extreme circumstances (e.g. severe medical or family emergency). I reserve the right to require documentation for approved absences and make-up work. *All **unapproved** late work will receive a **zero** and more than 2 absences will adversely affect your participation grade.*

Classroom Respect

At times we may discuss polarizing or sensitive issues. There will undoubtedly be times when your classmates, or I, express perspectives and opinions counter to your own. Every voice and opinion will be heard and respected both within *and* outside of the classroom. Discussions must always remain collegial, respectful, and germane to the topic.

Assignments:

Participation:	150 pts	15%
Midterm exam:	250 pts	25%
Theory paper:	150 pts	15%
Polling project:	250 pts	25%
Propaganda crit:	100 pts	10%
Poll analysis:	100 pts	10%

A = 930-1000	A- = 900-929	B+ = 870-899	B = 830-869
B- = 800-829	C+ = 770-799	C = 730-769	C- = 700-729
D+ = 670-699	D = 630-669	D- = 600-629	F = 599 or less

Theory Paper

In a 2-3 page paper, you will address the theoretical components of public opinion and propaganda; you will explore the intersection of these two concepts, their societal importance, and discuss how they benefit and/or hinder democracy. “A” papers will support claims with specific examples and material from the assigned readings.

Poll Analysis/Propaganda Crit

During the quarter you will analyze a recent poll and critique a contemporary example of propaganda. For the poll analysis you will assess the credibility of the information, seeking answers to questions such as: Who funded the poll? Is the poll accurate? Is the poll partisan or reflective of a “push” poll? Are the methodology and measures transparent? For the propaganda critique, you will develop an argument for why your selection is an example of propaganda. You’ll seek answers to questions such as: What is the message of the content? Who created the content, and what’s the underlying agenda? How does the message appeal to emotion over reason? What predispositions or values does it exploit?

Participation

Participation is a key component of the class. This grade includes your attendance in class, your contributions to class discussions, your participation in in-class activities, and your contributions to various Blackboard forums. If you find it difficult to jump into class discussions, Blackboard forums are a good way of balancing your efforts and ensuring high participation points.

Polling Project

In lieu of a final exam, you will work in teams for the second half of the quarter to craft and deploy an original poll at Cal Poly Pomona. As a group you will tap public opinion to learn more about student attitudes, opinions on any topic of your choosing. As a group, you will draft an online questionnaire, pre-test the questionnaire, generate a sample, implement the survey, and interpret the results. You will turn in an executive summary of your findings, a self-reflection/peer evaluation form, and present your group’s results to the class during finals week. Additional details and rubric to be announced.

Tentative Schedule

Week 1: Course Overview

- Tuesday, March 31: Cesar Chavez Day: **No class.**
- Thursday, April 2: Course introduction; defining propaganda and public opinion.

Week 2: Exploring the Public Opinion-Propaganda Relationship

- Tuesday, April 7: Read Chap. 1, “Our age of propaganda” (pp. 1-16) in Pratkanis & Aronson; Introduction, “What is public opinion?” (pp. 1-8) in McCombs et al.
- Thursday, April 9: Read L. Menand, “The unpolitical animal” (on Blackboard); Chap. 3, “Mindless propaganda, thoughtful persuasion” (pp. 33-40) and Chap. 4, “The rationalizing animal” (pp. 40-47) in Pratkanis & Aronson. Discussion on rationality, emotion, and reason. In-class viewing: “Climate of Doubt”.

Week 3: Mass Media & the Origins of Public Opinion

- Tuesday, April 14: Read Chap. 5, “Focusing public attention” (pp. 75-87) and Chap. 6, “Learning from the news” (pp. 88-97) in McCombs et al.
- Thursday, April 16: Read Chap. 7, “Forming opinions” (pp. 98-108) and Chap. 8, “Tone of the news” (pp. 109-119) in McCombs et al.

Week 4: Measuring Public Opinion

- Tuesday, April 21: Read S. Igo, “Public opinion polls” (on Blackboard); A. Kohut, “But what do the polls show?” (on Blackboard). Historical overview of public opinion polling. **Theory paper due.**
- Thursday, April 23: Read S. Keeter, “Public opinion polling and its problems” (pp. 28-51) in Political Polling in the Digital Age (on Blackboard). Survey and polling methodology; an introduction to questionnaire design.

Week 5: Polling Methodology & Transparency

- Tuesday, April 28: Read, The Upshot: “Push polls, defined” (on Blackboard); Gawiser & Witt, “20 questions a journalist should ask about poll results” (on Blackboard). Discussion on the news media, horse-race campaign coverage, and polling credibility.
- Thursday, April 30: **Midterm Exam.**

Week 6: Measuring Public Opinion

- Tuesday, May 5: An introduction to Qualtrics and/or Survey Monkey; group assignments and overview of final polling project.
- Thursday, May 7: Qualtrics continued; polling group time. **Poll analysis due.**

Week 7: Propaganda & Tools of Persuasion

- Tuesday, May 12: Read Chap. 5, “The four stratagems of influence” (pp. 48-66) in Pratkanis & Aronson. Polling group time.
- Thursday, May 14: Read Chap. 6, “Words of influence” (pp. 71-79) and Chap. 7, “Pictures in our heads” (pp. 79-87) in Pratkanis & Aronson; Goebbel’s “Principles of Propaganda” (on Blackboard). Discussion on myth, symbolism, rhetoric, and mass media.

Week 8: Polling Projects

- Tuesday, May 19: Polling group time. **Propaganda crit due.**
- Thursday, May 21: **Comm Day.**

Week 9: Message Frames & Emotional Appeals

- Tuesday, May 26: Read Chap. 9, “A questionable persuasion” (pp. 93-100) and Chap. 20, “Why do they keep repeating the same adds?” (pp. 179-184) in Pratkanis & Aronson.
- Thursday, May 28: Read Chap. 24, “The fear appeal” (pp. 207-215) and Chap. 26, “Guilt sells” (pp. 223-230) in Pratkanis & Aronson.

Week 10: Propaganda in Contemporary Contexts

- Tuesday, June 2: Read Chap. 36, “How to become a cult leader” (pp. 302-317) in Pratkanis & Aronson. Discussion on creating “social realities.” In-class viewing: “Secret State of North Korea”.
- In-class viewing: “Obama’s America” followed by class discussion.

*Note: Finals week: **Project Presentations: Tuesday, June 9 at 1:40-3:40 p.m.***

Note: Readings and/or assignments subject to change.