MEJO 705
Communication Theory
Fall 2017
Monday, 12:30pm-3:15pm, Rm 338

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Course Goals

The purpose of this course is to provide you with a broad introduction to the theoretical foundations of communication research. The semester will be broken into four parts. The first focuses on asking what ‘theory’ is, inquiring into the work that theories perform, and analyzing how we actually do theorizing. In the course of doing these things, we will read various authors’ perspectives on the history of theory in the vast, sprawling, and inter-disciplinary field of communication. The second part of the course is oriented around psychological approaches to communication theory, which generally focus on the relationship between media and what is going on in people’s heads and how that relates to their attitudes, emotions, beliefs, and actions. The third part focuses on sociological approaches to communication theory, which are concerned broadly with how people communicate and affiliate with one another, how institutions, organizations, fields, and industries shape communication and media, and the communicative basis of social order and contemporary democracies. Finally, we conclude by analyzing the normative underpinnings of communication theory, which provide the starting point for much empirical research in often unacknowledged ways.

The School of Media and Journalism’s accrediting body outlines a number of values you should be aware of and competencies you should be able to demonstrate by the time you graduate from our program. Learn more about them here: http://www2.ku.edu/~acejmc/PROGRAM/PRINCIPLES.SHTML#vals&comps

Students taking this course will be able to think critically, creatively, and independently, learn how to conduct research and evaluate information, write correctly and clearly, critically evaluate their own work and that of others, apply basic numerical and statistical concepts, and contribute to knowledge appropriate to the communications professions in which they work.

Readings

Most of the class readings will be available on Sakai or through academic databases. In addition, there is one required book for the class:

Bryant, Jennings, and Mary Beth Oliver, eds. Media effects: Advances in theory and research. Routledge, 2009.
In addition, your papers must be formatted according to MLA, Chicago, or APA style, or a style of your own choosing depending on your field. Abbreviated guides are available online at:

http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/560/01/
http://www.lib.unc.edu/instruct/citations/introduction/index.html

Recommended Books

In recent years, there have been a few works that have outlined theoretical critiques of the field. While I could not fit them here, I highly recommend the following three books:


Grades:

Graduate grades are H, P, L, F. I determine your grade by active participation in class, the quality of your assignments, and your work in relation to others.

The following is a general description of graduate grades:

• H means a truly outstanding performance in the class and on assignments.
• P is a solid performance overall in the class and on assignments.
• L is a performance in the class and on assignments that is below the acceptable level for graduate students. It means the student does not understand the course material very well, does not have a grasp of what is required in this area at the graduate level, is not participating in the class, is not handing in assignments on time, or is not participating in research basics or in-class exercises.
• F is failing.

Course Requirements

Participation 20%

Observation Assignment, Theory History, and Concept Explication: 45%

Final Research Proposal 35%

*Participation*

This class is highly participatory and run as a seminar. I expect you to do the readings and contribute to the in-class discussion. Contributions include questions, thoughts, or responses to your peers. I especially value critical readings of the literature encountered in the course.

In addition to active participation in class, you are responsible for writing a response to the readings *each class session*. This is a formal, one to two page single-spaced, assignment
written in Microsoft Word and posted to the Sakai forum each week. I expect these papers to include a) summaries of the chapter(s) or articles(s) that you are engaging with, b) a reasoned discussion of the strengths and limitations of the chapter(s) or articles(s), c) a discussion question posed for the group. I expect these essays to be treated as a formal writing assignment, with care paid to the argument and the presentation. Please read all the posted essays before class. They will be due the night before class. The target range for these comments are between 500-1000 words.

**A note about laptops:** Laptops are welcome in class, but I ask that you refrain from using them for purposes other than note taking, in-class assignments, or class-related research. Your participation in class will suffer if you are not fully present, and that will detract from the learning environment in the room as a whole.

**Observation assignment**

For this assignment, choose a site to observe and describe, either online or offline. This site can be anywhere communication is taking place – which is to say, anywhere. Choose a site that you are interested in, whether it is kids talking at a bus stop, couples using their mobile phones in a restaurant, dating profiles on an internet site, or patients in a doctor’s waiting room. Spend some time observing this site, and write up a descriptive narrative of what you observed. Pay attention to detail.

After you do this, try your hand at generating a theory, theories, or concepts that attempt to explain the social process that you observed. For example, what might explain why and how kids interact (or fail to) at the bus stop, couples may pay more attention to their phones in a restaurant than each other, how people perform their availability on an internet dating site in particular ways, or how patients wait for doctors? Think about how far can you generalize your proposed explanation to other sites, other time periods, or other contexts? What are the limits of your explanation?

This is meant to be a creative enterprise, so have fun with it. We will discuss in class.

Due date: Monday, October 2\textsuperscript{nd}

**History of a Theory**

Students will be responsible for writing the history of a communication theory. This should be approached as a chronological or narrative literature review that documents how a theory has evolved over time from its introduction, initial formulations, and most recent manifestations. Care should be paid to address a) key works that address or utilize the theory, b) the social and media contexts that the theory was articulated in, c) the biographies of the authors central to the development of the theory, and d) the ways that the theory has evolved over time, including asking the question of ‘why’ theoretical modifications have occurred (such as for empirical, analytical, or cultural reasons). Students can choose any communication theory, or theory used widely in communication research, that they like. If it is a new theory or concept, students should demonstrate how it is situated within, reconceptualizes, or is offered as a critique of other existing theories. The best papers will also discuss, from the student’s perspective, the strengths and limitations of the theoretical approach and propose modifications or reformulations to account for them.

Due date: Monday, November 13\textsuperscript{th}
**Concept Explication**


Choose a concept in communication research and explicate it. We will discuss this more in class, but this entails thinking about how your abstract concept can be linked to empirical observations. Explication includes a conceptual definition (i.e.: what is the scope of your concept) and an operational definition (i.e.: how are you going to measure or observe your concept in either a qualitative or a quantitative way). This assignment will entail a literature review that considers how other scholars have defined and used the concept, a meaning analysis that generates other concepts that constitute your concept, and attention to the conditions within which your concept will be found.

For a great recent example, see:


Due date: Monday, December 4th

You will also be responsible for presenting your concept explication in class.

**Theoretical Framework of a Research Proposal**

In a vein similar to a literature review of a grant proposal or a journal article, write up the theoretical section. This can take a number of different forms:

a) A theoretical literature review that derives formal hypotheses in a deductive manner from pre-existing theory. This is the most common approach for quantitative communication research that proceeds with a logic of verification. Take a theory, apply it to a potential empirical study, derive formal hypotheses from that theory, and provide a narrative of expected findings based on those hypotheses.

b) A theoretical literature review of theories that are likely to bear upon an *inductive* study of some communication phenomenon. This is the most common approach for qualitative research projects that proceed with a logic of discovery. In this approach, start with the phenomenon, such as a question (i.e.: why don’t people take advantage of preventive health care benefits?) or a proposed site of interest (i.e.: how do people dual screen live sporting events?) and conduct a literature review that seeks to identify the relevant theories that might come to bear on that question. In this approach, you are not formally proposing hypotheses so much as suggesting which theories might help you understand the question that you have.

c) A theoretical literature review that proposes that there is a puzzle based on or a gap in the existing literature, where some empirical phenomena seems to violate theoretical expectations or is generally left unaddressed in the literature. In this approach, think of something that you have observed or
experienced that seems to resist existing theoretical perspectives or does not seem to be accounted for in the existing literature. Describe both the phenomenon and, in detail, why it seems to violate theoretical expectations or falls outside of the existing literature. In the process, provide a review of all the relevant theories that might bear on your phenomenon.

Due Date: Thursday, December 14th

Importantly, there is no self-plagiarism in any of these assignments when it comes to your work in this class. Since the theory history and concept explication build to the proposal, you are free to recycle content across these assignments.

Grading

I will grade all aspects of the course based on originality, rigor, and the thoroughness of your review of the relevant literature and your conceptualization of the theories you are working with.

Special Accommodations:

If you require special accommodations to attend or participate in this course, please let the instructor know as soon as possible. If you need information about disabilities visit the Accessibility Services website at https://accessibility.unc.edu/

Honor Code:

I expect that each student will conduct himself or herself within the guidelines of the University honor system (http://honor.unc.edu). All academic work should be done with the high levels of honesty and integrity that this University demands. You are expected to produce your own work in this class. If you have any questions about your responsibility or your instructor’s responsibility as a faculty member under the Honor Code, please see the course instructor or Senior Associate Dean Charlie Tuggle, or you may speak with a representative of the Student Attorney Office or the Office of the Dean of Students.

Seeking Help:

If you need individual assistance, it’s your responsibility to meet with the instructor. If you are serious about wanting to improve your performance in the course, the time to seek help is as soon as you are aware of the problem – whether the problem is difficulty with course material, a disability, or an illness.

Diversity:

The University’s policy on Prohibiting Harassment and Discrimination is outlined in the 2011-2012 Undergraduate Bulletin http://www.unc.edu/ugradbulletin/. UNC is committed to providing an inclusive and welcoming environment for all members of our community and does not discriminate in offering access to its educational programs and activities on the basis of age, gender, race, color, national origin, religion, creed, disability, veteran’s status, sexual orientation,
gender identity, or gender expression.

Course Schedule

Monday, August 28th

Introduction to the course and each other

For this opening class, read:


Monday, September 4th

Labor Day, No Class

1. Introduction to Communication Theory and Theorizing

Monday, September 11th

Introduction to Communication Theory


*Monday, September 18th*

**Developing Theory**


Swedberg, Richard. "Theorizing in sociology and social science: Turning to the context of

Departure?." *Annual Review of Sociology* 0 (2017).

Waisbord, Silvio, and Claudia Mellado. "De-westernizing Communication Studies: A

**II. Psychological Approaches to Communication Theory**

*Monday, September 25th*

Agenda Setting, Cultivation, and Priming: read chapters 1, 3, and 5 in Bryant and Oliver


discourse through metaphor, hyperbole, and irony." *Communication Theory* 26, no. 4 (2016):
410-430.


*Monday, October 2nd*

Social Cognitive Theory, Elaboration Likelihood Model, Uses-and-Gratifications, and
Physiopsychology: read chapters 6, 7, 8, and 9 in Bryant and Oliver


Third-Person Effect, Media Violence, Sex, Gender and Race in Media: read chapters 12, 13, 15, 16, and 17 in Bryant and Oliver.

**Observation Due**
Monday, October 9th

Media and Public Communication, Public Health, and Entertainment: read chapters 20, 21, 22, 23, and 24 in Bryant and Oliver.


Monday, October 16th

Technology and Media Psychology: Chapter 27 in Bryant and Oliver


III. Sociological Approaches to Communication Theory

Monday, October 23rd

Introduction:


Monday, October 30th

Society and Culture


*Monday, November 6th*

Social Institutions


Monday, November 13th

Media Organizations


History of a Theory Due

Monday, November 20th

Networks, Groups, Individuals, and Collective Action


Topinka, Robert J. "Politically incorrect participatory media: Racist nationalism on r/ImGoingToHellForThis." *New Media & Society* (2017): 1461444817712516.


*Monday, November 27th*

**Perspectives on Technology:**


**IV Normative Theories in Communication Research**

*Monday, December 4th*


Pickard, Victor. ""Whether the giants should be slain or persuaded to be good": Revisiting the Hutchins Commission and the role of media in a democratic society." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 27, no. 4 (2010): 391-411.


**Concept Explication Due**

**FINAL PAPER DUE THURSDAY, DECEMBER 14TH**