

CommRC 1105: TV and Society

Fall 2001

Class Time: Tu/Th 4:00-5:15pm

Class Location: 203 Frick Arts

Instructor: Carrie A. Rentschler

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Office Hours: Tuesday/Thursday 2:30-4:00pm, and by appointment.

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Prerequisite

To take this course, you must have taken and received a passing grade in Mass Communication Process (CommRC 0320). No exceptions. A course in public speaking is also *highly* recommended.

Course Rationale and Goals

In public discourse, television is spoken of as demon and democratizing force, a “vast wasteland” and a consumerist utopia. Seventy-three years after the first programming was broadcast over television, television is treated as the “lowest of the low,” a popular public trash heap of nothing but damaging (yet fun!) entertainment. Whether it’s violence, low voter turnout rates, children’s “lack of respect” for authority, teenage pregnancy, or drug abuse, various social institutions scapegoat television for a whole host of social problems because of its audio-visual “power.”

The goal of this course is to develop a critical perspective from which to evaluate claims made about television. In this course, we will treat television as a social institution, with particular histories, physical infrastructures, social functions and possibilities. One of our goals will be to understand why blame for social problems is placed on television, and to come up with other ways of thinking about television’s importance in society. What does television really do in society? How? Why?

Television may be a unique medium but it is situated within a shared, cross-fertilized media environment. It is both a private and public medium. In the U.S., most people experience TV in private settings, such as the home. TV also shows up in public spaces, like malls, bars, airports, barbershops and salons, stores, restaurants, schools, and ballparks. In other parts of the world, TV might be watched on a street corner or at an outdoor market. Wherever television is being watched, accessing TV programming requires massive broadcasting infrastructures. Vast international satellite and cable networks – large networks connecting distant parts of the world through electric cables and radio signals – make watching TV possible.

This course combines historical and contemporary writing on television. We will discuss cultural, historical, economic, political, and other dimensions of television as it mediates our lives. After this course, you will know many things about television and its social functions.

Over the course of the semester, students will be developing and refining several important skills. Students will:

1. Develop their reading and critical thinking skills.
2. Practice and improve upon their writing and public speaking skills.
3. Be able to summarize authors' arguments in the readings.
4. Learn to explain and apply a basic set of concepts, and use them to analyze television, culture and communication.

Required Texts

All the readings for our course are available in a course packet available at the Pitt Bookstore. Another set of the readings has been placed on reserve at Hillman Library.

In addition, keep your eyes open for interesting articles, TV shows, videos, or radio shows that comment on television. Bring them to class.

What You'll Do In This Class

There are three important skills in this course: reading, discussion and writing. They are all skills at which you can improve, and you should treat them like you're learning a craft.

Reading:

Reading is a skill that one develops over time. This course will emphasize careful and generous reading, so that you can then make full use of our course texts when you write and present.

In order to read well, you should expect to do the following:

1. Readings are assigned at particular times for particular reasons. Do the reading when it's assigned.
2. Set aside a significant amount of time each week *just* for reading. Reading requires concentration and reflection; it should not be combined with other activities, like socializing or watching TV.
3. Mark important passages and passages that raise questions in your mind. Some people prefer to take notes on readings in a reading journal; others prefer to directly mark up the text. Choose one, and stick with it.
4. You should keep a dictionary close at hand and look up words you do not understand.
5. Regardless of whether you agree or disagree with the reading, you should be able to provide thoughtful answers to questions like: Why is the topic important? What was the

author intending with this piece? What are the main points he or she wants to get across? Why did the author choose these particular examples or topics? What did I learn by reading this article?

Discussion:

This course requires the engaged and active participation of students. Participation is crucial in making the course both lively and successful, and to this end, there is a formal participation grade for the course (see “Assignments” below). Class time will be divided between lectures, discussion, student presentations and the presentation of media materials. All students must come to class prepared to discuss the assigned readings, as well as generate questions for discussion.

Discussion requires a set of skills. The Department of Communication offers an entire course on discussion, but here are some basic skills and techniques to keep in mind:

1. **Active listening:** Listen for the specific words speakers use. Do you know what they mean? Do they suggest a particular standpoint? Ask if you don't know.
2. **Questioning:** If you are not absolutely sure what a speaker means, or if you don't understand something a speaker says, ask for clarification.
3. **Pushing Others:** Encourage colleagues to clarify or elaborate on what they mean to say. Push them to generalize and make interpretations. Speculate!
4. **Embellishment:** Build upon what others have said. Do you agree? Then add something. Do you agree partially? Then point out some differences. Do you disagree, or are you unsure? Present another perspective on the topic we're discussing.
5. **Dissemination:** Direct your comments to more than one person: discussions are for the whole class. Address the whole class; make eye contact.
6. **Engagement:** Good discussions are lively and freewheeling. Do not be afraid of speaking up. If you have a question, odds are that other students will have the same question. Basic questions and comments are encouraged. They are often the most important contributions to the discussion.

Ground Rules for Class Discussion:

1. Follow the golden rule. Treat others as you'd like to be treated.
2. Wait your turn – do not interrupt others.
3. You do not have to express your own opinion on a subject. You are also free to change your mind on any topic at any time.
4. Disagreements are natural and welcome in scholarly discussion. So are arguments. But arguments are not contests. You should grant the same courtesy and respect to the people with whom you disagree that you would want for yourself.

5. Students bring lots of interesting experiences to the classroom, and you are encouraged to bring up your experience when it is relevant to class discussion (and when you feel comfortable doing so). Everyone's personal experience deserves respect. But if you bring up your own experience in class, please recognize that it becomes a public topic for discussion. Others may interpret your experience differently than you do, and they are free to respectfully disagree with your interpretation.

Writing:

There are no secrets to becoming a better writer, but it does take hard work. Good writers do the following things, and so should you if you want to improve: 1) they read extensively and carefully; 2) they write regularly; 3) they discuss their writing and ideas; and 4) they revise a lot. This course will provide the opportunity for the first three; revision goes along with #3, but will not specifically be addressed during class time. Have other people read your writing and offer constructive suggestions on the clarity and persuasiveness of your argument, the organization of your essay, and choice of language.

Students will write three substantive essays in the course: two short essays, and a final research project. Other in-class writing will include quizzes. The writing you will be doing in the course is **formal writing**. Formal writing aims at getting the reader to think. It demonstrates your mastery of the material and is consciously designed to persuade readers of a particular point of view. In the process of persuasion, you may also need to educate the reader, but the ultimate goal is to advance a cogent and powerful argument, using basic conventions of scholarly writing (they will be explained in a handout on formal writing before the first assignment).

Formal writing adheres to strict stylistic guidelines: spelling and grammar count. I expect careful, thorough, thoughtful, and developed argumentation. Your essays should be designed to accomplish a specific task. For your research project, you will use external sources to support arguments and a known citation system. For each of your written assignments, you can expect extensive comments on the mechanics and content of what your paper says.

Assignments and Grading

Below is a general outline of assignments for the semester. The specifics of each major assignment will be explained over the duration of the course. The numbers in brackets indicate the cumulative weight of each category for student's semester grade. Please note: students will fail the course if they fail to turn in *any* assignment.

Students' grades will be largely determined by their ability to demonstrate in writing and oral presentation their comprehension of the readings, lectures and discussions. Because participation is absolutely essential to students' grades and to the quality of the course, students who are unable to attend every class and do all the required readings are advised to drop the course.

Pop Quizzes: [10%] In lieu of multiple choice exams on the course readings, a number of unannounced quizzes will be administered throughout the course to insure students are keeping up with the reading and comprehending lectures and discussion. At the end of the semester, the instructor will throw out each student's two lowest quiz grades; missed quizzes will be included in this number. Quizzes are graded on the following scale: 100% (got it right), 85% (clearly did the reading but got the answer slightly wrong), 50% (some evidence of having done the reading), 25% (took the quiz, shows no evidence of having done the reading), 0% (did not take the quiz).

Participation: [10%] As a discussion class, the instructor encourages participation! Participation means attending *all* class meetings, being prepared and attentive, having something relevant to ask or tell, and being respectful and courteous to your classmates and your instructor. To help facilitate class discussion, students are encouraged to closely read our course readings, and be prepared to substantively discuss and argue with course readings. As readers, students are advised to take notes and mark key passages in the texts we read to help stimulate discussion questions. Pay particular attention to declarative sentences and the use of connotative language in our readings – they are the clearest indicators of an author's argument and the assumptions he or she makes. Note that no participation means 0%, adequate participation means 7%, exceptional participation means 10%.

Student Presentations for Discussion: [20%] In pairs, students will develop and present questions for class discussion on assigned readings, **and** present a media document that further facilitates discussion. Each group will make a brief statement on their impressions of the reading, followed by the presentation of questions and a media document for discussion. Questions should be substantive, fair and directed.

- **Substantive:** Deal with the substance of the author's argument. What claims is he/she making? Based upon what evidence? Is the author's argument persuasive (see discussion of Fairness)?
- **Fair:** Our primary goal is to understand what the text does and argues and for what purpose. What is it trying to do, and why? What does it help us think about and perceive differently about television? Think about what the author was trying to accomplish.
- **Directed:** How might you think about applying this author's argument today? How might we apply what the author discusses to our understanding of television in the present?

Short Essays: [15% each, 30% total] Students will write two short (3-4 page) essays during the semester, in pairs. Working with your partner, each response paper must demonstrate your ability to summarize and critique a single line of argument within one substantial* course reading of your choosing. The first response paper must be turned in by Friday September 28th, the final one by Wednesday October 31st.

*the magazine articles do not count as "substantial" readings.

Final Project: [15% for each part, 30% total] Students will complete the course with a final research project. Students can work individually or in pairs. There will be two options for the final project: writing an 8-page research paper or doing a creative project that incorporates research and content from the course. The project consists of two parts: an oral presentation and a formal write-up of your analysis. The length of the oral presentation will be based upon whether students present individually or in pairs. Specific details on the assignment will be discussed later in the class.

Final grades will be based on the standard university scale:

90-100% = A range
80-89% = B range
70-79% = C range
60-69% = D range
0-59% = F

The instructor reserves the right to adjust students' semester grades based on her evaluation of their overall performance.

Other Course Policies

1. Compliance

By staying enrolled in this class, you acknowledge that you understand – and agree to abide by – the following rules and regulations *and* the University's policies (see addresses for Code of Conduct and Academic Integrity below). Failure to follow the letter *and the spirit* of these reasonable guidelines can result in a reduction of your final grade, failure of the course, and/or other penalties as set by University policy.

2. Attendance

You are paying for an opportunity to learn. Absences hurt your ability to learn and they hurt your grade. Signing up for this class indicates that you are committed to being here for the full class period each class meeting. **For the purposes of this policy, you are either present for an entire class meeting or not. Late arrivals and early departures will count as absences.**

You are allowed four absences over the course of the semester (equivalent to missing two full weeks of class). I think you will agree that this is a lot. **For each absence above four, students will have their semester grade reduced by 1/3 grade. Further, in-class assignments and quizzes cannot be made up. If you miss class, you are still responsible for whatever was covered that day.**

Absences in excess of four will be excused only under exceptional and unavoidable circumstances. Requests for excused absences must be submitted in writing, with

documentation, and immediately upon a student's return to class. **Students who enroll late are not exempt from this policy.**

3. **Assignments and Extensions**

Assignments (except for quizzes, in-class work, and the like) will be announced well in advance of due dates. If you know in advance that you can't make a due date for a paper, please discuss it with me beforehand. Requests for extensions after a due date has passed will only be granted in exceptional and unavoidable circumstances and must include (a) one typed, double-spaced page explaining the reason for missing the deadline, and (b) relevant documentation such as an official doctor's note. The written request for an extension must be in my hands within one week after the scheduled due date. Your instructor is under no obligation to accept late assignments.

4. **Grades**

I am eager to help you do well on assignments before they are due. Please visit me during office hours to ask me questions when you are working on an assignment or reviewing material.

Grades are final. I grade assignments and quizzes on performance, not effort. Effort will be recognized in your participation grade for the course. Here are the circumstances under which I would change a grade: (a) if I have made an error, or (b) if I have failed to hold you to the same standard as everyone else. In the event that you feel you received an undeserved grade, you should make your case in writing to me within two weeks of receiving the grade. Under no circumstance will I award a grade of "incomplete" for the course.

I do not give out grades over email or the telephone.

5. **Accommodations:**

If you require special testing accommodations or other classroom modifications, please notify both the instructor and Disability Resources and Services by the end of the first week of the term. Disability Resources and Services is located in 216 William Pitt Union (648-7890 [voice or TDD]), and their website is at: [<http://www.pitt.edu/~osaweb/drs/drs.html>].

6. **Nondiscrimination Statement**

As an instructor at the University of Pittsburgh, I value equality of opportunity, human dignity, and racial/ethnic/cultural diversity. Be assured that I will promote a safe and conducive environment for learning. In accordance with University policy, I will not tolerate discrimination or harassment on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, ancestry, sex, age, marital status, familial status, sexual orientation, disability, or status as a disabled veteran or a veteran of the Vietnam era. In addition to the University's policy, and within the bounds of the course, I do not discriminate on the basis of political creed. This means that you do not have to agree with me in order to do well in this course. So long as you demonstrate an understanding of the course material, you are under no obligation to agree with it. I also make every effort to

avoid discrimination on the basis of class or income. If there is something I can do to make the class more hospitable, please let me know.

7. **Other Policies You Should Know**

Student Code of Conduct: [<http://www.pitt.edu/~osaweb/usjs/code.html>]

Academic Integrity: [<http://www.pitt.edu/~graduate/ai1.html>]

Plagiarism is using someone else's ideas as your own in formal writing. If you use someone else's ideas, you are expected to cite them. If you use someone else's exact words, even if it is part of a sentence, you should put quotation marks around them and cite them. If you have any questions about plagiarism, please see me. Plagiarism is a serious academic offense and can result in failure of the assignment, the course, and other serious sanctions.

Semester Calendar

Depending upon how the course progresses, this schedule may change. The schedule will be updated regularly in class. Readings listed below each date and topic are to be completed *before* that day's class meeting. All readings are either available in the packet, or will be handed out in class. The instructor reserves the right to add readings as necessary.

An asterisk (*) identifies dates and readings for group presentations.

Tues Aug. 28th: Introduction or What is Television?

I. Television: A Global Network of Institutions

Thurs Aug. 30: Television: A Thoroughly Corporate and Global State of Affairs

Edward Herman and Robert McChesney (1997). "Main Players in the Global Media System" In *The Global Media: The New Missionaries of Global Capitalism*. London: Cassell, 70-105.

Tues Sept. 4: Sport and Global Television

"Sport and Television: Swifter, Higher, Stronger, Dearer" (July 20, 1996), *The Economist*, 17-19.

*Toby Miller (May 1999), "Televisualization" *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 23:2, 123-126.

*David L Andrews, S.J. Jackson, B. Carrington, Z. Mazur (1996), "Jordanscapes: A Preliminary Analysis of the Global Popular" *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 13:4, 428-457.

Thurs Sept. 6: History of Network TV

William Boddy (1997), "The Beginnings of American Television," In Anthony Smith, ed. *Television: An International History*. Oxford University Press, 23-37.

*Dennis Mazzocco (1994), "The History of ABC: Always Be Conservative" In *Networks of Power: Corporate TV's Threat to Democracy*. Boston, MA: South End Press, 29-49.

Tues Sept. 11: Review Global TV and How Television Began in the U.S.

Review Herman and McChesney, Boddy, and Mazzocco readings

Thurs. Sept 13 and Tues Sept. 18: The Economics of Network and Cable TV Programming

Mike Budd, Clay Steinman (1999), "An Overview of Television Economics" In *Consuming Environments: Television and Commercial Culture*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 25-52.

Steven Brill (August 2000), "Taming the TV Giants" *Brill's Content*, 23-4, 130-32 (handout).

Thurs Sept. 20: Commodifying Us, the Audience

Mike Budd, Steve Craig and Clay Steinman (1999), "Advertisers and Their Audience" In *Consuming Environments: Television and Commercial Culture*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 53-81.

Tues Sept. 25: Sponsors + Government Intelligence Agencies = TV Entertainment

*Erik Barnouw (1978), "But First, This Message . . ." and "The Outer Defenses – Entertainment" In *The Sponsor: Notes on a Modern Potentate*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 3-5, 101-121.

Thurs Sept. 27: Reviewing Television Economics: Networks, Production Companies, Advertisers

Review Budd and Steinman, Brill and Barnouw readings

Fri Sept. 28: SHORT ESSAY #1 IS DUE

II: Television as a Domestic Technology

Tues Oct. 2: The 1950s, Suburbia and Television

Lynn Spigel (1992), "Television in the Family Circle" In *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 36-72.

Thurs Oct. 4: The Mothership: Families in Outer Space

*Lynn Spigel (1997), "From Theatre to Space Ship: Metaphors of Suburban Domesticity in Postwar America" In Roger Silverstone, ed. *Visions of Suburbia*. London: Routledge, 217-239.

Tues Oct. 9: The Vast Wasteland?

Newton Minow (1960/61), "Program Control: The Broadcasters are Public Trustees" In *Vital Speeches of the Day* 27, 533-537.

Gunther Anders (1957), "The Phantom World of TV" In Bernard Rosen and David Manning White, Eds. *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America*. New York: The Free Press, 358-367.

Thurs Oct. 11: Kids and TV (they're a lot smarter than you think!)

*Máire Messenger Davies (1997), "Reality Perception on TV" In *Fake, Fact and Fantasy: Children's Interpretations of Television's Reality*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 21-34.

*David Buckingham (December 1999), "Blurring the Boundaries: "Teletubbies" and Children's Media Today." *Television* 12:2, 8-13.

Tues Oct. 16: The 1959 Quiz Show Scandal and Other Deceptions

*Walter Karp (May/June 1989), "The Quiz Show Scandal" *American Heritage*, 77-88.

*"Regulating Reality TV" (May 2001), *Brill's Content*, 27-28 (handout).

*Alicia C. Shepard (Jan/Feb 2001), "How They Blew It: A Behind-the-Scenes Look at the Television Networks' Dismal Performance on Election Night. *American Journalism Review*, 20-27.

Thurs Oct. 18: Review of Television and the Suburban Ideal

Review Spigel, Minow, Anders, and Davies readings

III: The Experience of Televisual Time

Tues Oct. 23: TV Turns Everything into an Event

Mary Ann Doane (1990), "Information, Crisis, Catastrophe" In Patricia Mellancamp, Ed. *The Logics of Television: Essays in Cultural Criticism*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 222-239.

Thurs Oct. 25: Regulating Experience through Sound

Rick Altman (1986), "Television/Sound" in Tania Modleski, ed. *Studies in Entertainment*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 39-54.

Tues Oct. 30: Bringing the Experience of TV Together: TV, Time, and Sound

Review Doane and Altman readings.

Wed Oct. 31: SHORT ESSAY #2 IS DUE

Thurs Nov. 1st: NO CLASS, Instructor is out of town

Tues Nov. 6: Group Project Discussion Day

IV: The Drama of Everyday Life

Thurs Nov. 8: The Theater Comes to You

*Raymond Williams (1974/1989), "Drama in a Dramatized Society" In Alan O'Connor, ed. *Raymond Williams on Television: Selected Writings*. London: Routledge, 3-13.

Tues Nov. 13: Live Rituals and Collective Experience

*Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz (1998), "Political Ceremony and Instant History" In Anthony Smith, ed. *Television: An International History*. Oxford University Press, 97-106.

Madonna video (2000), "What it Feels Like for a Girl," broadcast one time on VH1.

Thurs Nov. 15: Proposed Group Project Day (in-class)

Tues Nov. 27: How the News Defines the Nation

*Edward Jay Epstein (1973), "Pictures of Society" in *News From Nowhere: Television and the News*. New York: Random House, 239-257.

*Herbert J. Gans (1979), "Nation and Society in the News" In *Deciding What's News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek and Time*. New York: Vintage Books, 8-18.

Thurs Nov. 29: The Most Profitable Local Soap Opera = The Local News

*Elayne Rapping (1987), Excerpt from "A Look at the Basics" and "Local News: Reality as Soap Opera", 35-41, 43-60.

Tues Nov. 20: NO CLASS

Thurs Nov. 22nd: NO CLASS, THANKSGIVING DAY

Tues Dec. 4th: Final Project Presentations

Thurs Dec. 6th: Final Project Presentations

Final Exam Period: Sat. Dec. 15th, 4:00-5:50

Will use for final project presentations if needed.