Introduction and goals of course

Politics and Popular Culture

This class is designed to introduce students to the study of popular culture - with a specific focus on pop culture's role in American political life. We will discuss various pop culture texts - from movies to music, television shows to websites - to understand their political relevance and potential impact on individuals and society.

Reading

The following texts are required for the course:


Grading

30% Exam #1 Thursday Oct 15th
30% Exam #2 Thursday, Nov 19th
40% Cumulative Final Exam (During Finals Week)

Total = 100%
Structure of the course:

**Terms and concepts**

This course is designed to provide students with a broad understanding of the political relevance of popular culture. We will begin the course with a consideration of various terms, including: mass, popular, and high culture; citizenship, entertainment, information, and politics.

I use the term “politics” in this course to refer to three (somewhat overlapping) categories of concepts.

1. **Electoral politics** (especially American electoral politics): includes all branches and functioning of government, politicians, policies, elections, campaigns, and formal governmental institutions.
2. **Cultural politics**: refers to questions of power distribution in society among various groups. Questions pertaining to gender, race, class, religion, and sexuality fall into this category.
3. **Global politics**: may concern the relationship between the U.S. and the globe, foreign crises, international security, globalization and world economics.

Throughout the course we will be examining the implications of popular culture and entertainment in the context of electoral, cultural, and global politics.

We begin with a consideration of citizenship and political socialization, exploring terms and concepts that will be central to this semester’s discussions.

Next we turn to visual media, concentrating on the medium of television where we examine the McLuhan-esque perspective (“the medium is the message”), considering the potential influence of the medium of television itself (not its specific messages). We will read Postman’s (1985) *Amusing ourselves to Death*, a pessimistic exploration of how television is transforming our culture into one of passive amusement and spectatorship. On the other side, we consider the arguments of van Zoonen, Jones, and others, who see political entertainment as a potential avenue for mass engagement in politics.

We then move towards the specific content of television programming, exploring how televised political entertainment can be politically relevant.
COURSE POLICIES

STUDENT RESPONSIBILITIES. While attendance will not be formally recorded, attendance will most certainly be required to succeed on exams. Exams will be based on lectures and the texts required for the class. Students who miss class should try to obtain copies of class notes from their peers. Students with university-excused absences (due to illness, death in the family, or athletic obligations) may be eligible for notes from the professor or TA, but only with proper documentation.

EXAMS. There will be two exams during the semester and one final exam during finals week. Exams will consist of true/false and multiple choice questions. Exam dates are posted in this syllabus are FIXED. Therefore, the only make-up exams that will be permitted are those predicated by unforeseen documented emergencies. (See section on “Justified Absences”)

GRADING. Consultations about grades are intended to clarify course standards and procedures and to provide guidance that might improve future performance. Assigned grades will not be changed unless clear and significant procedural errors have occurred.

JUSTIFIED ABSENCES. If students know they will be absent from class due to a religious holiday, travel with a university-affiliated team or group, or because of unavoidable circumstances, they should speak with the professor at the beginning of the term or as soon as possible thereafter, so that appropriate arrangements can be made.
Calendar (subject to change)
ALL READINGS SHOULD BE COMPLETED FOR THE TUESDAY CLASS

Week 1. September 1: Introduction to the course

Sept 3 class cancelled: (Dr. Young attends American Political Science Association Annual conference)

Week 2. Sept 8 & 10

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TOPIC: Definitions and Concepts</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Readings:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Van Zoonen, Chapter 1. <em>Distinctions</em></td>
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<td>▪ Schudson, <em>Politics as cultural practice</em>. (On Sakai)</td>
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<tr>
<td>▪ <em>Might want to start reading Postman for next week… (cause there’s a lot of reading)</em></td>
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Week 3. September 15 & 17

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<tr>
<th>TOPIC: The broad implications of television and visual media on politics and citizens’ engagement in political life.</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Readings:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>▪ Postman, <em>Amusing ourselves to death</em>. (Foreword through chap 2 up to page 29)</td>
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<td>▪ Putnam, <em>Tuning In, Tuning Out: The strange disappearance of social capital in America</em> (On Sakai)</td>
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<tr>
<td>▪ Prior, <em>News versus entertainment: How increasing media choice widens gaps in political knowledge and turnout</em> (pages 577-579 AND conclusion (587 – 589)) (On Sakai)</td>
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Week 4. September 22 & 24

**TOPIC:** What is citizenship and how might television affect it?

**Readings:**
- Postman, *Amusing ourselves to death.* (chapters 3–5, p. 30–80)
- Van Zoonen, Chapter 4. *Connections: The Fan Democracy*
- Jones, *Rethinking Civic Engagement in the Age of Popular Culture,* from *Entertaining Politics,* (On Sakai)

Week 5. September 29 & October 1

**TOPIC:** **VISUAL MEDIA, TELEVISION, AND CITIZENSHIP**
The broad implications of television and visual media on politics and citizens’ engagement in political life.

**Readings:**
- Postman, *Amusing ourselves to death.* (ch. 6 & 7, 83 – 113 & 9, 125 - 141)
- Van Zoonen, Chapter 5. *Personalization: The Celebrity Politician*
- Williams and Delli Carpini: *Heeeeeere’s Democracy!* (On Sakai)

Week 6. October 6 and 8

**TOPIC:** **TELEVISION ENTERTAINMENT PROGRAMMING AND ELECTORAL AND GLOBAL POLITICS. FROM JACK BAUER TO JON STEWART.**

**Readings:**
- Postman, *Amusing ourselves to death.* (chapters 10-11, p. 142 - 163)
- Young, *The Daily Show as New Journalism,* (On Sakai)
- Young, *Recreatin’ Sarah Palin: Journalists, Tina Fey, and the construction of a Political Persona.* (On Sakai)

Week 7. October 13 and 15 (Exam #1 scheduled for October 15)

**TOPIC:** **RECAP**
Week 8. October 20 and 22

**TOPIC: TELEVISION ENTERTAINMENT PROGRAMMING AND CULTURAL POLITICS**  
**Reading:**  
- Gerbner, Gross, Moran, & Signorielli, *The political correlates of television viewing* (On Sakai)

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Week 9. October 27 & 29

**TOPIC: TELEVISION ENTERTAINMENT PROGRAMMING AND CULTURAL POLITICS**  
**Readings:**  
- Battles & Hiton-Morrow, *Gay characters in Conventional Spaces: Will and Grace and the Situation Comedy Genre* (On Sakai)

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Week 10. November 3 & 5

**TOPIC: AMERICAN FILMS: IMPLICATIONS FOR ELECTORAL & GLOBAL POLITICS**  
**Readings:**  
- Van Zoonen, *(2007 article online)*, *Audience Reactions to Hollywood Politics* (On Sakai)  
- *Readings on the fate of Iraq War Films* (On Sakai)

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Week 11. November 10 & 12

**TOPIC: MUSIC**  
**Readings:**  
- Van Zoonen, ch 3. *Confrontations: Popular Music and Politics*
Week 12. November 17 & 19 (Exam #2 Scheduled for November 19)

**TOPIC: RECAP**

Week 13. November 24 (Nov 26 no class: Happy Thanksgiving!)

**FILM SCREENING**

Week 14. December 1 & 3

**TOPIC: DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES**

Readings:
- Van Zoonen, ch 9, *Reflections*

Week 15. December 8 (Last Day of Class)

**FINAL EXAM Held during Finals Week (Dec 11 – 18)**