Political Communication
CMN 529, Sec. 5
2:00-4:50 pm Tuesdays
356 Armory (ACDIS Conference Room)
CRN 53580

Professor Scott Althaus
Office: 256 CAB (until mid-Sep.); 427 DKH (after mid-Sep.)
Hours: Thursdays 3:00pm-5:00pm, and by appt.
E-mail: salthaus@illinois.edu
Web: www.illinois.edu/~salthaus
Phone: (217) 265–7879

Overview
This course is an advanced introduction to theory and research in the field of political communication. Its goal is to acquaint students with the field's history, research questions, theoretical approaches, empirical accomplishments, and likely future directions.

No course can be fully comprehensive, and in order to best serve students taking this one, the instructor has limited the range of topics to a manageable few. Four omissions are notable. First, students should be aware that most of the course readings apply mainly to political communication systems in the United States, with a few exceptions. This course mostly ignores a broader range of important work done by political communication scholars that addresses the interaction between news media, audiences, and politicians in within and across other countries. Cross-national political communication research is a thriving area of scholarship that deserves a course of its own, and interested students are encouraged to follow up on this course by examining political communication research directed at systems outside the United States.

Second, this course covers the social-scientific study of political communication that is being conducted primarily by political scientists and communication scholars. Neglected almost entirely is a much broader range of humanistic and qualitative research on political communication that traces back to Aristotle's Rhetoric and is currently pursued by scholars of rhetoric, cultural studies, and media studies. This choice reflects the unfortunate historical divergence of qualitative and quantitative political communication scholarship, and a division of scholarly labor that now emphasizes specialization in one or the other area of research. This course is an introduction to the quantitative side of political communication research only, and students interested in pursuing this subject further are strongly encouraged to consider coursework in media studies, rhetorical criticism, and rhetorical theory.

Third, this course has been designed to provide a broad overview of many important theoretical developments and debates in the field of political communication, but this broad theoretical overview necessarily ignores huge chunks of literature focusing on specific topic areas. For instance, the class will hardly touch on the subject of social capital and media use even though this is currently a vibrant research area among political communication scholars. This choice to privilege theory over broad literature reviews was made with a hope and an assumption. The assumption is that class time is better used discussing theoretical approaches and controversies rather than merely bringing students up to speed with broad areas of the research literature. The hope is that once students are armed with the theoretical insights gained from this course, they will be prepared to efficiently and effectively navigate their own way through these research literatures.

Fourth, different aspects of mass-mediated political communication are studied by political communication researchers, some of which are also studied by broader scholarly communities and are covered in other
courses available in the political science and communication departments. To avoid overlapping topics and to allow us to go in depth on research areas that are uniquely pursued by political communication scholars, this course will largely ignore relevant topics in the areas of media effects, policymaking, social networks, campaign effects and new media technologies to privilege areas of inquiry that are not duplicated elsewhere in the academy.

Objectives
This course is intended to provide students with a broad overview of the political communication subfield. The assigned readings along with the recommended readings constitute a foundational part of what every well-trained political communication scholar should know about the field. By the end of this course, students should be able to:

- understand the study of political communication as an inherently interdisciplinary project
- appreciate a broad range of theoretical concepts and empirical approaches that play important roles in political communication research
- recognize the strengths and weaknesses of these theoretical concepts and empirical approaches

Required Books

The following books are required reading for the course. All of the following titles are on reserve at the Communication Library in Gregory Hall:


Other Readings
This course has a Moodle site that will be the primary vehicle for receiving course assignments and distributing course-related materials in electronic form. The Moodle site can be accessed here (access requires an enrollment key): [http://courses.las.illinois.edu](http://courses.las.illinois.edu)
Two important reminders: electronic copies of readings obtained through the library system or the course Moodle are not for redistribution to persons outside this class, and graduate students are not allowed to print these readings for free in departmental computer labs. Students are strongly encouraged to organize themselves so that one person is responsible on a rotating basis for printing out, photocopying, and distributing readings assigned for each week.

Assignments and Course Grade

Your final grade for this course will be determined by your performance on the following assignments:

- Final research paper or take-home exam (40% of final grade)
- Weekly participation in class discussions (20% of final grade)
- Discussion guides for assigned readings (8-12 short papers, 40% of final grade)

Final research paper or take-home exam

Students will be writing a final paper that will be 20-25 double-spaced pages in length. This paper can take either of two forms: a research paper on a topic related to the seminar readings (topic to be determined in consultation with the instructor), or a take-home final exam that requires you to integrate and synthesize the readings from the course. The idea here is to provide you with an opportunity to apply what you have read in the course, either to a substantive research problem, or to stepping back and crystallizing your own perspectives about the theories, research designs, and topics covered in class. Advanced graduate students are encouraged, but not required, to pursue the research paper option. Master’s level students are encouraged, but not required, to consider the take-home exam option, which provides an opportunity to integrate and synthesize the full range of course readings.

Weekly participation in class discussions

In-class discussion will be the primary mode of instruction for this course, and therefore it is vital that everyone participates. Participating means being an active conversation partner and engaging with other students. Participation does not mean dominating the conversation, trying to impress the professor or one’s fellow students with how much you know, or even criticizing the readings or ideas that come up in conversation. Asking questions is a more desirable mode of participation than answering them. Asking good questions that open up lines of inquiry will contribute more to the conversation than providing good answers or merely dissecting a reading’s faults and limitations. Criticizing a reading is useful but easy. The more productive but difficult work is intellectually engaging with a reading. Being completely confused about a reading is fine (and candor about such matters is encouraged) so long as you own up to it so that others in the seminar can benefit from the opportunity to test their own understanding of what a reading is about.

Discussion guides for assigned readings

Discussion guides are assigned to provide a collective benefit to all students taking the course. Each week, students will be assigned to write up brief (roughly 1-2 pages, single spaced) discussion guides for particular readings. These guides serve three purposes: (1) they summarize a reading to focus attention on main points and to highlight its relevance to issues of concern in the course, (2) they raise questions about a reading that can be used to stimulate discussion, and (3) they connect new readings to old readings in order to highlight common themes and to point out how current readings raise, address, or underscore questions sparked by previous reading assignments. By the end of the course, each student will possess a discussion guide for every major reading covered during the semester. This collection that
will prove invaluable for reviewing course material, studying for comprehensive exams, and as a foundation for future engagement with research conducted in the political communication subfield.

There is no set format for discussion guides, but they should address the three purposes described above in the process of summarizing and raising questions about each reading. In addition to summarizing main arguments/contributions, these guides will be helpful in drawing connections to other readings. Since the set of readings for a given week is often chosen to highlight a particular area of controversy, it will be especially helpful when constructing these guides to note how your assigned reading relates to others assigned in a given week. Keep in mind that our interest is not only in exploring the broad theoretical issues at the heart of research on political communication, but also in exploring the ways that different scholars have attempted to study these issues. Relevant questions therefore include not only theoretical or philosophical issues but also questions related to methodological approaches, research designs, operationalization of key concepts/variables, interpretation of findings, etc.

You are expected to provide enough paper copies of your discussion guides for everyone in the class (one for each student, plus one for me). If you get them to my e-mail account or my Political Science department mailbox by noon on the Tuesday before each class, I will be able to photocopy them for you without charge. If for some reason you will be unable to attend a class for which you are assigned to provide a discussion guide, it is your responsibility to either trade assigned readings with someone else in the class who can attend, or arrange someone else to distribute your discussion guides at the start of the relevant class period.

Class Schedule

8/23 Overview of the Field and History of Political Communication


For further reading


8/30 Theoretical Origins of the Field: The Lippmann-Dewey “Debate”


9/6 Normative Perspectives on Political Communication


For further reading


9/13 Understanding News Exposure


For further reading


9/20 Consequences of News Exposure and Nonexposure


For further reading


### 9/27 Making News


*For further reading*


**10/4 Economics of News Production**


**For further reading**


### 10/11 News Autonomy


**For further reading**


10/18 News Bias


*For further reading*


**10/25 Cross-National Perspectives on Political Communication**


For further reading


11/1 The Early Trajectory of Media Effects Research


For further reading


11/8 Media Effects Research since the 1970s


For further reading


11/15 Selective Exposure Research Then and Now


*For further reading*


**11/22 [NO CLASS—THANKSGIVING BREAK]**

**11/29 Current Perspectives on the New Media System**


*For further reading*


12/6 The Future of Political Communication


**Audio recording** of The future of political communication research: Where we’ve been, where we’re going. Roundtable discussion at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association in Washington, DC, Aug. Sep. 1–4, 2005.

12/13 Final papers due in *my Political Science mailbox* and posted to Moodle no later than **5:00pm**