



UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI DI MILANO-BICOCCA

COURSE SYLLABUS

Cultural Research: Methodology and Techniques

2526-2-E4001N115

Learning objectives

Knowledge and understanding

The course aims to provide students with a coherent set of theoretical categories and conceptual tools to understand communicative and cultural processes in contemporary society, with particular attention to the role of media in the production, circulation, and reception of symbolic content. The course examines the main transformations of the media ecosystem, from mass communication to digital media, and up to the central role of platforms and algorithms in processes of cultural visibility, selection, and transmission.

The teaching path introduces the main sociological approaches to the study of communication and culture, reconstructing their theoretical genealogies and relating them to key areas of contemporary media analysis, such as popular culture, cultural and creative industries, audience practices, participatory culture, the platformization of production, and emerging forms of algorithmic mediation.

Applying knowledge and understanding

The course is oriented toward the study of communication as a situated social process, embedded in the dialectic between cultural production and reception and articulated through different forms of artistic and media expression. From this perspective, works, texts, and communicative practices are considered within the relationships between authors, institutions, cultural industries, and audiences, as well as the technical devices and social conditions that shape their production, circulation, and interpretation.

By the end of the course, students will be able to situate communicative phenomena within appropriate theoretical frameworks and apply sociological categories to the analysis of cases related to cultural production and reception.

Making judgements

The course aims to develop students' autonomous judgement in interpreting the transformations of media and digital cultures, fostering a critical and informed approach to communicative phenomena and media texts.

Communication skills

The course is designed to strengthen students' argumentative competences and expressive abilities, encouraging them to present clear and coherent theoretical analyses and sociological interpretations of cultural and communicative phenomena.

Learning skills

The course promotes a critical and informed engagement with the scholarly literature in the fields of sociology of communication, media, and culture, developing the skills necessary for students to continue studying and deepening these topics independently.

Contents

The first part introduces the main theoretical foundations of the sociology of communication and media, focusing on the relationship between symbolic forms, media institutions and processes of meaning-making. This section reconstructs the principal research traditions that have analysed communication, audiences, popular culture and artistic production as interconnected domains within the dialectic of cultural production and reception, and as central dimensions of social life.

The second part is devoted to the transformations of the contemporary media ecosystem, with particular attention to the transition from mass media to digital media and to the growing centrality of platforms and algorithms. The focus is on their implications for cultural production, consumption practices, the visibility of content and forms of participation.

The third part concentrates on the approaches used to study digital media, platforms and online communicative practices, highlighting the analytical specificities of platformised environments and the ways in which media technologies reorganise forms of sociality, cultural circulation and the construction of publics.

The fourth part of the course is organised in a flipped classroom format and is devoted to the reading, presentation and critical discussion of scholarly articles related to the course topics, with the aim of developing analytical skills, argumentative abilities and engagement with the research literature.

Detailed program

Part I. Sociological foundations of communication and media. The first part of the course introduces the main theoretical frameworks for understanding communication and media as constitutive dimensions of social life. It reconstructs the principal traditions of the sociology of communication, from the classics of social theory and the Chicago School to the opposition between critical theory and American communication research. Topics include classical models of communication, the shift from transmission to ritual approaches, theories of interaction and social representation, and conceptions of media as symbolic environments. Particular attention is devoted to the interpretative turn, British cultural studies, audience studies, and analyses of popular culture, as well as to perspectives on cultural and artistic production, understood as collective processes of value attribution and the social construction of works, from theories of cultural fields and art worlds to the production of culture perspective.

Part II. Digital media and platforms. The second part of the course is devoted to the transformations of the contemporary media ecosystem, relating communication theory to the digital configurations of cultural production and reception. It examines the shift from the broadcast model to many-to-many communication, the network society and theories of mediatization, participatory cultures and networked publics. Specific attention is given to the platform society, datafication, algorithmic personalisation, and new forms of cultural visibility, selection and valuation. Within this framework, the course also addresses processes of automated mediation and the growing role of artificial intelligence in the production, distribution and recommendation of content. The section further explores media inequalities, creative and platformised labour, and the transformations of popular culture within the digital ecosystem.

Part III. Approaches to the study of digital media, platforms and popular culture. The third part introduces the principal approaches used to study digital media, platforms, and cultural practices both online and offline. The focus is on the construction of the research object in media studies, the relationship between theory and empirical research, and the typical units of analysis in communication research: practices, texts, publics and contexts. The course presents qualitative approaches to the study of communicative and cultural practices, the analysis of media texts and representations, reception studies, and strategies for triangulating production, content and audiences. A specific section is devoted to digital ethnography, the study of platforms, online cultural traces and native web methods, with attention to ethical issues and the epistemological limits of digital data.

Part IV. Flipped classroom: papers, discussion and research. The final part of the course is organised in a flipped classroom format and involves activities centred on the reading, presentation and discussion of scholarly articles related to the course topics. Work is primarily conducted in small groups and focuses on the analysis of research contributions, their oral presentation, and collective discussion in class. Activities include guided reading of academic texts, structured presentations, critical discussion, and the connection of theoretical contributions with empirical cases and contemporary communication issues. This part is designed to develop critical thinking, argumentative skills and clarity of expression, while fostering an active engagement with the research literature and the main perspectives in media and popular culture studies.

Prerequisites

Basic knowledges of the qualitative and quantitative research methods and main topics of cultural sociology

Teaching methods

The course consists of 56 hours, of which approximately 65% will be delivered through direct teaching (lectures with the use of slides, audio and video) and 35% through interactive teaching (exercises, sub-group work, and the presentation of case studies from which individual and group activities, prepared and discussed during the course, can be developed).

Assessment methods

Learning will be assessed through a written examination consisting of open-ended questions to be completed within 60 minutes, based on the set texts and the topics covered during the course. The questions require students to present and discuss theoretical concepts, authors, interpretative models, and transformations of the contemporary media ecosystem in a structured and reasoned manner.

The written examination assesses: understanding of the main concepts and theoretical approaches in the sociology of communication and media; the ability to apply conceptual categories to the analysis of contemporary communicative processes; independent judgement in interpreting transformations in digital media; and clarity of expression and appropriate use of disciplinary language.

Assessment takes into account the relevance and completeness of the answers, the ability to connect concepts and authors, the coherence of the argument, and the correct use of sociological terminology.

Textbooks and Reading Materials

Textbooks:

- Sorice, M. (2025). *Sociologia dei media. Un'introduzione critica*, Carocci.
- L. Heinich (2004). *La sociologia dell'arte*, Il Mulino

Scientific papers:

- Griswold, W. (1987). The Fabrication of Meaning: Literary Interpretation in the United States, Great Britain, and the West Indies, in «*American Journal of Sociology*», 92(5).
- Swidler, A. (1986). Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies, in «*American Sociological Review*», 51(2).
- Nieborg, D. B., & Poell, T. (2018). The platformization of cultural production: Theorizing the contingent cultural commodity, in «*New Media & Society*», 20(11).
- Seaver, N. (2017). Algorithms as culture: Some tactics for the ethnography of algorithmic systems, in «*Big Data & Society*», 4(2).
- Forberg, P., Schilt, K. (2023). What is ethnographic about digital ethnography? A sociological perspective, in «*Frontiers in Sociology*», 8.
- Chu, W. et al. (2025). Exploring the impacts of generative AI on artistic innovation routines, «*Technovation*», 143.

Sustainable Development Goals

QUALITY EDUCATION
