Course Description:

Much as we may strive for clarity and effectiveness, communication doesn’t have precise, focused effects. The imprecision, multiple and diffused effects, and unintended consequences of human communication make this branch of the social sciences notoriously challenging—particularly regarding cause and effect. This course takes a multidisciplinary look at the “underside” of interpersonal, mass media, political, commercial and social communication, as well as other types of campaigns, to learn from other communicators’ miscalculations, tactical and strategic errors, mistakes, and surprises. During the course, we will attempt to identify a list of antecedents that can help us avoid unintended effects. The class is designed to help us learn what can go awry, what’s likely to go awry, and to avoid the pitfalls of unintended consequences of communication.

Objectives:

- Define ‘success’ and ‘failure’ within the discipline of communication.
- Distinguish intended vs. unintended vs. ironic “backfire” consequences of communication, both interpersonal and mass media campaigns.
- Reason from cause to effect using the tools of the social sciences.
- Identify antecedents of unintended consequences (the course covers six antecedents but they aren’t exhaustive—students are encouraged to discover their own antecedents).
- Develop skills to increase the likelihood of one’s own communications having intended effects, with a minimum of unintended or ironic effects.
- Compare successful to failed campaigns, and draw conclusions.
- Develop an informed sense of which campaigns risk failure before they start, why they are likely to do so, and what to do about potential risk. This is the primary objective of the class, and will be evaluated in various ways, but particularly by the final exercise.
- Create a toolbox of strategies on how to “fix” a communication campaign in trouble, and how to mitigate communication failures.

Topics & Calendar:


Read: Psychology of Unintended Consequences, Mindlessness, Chapter 4.
Read: Articles as distributed.

Weeks 3 & 4. (Sept 11 & Sept 18).
Read: Psychology of Unintended Consequences, Lack of Opposition, Chapter 3.
Read: Articles as distributed.

**Big Ideas**, Values, Ideology, & Morality. Off-the-shelf intellectual systems, how they put blinders on critical thought, and how they can either propel or retard effective campaigns. Ideologies of religion, politics, demography, and science.
Read: Psychology of Unintended Consequences, Big Ideas, Chapter 2.
Read: Articles as distributed.

**Ironic Incentives**. The wrong incentives lead to the wrong behavior. Tragedy of the commons. Diffusion of responsibility.
Read: Psychology of Unintended Consequences, Ironic Incentives, Chapter 5.
Read: Articles as distributed.

**Resistance**, Reactance, and Rebalance. People push back; pushing harder can lead to more resistance, not less. Uninformed and informed resistance. Results of force, coercion, and punishment.
Read: Articles as distributed.

**Commitment**. Inertia, habit, expecting the same independent variables to lead to the same dependent variables, even when the communication environment changes. Generalization failures.
Read: Psychology of Unintended Consequences, Commitment & Inertia, chapter 7.
Read: Articles as distributed.

**Mitigation**. What to do when plans go awry. Fixing the problem vs. fixing the perception of a problem. Playing defense. Accounts.
Read: Psychology of Unintended Consequences, Mitigation, chapter 8.
Read: Articles as distributed.

(No class held on Dec 4).

**Grades & Percentages:**
Five 10-minute Presentations, Each 10% for a total of 50%.
Final Exercise (small-group written exercise) 30%.
Participation (attendance, work turned in on time, quality of in-class comments and discussions, overall quality of work and participation) 20%.

Five Short Presentations:

On five days during the semester (see dates in blue above), students will be called upon to present brief 10-minute presentations (containing explanation and analysis) of one of the following:

(A) A campaign or communication or other attempt to change human behavior that yielded unexpected, unforeseen, or unintended consequences. For example: the Dove Real Women ad campaign, the backlash from the Groupon super bowl ads, the unexpected support for Chick-Fil-A, a backfiring political campaign or social action campaign, the crusades, etc. These may be current or historical. (Please remember that a simple blunder or an inept communication is not the same as an unintended consequence from an intended effect.) There is no limit on the number of these types of presentations; all five of your presentations may be of this type if you wish.

(B) A philosophical or psychological perspective, or other “school of thought” perspective, that relates to unintended consequences. For example: chaos theory, or determining cause and effect, or confirmation bias, or the perspective of economics or law on unintended consequences, etc. For this sort of presentation you’d want to combine a few sources, not just pull from a single source. Please limit yourself to a maximum of two of these types of presentations, if you opt to give a “school of thought” perspective.

(C) An article or book review. The review must pertain to, or somehow illuminate, unintended consequences. This presentation can draw from a single source. If you review a short article, please be certain it’s sufficiently “rich” to sustain the presentation. Please limit yourself to a maximum of two of these types of presentations, if you opt to do a review.

Please make every effort to present on the blue dates as scheduled, unless you are ill. You may need to arrange your work schedule to be in class on blue dates; I am not inclined to excuse absences these dates except for illness.

The presentations should be relatively casual, and the class will certainly want to discuss your presentation and ask questions afterward. Ten minutes is not a lot of time, so you should practice your presentation to make certain you can fit it into the time allowed. If you would like to show us supporting material, you’re free to use the presentation computer. You can use this during your 10 minutes to show graphics, videos, etc.

Please be certain to maintain your neutrality as you discuss a communication or campaign. Don't engage in campaign cheerleading or damnation. I'm not asking you to
judge an influence agent's morality. If you are commenting on political campaigns, do so in a way I can’t tell which side you’re rooting for, or what your bias or interest is. You're not being asked to pass moral judgment on a campaign or its authors. Your writing should be interesting and educational without emotional partisan, ideological, or moralistic heat. I'm looking for objective, balanced, informed reviews.

Start looking for unintended consequences immediately at the start of class, so you have a “stack” of them to use throughout the semester. On the black dates that precede blue dates, you’ll have a chance to tell the class what you’re working on. If it so happens that two of you have chosen the same campaign or example to present, you’ll have the option to co-present (for 20 minutes), or you may decide to choose a different topic to present. Each person in the class is allowed one co-presentation. (In other words, at least four of your five presentations should be solo.)

Note that once we formally discuss a particular example of an unintended consequence in class, that same example is now ineligible for presentation, unless you can present it from a fresh perspective. The intent here is to avoid student presentations that sound like discussions or prof lectures we’ve already had in class.

You also need to give your audience a presentation handout, (aka summary sheet, or take-home sheet) on your topic. This is a single-sheet summary of your presentation (it can be two-sided but it should fit on a single sheet). You may wish to add a graphic or two. Make enough so everyone in the class can have a copy, plus a few extras to keep on hand for those who may need a spare.

Your presentation handout should give references to at least several sources you used to create your presentation (except in the case of a book or article review, where a single source is adequate). Please be certain your sources are of high quality—see discussion below.

Your presentations and handouts should be interesting to read, and ideally should be a learning experience for your audience. As you create your presentations and handouts, be sure to monitor:

- quality of analysis;
- quality of references;
- sufficient level of understanding of the topic (because some students are prone to present on a topic before they themselves understand it with sufficient depth);
- the creativity and interest level of the presentation & handout;
- your ability to specify and explain communication consequences;
- your ability to field questions about your presentation.

Here [link when online] are examples of presentation handouts created in other classes. The topic isn’t the same, but you can see the form of the summary sheet itself.
After the week’s presentations are done, when you’re at home, or studying elsewhere, please review the presentation handout and rate them. It’s best to read and rate them within a day of the presentations, so the material’s fresh in your mind. You’ll be provided a rating sheet [link when online] for this purpose. Hand in this rating sheet on the following black date. These rating sheets will be used in part to create grades. About half a presentation’s grade will come from these student review sheets, and the other half of a grade will be determined by the professor. So grades on the presentations will concentrate on the presentation handout (rather than the presentation itself) and will be informed both by students and the professor. Do not rate yourself on these sheets.

The rating sheet for the presentation handouts is along a 1 to 5 scale, with “3” indicating normal or typical for the class as a whole. This is an important point. A “3” does not represent a “C,” it represents the typical class performance. So if the class is full of “A” students, then “A” work is typical, and it would get a “3.” I would expect to see 1s and 5s used seldom, but use them if needed.

Several cautions are in order regarding sources:

Please don’t reference low quality blog postings, Wikipedia entries, or sources that contain discernable partisan bias.

Quotes from blogs that have made it into student journals in the past have been of remarkably low quality, often representing one anonymous person’s opinion, so I discourage the use of blog postings if they are used as merely anecdotal evidence. Of course, there are blog postings by authoritative and reputable sources that are of high quality, in which case, they’re welcome. It’s up to you to discern the difference between a low-quality and a high-quality opinion, and to make it clear that you are using a high-quality source if you rely on blog entries.

Wikipedia has many problems as a scholarly source:

- Wikipedia is filled with personal and political agendas.
- Wikipedia often contains incorrect and misleading information, which may appear one day and be gone the next.
- Wikipedia is particularly susceptible to infiltration by activists with agendas other than enlightenment.
- Wikipedia is written by unaccountable, anonymous authors loosely governed by unaccountable, anonymous administrators. Authors and administrators come to “own” certain topics, and may refuse to allow any significant editing or changes. Some pages are locked once they are acceptable to the authors and editors, effectively silencing those with alternate views.
- Wikipedia has often been used to spread gossip and libel.
- Wikipedia is infamous for overemphasizing pop culture and underemphasizing scholarly disciplines.
- Wikipedia is non-profit, but owner Jimmy Wales’ for-profit business Wikia
capitalizes on Wikipedia.

- Wikipedia is widely acknowledged to be an inferior source for rigorous investigation, and has little utility as a scholarly reference. At best it can give you an overview (of unknown accuracy) as a supplement to your own research.

These cautions apply to highly partisan sources as well, such as: The Huffington Post, the Rush Limbaugh Show, material from Jon Stewart’s Daily Show, the American Spectator, the Daily Kos, and similar highly partisan sources, which are frequently padded with propaganda. If you find interesting material at highly partisan sources, try to discover their sources; you may be able to track down less partisan material this way. It’s hard to say exactly where to draw the line, given the politicization of much of life, but for this class I draw the line at sources or particular articles that are unambiguously partisan, ideological, or propagandistic. On the other hand, you’re encouraged to reference major newspapers such as New York Times and Wall Street Journal, which have biases, but are held to a higher standard than popular propaganda sources. And of course trade magazines and academic journals (which may also be subject to bias) are generally acceptable. Being able to distinguish propaganda from information is a skill you must develop.

AdAge is a nearly limitless source of information about campaigns that performed poorly. Also major newspapers regularly chronicle unintended consequences. And any of the academic journals devoted to the social sciences will provide interesting academic analyses upon which you can present. Chapters or portions of chapters from relevant books on our topic can provide material. Google searches under “failed campaign” or “unintended consequences” or similar search words will also give you leads. Just be certain to follow up with a quality investigation of your own.

Final Team Exercise:

The final will be a group-based take-home exercise. Your group will receive a scenario, in which an advocacy group is planning a campaign. Your team’s job will be to review the proposed campaign, spot danger signs, and make recommendations to avert trouble. In essence, you’ll take on the role of outside consultants who are tasked with vetting the campaign before it runs.

You will have a chance to vote for team members toward the end of the class. Teams will be approximately four people in size, give or take one. Teams will be formed partly through student preferences, and partly through the need for similar-sized teams, but if you have any preferences, I’ll try to put you in a team where at least one person is someone you want to work with, or with someone who has requested to work with you.

The best way to approach this exercise is to meet as a team to discuss potential pitfalls of the scenario. Then write your exercise, rewrite, edit and proof into a 3-4 page, single-spaced document which you can hand in at the final. While the team receives a grade that’s shared, team members also rank the input of their fellow team members on an evaluation sheet, and these evaluations may spread individual scores within a team
somewhat. The best course of action is to make certain all team members share an equal burden of the load; “ slackers” are easily spotted on evaluation sheets.

**Bibliography**

Some of our readings may be taken from the following; see actual readings posted.