



## COMM 411: COMMUNICATION CRITICISM

Fall, 2017

Class #20625

12:30-1:50 MW

ANN 209

### Course Information

It is a truism that we are bombarded by thousands of persuasive messages every day. Politicians lobby for our votes; companies lobby for our dollars; causes of all kinds lobby for our allegiance. Communication criticism is the process of analyzing these messages for the purpose of figuring out *how* they persuade us. It differs from two other forms of “criticism” with which you may be familiar. It is not criticism in the popular sense of carping or complaining because, although critical judgments are always somewhat subjective, they are not simply expressions of personal opinion. Communication criticism also is not simply critique because not all messages are simply effects of ideology and power (although some are). The communication critic believes that messages are far richer, more complicated, and more diverse than this, and approaches them as strategic responses to actual, and specific, communicative situations. Thus, communication criticism is a systematic, three-stage process. First, the critic studies the context within which the message was produced, in order to understand how circumstances might have “called forth” (or stimulated creation of) the message while also constraining (or limiting) the kind of message that would be understood as responding appropriately to those conditions. Second, the critic studies the message itself, in order to understand its component parts and how they combine. Finally, the critic “matches” the message to its context, in order to understand how—or whether—the message responded to the demands of the situation, and to evaluate it as a persuasive effort.

In this class, we will explore a vast range of persuasive messages, from some of the most important speeches ever delivered to some of the cleverest advertisements ever devised; from powerful documentary films to popular TV programs; from political cartoons to internet memes. As communication critics, we will seek to understand, interpret, and evaluate these messages as attempts to shape beliefs and attitudes, and motivate action, in particular audiences under specific circumstances.

The main assignment in the course will be a semester-long project devoted to an artifact, or public message, of your choice (with my approval). It will be completed in three stages, and will involve three papers, reflecting the critical process outlined above: Stage 1 will be a description of context (which might be historical or very contemporary, depending on your artifact); Stage 2 will be an analysis of the artifact itself; Stage 3 will be your finished project, which interprets and evaluates your artifact (see Stage 2) as a strategic response to a communicative situation (see Stage 1). Of course, we'll talk about how to complete these stages in much greater detail in class.

Further details, including a daily syllabus, are under development! Join us and become a more critical communication consumer!