



COMM 384  
 Interpreting Popular Culture:  
 Media and Audiences in the Digital Age

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 Class meets M/W/F 9:00 – 11:50am  
 Room: ANN 209

Course Description

What is popular? How do we define culture? Placing these two terms together opens up a host of questions that we will be discussing and working through in this class. This course is built on a cultural studies approach, in which the work of the audience is always key to understanding how popular culture operates. Cultural studies claims that what we consider popular culture is always in process; it is a negotiation between what the media industries (studios, networks, labels, tech developers) produce and how the consumers of that media content interpret it—read it, reuse it, share it, mix and mash it. This class will survey how this negotiation occurred through twentieth century media, from radio to film to television, as well as focus on how the dynamics have evolved with tech-driven changes in online, mobile, and networked digital media that we use every day.

This course will provide the skills and space to critically interrogate the shows we watch, the music we listen to, the content we make and share. Popular culture also encompasses popular movements, especially when we see these politics embedded in the content we stream, who we follow, and what's trending on social media platforms. We will use contemporary popular culture to debate and investigate the role power plays in shaping the media landscape and how we interpret it. We will use a critical lens to analyze how issues of gender, race, class, and sexuality are mediated and practiced through these negotiations of power. This course requires attentive reading, active discussion, engaged, and creative work on assignments. We will learn as we apply our critical skills to analyze a range of popular culture texts from Beyonce and Netflix shows to #OscarsSoWhite and Harry Potter fans.

By the end of this course, students will:

- Develop the tools to critically interpret popular culture and the ways we interact with it.
- Understand how the media practices we engage in play a role in shaping popular culture.
- Be able to identify and analyze how media and audience practices negotiate representations of gender, race, class, sexuality, and other identities.
- Learn how to engage with popular culture through critical writing and creative making.

