Course Description

This course is a survey of theoretical approaches and substantive sociological concerns in the study of television. We will focus on three general areas of sociological interest in television: 1) how the production of television programs is related to the structural properties of the television industry and individual organizations; 2) the social messages and meanings that are encoded in the content and form of television genres; and 3) the kinds of social and individual effects that television may generate, including how television is used by viewers.

Required Readings:

1) Required textbook (Available at the McGill bookstore):


1) Coursepack (Available at the McGill bookstore)

Note that not all the required readings are in the coursepack. The rest of the articles will be available via WebCT.

Course Requirements

1. **Mid-term Exam**: There will be a mid-term test on October 21st. This test will be worth 30% of your final grade. Failure to take the test on the scheduled day will result in a grade of F for the test unless there is some legitimate extenuating circumstance and arrangements are made in advance. A review session for the test will be conducted in the preceding lecture period.

2. **Final Exam**: A final exam worth 35% of your final course grade will be given during the finals period. The final exam will not be cumulative. No review session will be given.

3. **Course Essay**: A course essay on some sociologically pertinent aspect of television is required (approximately 8-10 double-spaced pages in length). See "Essay Assignment" below. This will be worth 30% of your course grade, and is due Friday November 29th in class. See the guidelines for essays section at the end of the syllabus. A late paper will not be accepted unless there is some legitimate extenuating circumstance, and I reserve the right to reduce the grade of any essay that is turned in late.

3. **Conferences**: The Friday lecture period will sometimes be canceled for conferences (see schedule). They will be conducted in the same classroom. It is strongly suggested that you attend them as they will help you with the essay. Some exam questions will be related to the content covered during those conferences. Group assignments will be assigned during those conferences. Although those assignments are not mandatory, they will count in your participation grade. 5% of your course grade will be based on your attendance at the conferences, and a bonus point of 5% will be based on your participation.

Note that the mid-term and the final are closed-book exams.

“In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University’s control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.”
Course Outline

Lecture Topics and Reading Assignments

Introduction to the Study of Television in Society

Week 1
September 4: Overview of the Course and Introduction to the Sociology of Television
September 6: History of Television


Week 2
September 9 & 11: The Role of Television


September 13: No class

The Production of Television

Week 3
September 16 & 18: The Industrial and Organizational Structure of Television


September 20: Conference

Week 4
September 23, 25 & 27: The Economic Aspect of Television

Reading: Walker & Ferguson “The Broadcast Television Industry, Chapter 3”

Week 5
September 30: Canada versus United States

Reading: Raboy and Taras “The Trial by Fire of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation: Lessons for Public Broadcasting”

October 2nd: French versus English Canada

Reading: Attalah “Public Broadcasting in Canada”,
October 4: Conference

Television Genres & Ratings

Week 6
October 7 & 9: Analyzing Television Content and Form
Recommended: Mittell “Cartoon Realism: Genre Mixing and the Cultural Life of the Simpsons”

October 11: Conference

Week 7
October 14: Thanksgiving Day (no class)
October 16: Television Ratings

October 18: Wrap-up and Review

Week 8
October 21: Mid-Term (in class)

Television, Socialization and Identity

October 23 & 25: The effects of television/ Notion of Identity

Week 9
October 28 & 30: The Dominant Ideology

November 1st: Conference

Week 10
November 4 & 6: Journalism and News Coverage
November 7:  Conference

Week 11:

November 11: Ethnicity / Race


November 13: Sex and Sexuality


November 15: Conference

Week 12:

November 18: Gender Representations & 20


November 22: Conference

Week 13

November 25: TV and Violence & 27


November 29: Reality TV


NOTE: Your term paper must be turned in by Friday November 29 in class.

Week 14

December 3: Reality TV

FINAL EXAM t.b.d.
GUIDELINES FOR ESSAYS

Typing: Your essays must be typed and double-spaced with at least an inch margin on all sides. Use Times New Roman and font 12.

Long Quotations: If you are quoting a passage from a text that takes up five or more lines when you have typed it out, you will need to indent and single space this quote in your essay. Note: you should not put quotation marks around such an indented passage. The fact that it is indented signals to the reader that this is a direct quote (you will, of course, need to cite the source of the quotation at the end of the quote—see below).

Essay format: Subtitles are often useful as a means of segmenting various aspects of your analysis. Number the pages of your paper in some consistent fashion. Be aware that you need to place references in the essay when you are quoting from a textual source, or when you are paraphrasing some textual argument. Failure to do so will be considered an act of plagiarism (see below) and you will be penalized accordingly.

Reference Page: You must also include a complete list of references at the end of your essay. My main concern is that you be consistent in the way in which you document your references. You might wish to look at the citations and references in the American Sociological Review, to see the preferred format for sociology articles.

For guidance on how to cite material that you may have located on the internet, see the documents available at http://www.bedfordstmartins.com/online/citex.html

There are many different styles of videography. If you are examining episodes of a TV program you may reference them as:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Episode</th>
<th>Airdate</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Writer/Producer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(example)</td>
<td>5/22</td>
<td>5/22/01</td>
<td>“The Gift”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Joss Whedon</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Academic integrity: McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offenses under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see www.mcgill.ca/integrity for more information).

Plagiarism: McGill's policy on plagiarism is as follows:

L'université McGill attache une haute importance à l'honnêteté académique. Il incombe par conséquent à tous les étudiants de comprendre ce que l'on entend par tricherie, plagiat et autres infractions académiques, ainsi que les conséquences que peuvent avoir de telles actions, selon le Code de conduite de l'étudiant et des procédures disciplinaires (pour de plus amples renseignements, veuillez consulter le site www.mcgill.ca/integrity).

McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offenses under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see www.mcgill.ca/integrity for more information).

Computers: Mobile computing and communications devices are permitted in class as long as it is not disruptive.
ESSAY ASSIGNMENT

For the class essay assignment, you must write an essay of about **8-10 double-spaced typed pages** on some sociologically pertinent aspect of television. Papers on purely technical or formal aesthetic properties of television are not acceptable.

I have included a number of potential essay topics that you might find of interest. If you choose one of these topics I would expect you to address these questions in some fashion, but your analysis may certainly go beyond these questions if the problems you address dictate related inquiries. And you are free to design your own paper topic, as long as you check with me to see if it is appropriate for this course. The course lectures and readings will cover most of these topics, but students are encouraged to look up additional sources in the library or on the internet.* Note that your choice of TV show should be relatively well-known. In other words, try to avoid picking a show that is only available on obscure networks.

1. Choose one TV show and apply the material covered in class regarding the discourse used, the portrayals of the characters, the stereotypes, etc. The guiding question is how minority (Blacks, Asians, Women, etc.) and non-minority groups are represented in this show? What message can we see by studying the discourse, and the portrayals of the characters? If you want, you can compare the same groups across different shows, even old shows that do not play anymore in order to see if some changes in the portrayal of those groups have occurred. Why minority groups are portrayed that way? To what extent can we apply the dominant ideology thesis to this portrayal? Would you say that this portrayal is an accurate representation of those groups in real life? Why? What general messages, if any, emerge about the tribulations of modern life (and, perhaps, how they should be dealt with) from this program? What are the audience demographics for this show, and how might that be reflected in the “situations” and their resolutions? *Note that this essay topic could apply to commercials as well. You should then think about what kinds of cultural references and representations are used to create the meanings that emerge?

2. Bourdieu argues that television, especially news coverage, creates “homogenization and political conformity” (Bourdieu, 2001). For this essay you will need to watch some national newscasts. Describe, in detail, how two or three news stories are “framed” on the television news. What are the themes (and subthemes) in the news story? What did you take to be the overall message conveyed by the story? Locate a newspaper or magazine version of the “same” story and compare how much information was imparted through the television frame. How might the story have been framed differently? (Here, another possibility is to examine how the story is framed on other newscasts). Assess the objectivity of news coverage by looking at their methods to present events, facts, “experts”. What could they do to improve it? Try to distinguish between facts and value. The class readings “As Goes the Statue, So Goes the War: The Emergence of the Victory Frame in Television Coverage of the Iraq War” and “How Journalist Visualize Facts” should be consulted.

3. Choose one genre of television (e.g., dramas, news, advertising, talk shows) and make some systematic comparisons between Canadian (French or English) and American television programs (or Canadian French and Canadian English television). (Viewing at least four episodes of each national program should give you the required comparative leverage). One claim advanced in the past is that Canadian television dramas are more novelistic than their American counterparts, and tend to be more realistic and (perhaps as a consequence) more downbeat than U.S. dramas. Is this still the case? For this type of project, you will need to find roughly comparable programs (which rules out some genres), and then note the themes and topics that appear in these shows, and how they are treated. Then begin the task of trying to explain whatever differences and similarities that you have found. Are they the result of differences in norms and values between the two countries? Of production constraints? Are the stylistic similarities a function of the time constraints of TV, or perhaps the desire to sell a standardized commodity to overseas markets?

4. “Reality Television” has emerged in the last few years as a significant programming genre throughout the world. For this project I would like you to analyze one of these reality shows (Survivor, American Idol, SuperNanny, Extreme Make-Over, Big Brother or others). Is there more to it than tournament-style elimination formats and the satisfaction of outguessing the dimwits? Do you agree more with Rushdie or with Ouellette and Hay? What are the
positive and negative elements that you see in reality television? How would you apply what Ouellette and Hay say about this genre? For instance, do you see reality TV shows as helping citizens in defining themselves? Is there any evidence that reality shows act as an agent of socialization?

5. Violence in television is everywhere. For this essay, I want you to choose a TV show and analyze the role that violence plays in this show. What would social learning theory, cultivation thesis and the catharsis thesis say about the violence shown in television? Would you agree with one theory more than with the others? Why? To answer that question, you should pay attention to how often you see violent acts? What message is conveyed by the use of this violence? Would you agree more with Signorelli or Freedman; that is, do you think that the way violence is portrayed in television influences our behaviors? (for that, you can do some external research or use studies described by Signorelli). To what extent is the presence of violence necessary in this show?

6. Design your own essay. But do see me before you proceed!

In accord with McGill University’s Charter of Students’ Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.