Media, War, and Conflict

An Introduction to key issues and debates

Institut für Kommunikationswissenschaften (IfKW), Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München (LMU)

Course responsible:
Holger Pötzsch (UiT Tromsø; guest researcher at IfKW/LMU); contact: holger.potzsch@uit.no

Level: Bachelor

ECTS: 9

Language: English

Time and date:
WS 2018/19: January 21, 25 & 28 (09:00 - 16:00 and 19:00 - 21:00)

Exam form:
Project essay about subject chosen by student (max. 5,000 words incl. references). Theme must be accepted by course responsible and has to be relevant for content of the course.

Project essays due:
February 10, 2019.

Lecture plan and syllabus:

Summary:

The interdisciplinary course interrogates how mass media (in particular film, computer games, and social media) represent violent conflicts, how these representations, their reception, and potential implications can be analyzed, and how the roles of technology and societal institutions in these processes can be understood.

We will take a two-folded approach; firstly, we will explore ways of formally analyzing media 'texts' (in a wide understanding) to assess their ideological potentials before we, secondly, contextualize these texts with reference to concrete contexts of production and reception, as well as the open and hidden affordances of dissemination technologies. By these means, the course oscillates between 1) text-focused, 2) user/audience-centric, and 3) technological approaches and brings these apparently opposing frameworks into productive dialogue.
Monday, January 21:

09:00 - 09:30  
**Welcome and introduction to the course**

We get to know each other and gain an overview over content of the course, work requirements, exams etc.

09:30 - 11:00  
**Lecture 1: TEXT**

**Mind the Gap: Cultural expressions and the representation of violent conflicts**

The lecture explores how war and other violent conflicts are represented in media. Main focus will be on film and computer games.

Firstly, we look into how representation has been conceptualized by for instance Ferdinand de Saussure, Roland Barthes, and Stuart Hall. We home inn on the necessary gap between representation and what is represented, and identify this gap as the locus of a politics of cultural expressions. Connecting these considerations to theories of discourse (Foucault, Laclau/Mouffe), we develop concrete methodological tools to approach audio-visual media representations of war and their possible ramifications empirically. Examples will be taken from mainstream Hollywood cinema and AAA game titles.

Secondly, the analytical frames drawn up so far will be connected to an exploration of the political economy of the Hollywood studio system and major game developing companies. Following Hall's Encoding/Decoding model, we connect the generic frames of representation identified earlier to concrete factors at the level of relations of production, technology, and received hegemonic discourse.

Finally, we will explore how certain cultural expressions critically interrogate the identified formal frames and their potential discursive and political effects. Here, we reconceptualize another gap - the gap between self and other - as a potentially productive third space inviting contact and negotiation rather than othering and exclusion.

**Required readings (recommended to read in the order below):**


**Recommended readings:**


11:00 - 12:00: Lunch

12:00 - 13:45

**Lecture 2: MEANING**

**Culture Matters: Exploring effects of cultural expressions**

In this lecture, we approach the question of how possible implications of media representations can be accounted for. Moving from earlier media effects scholarship to an understanding of active audiences, we criticize both frameworks as necessarily limited in their outlooks and develop an alternative model based on the conception of meaning potentials that are, more or less systematically, invited by media representations' formal devices and narrative tropes. In doing so, we unhinge distinctions between popular culture and high art, and replace it with a division between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic articulations.

In a second part, we turn to the question of how to analyse the meaning potentials invited by cultural form. Here, we initially look at two possible methods, before we combine these in an interdisciplinary framework. Firstly, formal analysis and close reading can serve to unveil the devices and structures that systematically invite certain perspectives and understandings. Secondly, empirical audience research can assess how concrete audiences activate, negotiate, or subvert these invited meanings in situated practices of reception. Both frameworks provide valid insights. However, only their combination within an overarching interdisciplinary framework setting the data sets acquired through each method up against one another allows for a triangulation that enables us to identify certain effects with a high degree of certainty.

Concrete examples will be taken from historical films and computer games. We analyze how their representational frames invite meaning potentials that play into contemporary memory politics, and assess what concrete audiences do with these potentials and the overarching frames. Again, hegemonic articulations will be measured against counter-hegemonic ones.
We also investigate potential roles played by organized interests in maintaining a biased cultural field.

Recurring back to the last two lectures, this session ends with a critique of received models of communication as inherently violent and presents an alternative based on processual thinking and the logic of contingency (Pinchevsky, Levinas).

**Required readings:**


**Recommended readings:**


14:15 - 16:00: Seminar 1

We take a closer look at certain key concepts and theories and conduct sample analysis of war films and games.

19:00 - 21:00: Film screening

Eugen Jarecki’s *Why We Fight* (2005). With brief introduction and followed by q/a.
Friday, January 25:

09:30 - 11:00:

Lecture 3: TECHNOLOGY I

The Materiality of Digital Networks

This lecture critically interrogates potential political implications of (new) media ecologies.

Empirically, we will trace the development and current state of the Internet. Starting as a military technology in 1960s, the new digital network technologies quickly resonated with a certain strain of US counter culture in the 1970s and 80s, leading to the first tech companies in the rapidly developing Silicon Valley. Cutting through an ideology of immateriality and virtuality that has dominated the preaching of acolytes of the digital since Barlow's Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace, we propose four lenses of critical inquiry that promise to bring materiality back into the picture - technology, political economy & labour, the body, and ecology. Explaining each of these and connecting them to concrete cases, we investigate what each perspective makes visible and what it veils.

Finally, again following Foucault, we address possibilities of resistance unique to the digital by interrogating the practices and implications of Wikileaks, whistleblowing, and genuinely commons-based digital tools.

Required readings:

Electronic Frontiers Foundation: https://www.eff.org/
Public Library of US Diplomacy: https://wikileaks.org/plusd/about/
Recommended readings:


11:00 - 12:00: Lunch

12:00 - 13:45:

Lecture 4: TECHNOLOGY II

Digital Subjects

This lecture continues our exploration of material aspects of digital networks and their possible political implications.

We continue by interrogating questions of power and subjectivity in digital realms. Recurring upon Foucault’s distinction between three paradigms of power and adding Deleuze’s understanding of the role of the digital in these, we investigate practices and implications of digital surveillance, big data gathering, and predictive analytics for subjectivities, politics, and collective action.

Finally, we ask the question if contemporary increasingly dense socio-technical environments afford, or even enforce, a re-thinking of established categories such as agency, autonomy, and human beings.

Required readings:


**Recommended readings:**

McFarland, Daniel & McFarland, Richard. 2015. “Big Data and the Danger of Being Precisely Inaccurate”, *Big Data & Society*, online first. (8 pages) [http://bds.sagepub.com/content/2/2/2053951715602495](http://bds.sagepub.com/content/2/2/2053951715602495)


**14:15 - 16:00: Seminar 2**

We take a closer look at certain key concepts and theories and conduct sample analysis of war news and new media content.

**19:00 - 21:00: Film screening**

Laura Poitras's *Citizenfour* (2014). With brief introduction and followed by q/a.

**Monday, January 28:**

09:30 - 11:00

**Summarizing discussions and debates**

11:00 - 12:00: Lunch
12:00 - 13:45: Student project presentations: (work requirement)

Each student will have to present a case that speaks to the course’s content. Please prepare for approx. 15 minutes presentation and approx. 15 minutes debate. The presentation can introduce the frames of your planned course essay.

14:15 - 15:30: Student project presentations: (continued)

15:30 - 16:00: Exam preparations

You will be able to ask questions and get feedback on practical issues regarding your planned course essays.

16:00 - 18:00: Practical Cybersecurity workshop (non-obligatory)

Important publicly available encryption and anonymization tool for digital devices will be introduced. Please bring your own smartphones and computers as we will install and start to use key applications in a hands-on approach.