

COMM 7010: Theories to Think With

Cornell University

Department of Communication

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Course Description

Theory is a tool. By offering generalizable principles and frameworks, theory allows us to grapple with a wide array of phenomena across varied contexts. As scholars progress in their intellectual journey, they begin by working to understand what contributions theory offers to a discipline. They must then grapple with the limitations and openings of theory as they look to conduct their own research. Finally, scholars begin producing their own theory. In this course, we will focus primarily on the second phase of this journey. We will read an assortment of different qualitative, critical, and philosophical theoretical frameworks to grapple with how those theories can help us build our analytical toolkit.

Learning objectives. By the end of this course, you should be able to:

1. Reference multiple new theoretical toolkits.
2. Articulate different ways in which theory is constructed, leveraged, and deployed.
3. Trace theoretical ideas across literatures.
4. Present and ground theoretical contributions.

If you take the class for a grade, this class will also give you the opportunity to produce a novel research paper. You will be best equipped to leverage this opportunity if you come to class with data you have already collected or a clear research question in mind.

Pre-requisite: COMM 6810, or graduate standing and permission of instructor

This course is designed for PhD students with prior exposure to advanced communication theory. Graduate students outside of Communication who have not taken COMM 6810 - but have taken similar social theory courses in STS, sociology, anthropology, media studies, etc. - can seek permission from the instructor.

Expectations and Attendance

This is a graduate seminar organized around in-depth discussions of theoretical texts. You are expected to read approximately a book a week for this course. We will talk on the first day about *how* to read for graduate seminars, but you should plan to read for 6 hours each week (and cut yourself off at 10 hours). One goal of this class is to help you develop the skills to read academic literature.

Each week, you will be told what to focus on; you will often be asked to bring additional materials to class. During the week, you will be encouraged - but not required - to [collaboratively note-take](#) so that you can all benefit from each other's efforts. By midnight the night before each class, you will be expected to submit a brief weekly memo to Canvas. During class, you will be asked to present on specific portions or additional material.

You will be responsible for acquiring the books for this class. I strongly encourage you to purchase them so that you can write in your own copy, but you can get them at the library or download them. I strongly recommend purchasing all of the books upfront. Please talk to me after the first class if this is going to be a problem. This class is untenable without obtaining copies of the books.

You are expected to arrive on time and contribute to every class. Contributions come in the form of offering insights to discussions, raising questions about the material, and helping the rest of the room learn together. My job is to guide the discussion; your job is to take ownership of your learning journey and contribute to the collective good of the classroom.

Please be in your seats by 1:25PM so that class can start on time for the benefit of all. Arriving late or leaving class early disrupts your peers' learning opportunities. Should you need to be late, leave early, or miss a class, please contact Professor boyd as soon as possible to discuss options. You may miss class, be late, or leave early once with advanced communication without penalty. Beyond that, each absence will cost you 5% of your grade (and each late arrival will be 2%). Again, if this is going to be a problem, talk to me ASAP. (Exceptions will be made for conference travel, job interviews, etc. Communication is key.)

Accommodations

If you are a student with a disability or who qualifies for academic accommodations, I am happy to work with you. I have provided basic information about the assignments and expectations in this document. Please make sure that you scan the expectations now. Should you need any accommodations for this class, please contact me by January 28th at the latest so that we can co-construct a path forward. Should a significant change occur over the course of the semester, please contact me as soon as possible.

Statement of Inclusivity and Respect

Each student in this course is expected to contribute to an inclusive and respectful class environment. Students of all backgrounds including gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, caste, nationality, and religion are to be treated fairly and with honesty, integrity, and respect. Civil discourse, reasoned thought, sustained discussion, and constructive engagement without degrading, abusing, harassing, or silencing others is required of all students in this class.

In-Class Device Policy

Technology can support your educational development; it can also be a distraction, both to you and others in the classroom. It is your responsibility to avoid using technology in ways that rupture the academic purpose for which we gather. You are responsible for your behavior and choices – and the impact that they have on those around you. If your use of technology distracts your peers or results in your disengagement from the classroom, you will be treated as being absent from class.

Generative AI Policy

Generative AI is a powerful tool that can enhance your creativity, but it also comes with trade-offs. You may use Generative AI for your class work, but you must be transparent about your use. On the first day, we will discuss how to use Generative AI constructively for working through academic literature. (We will also highlight the pitfalls.) That said, you are not required to use Generative AI for this class.

If you use Generative AI in any materials you share with the class (e.g., collaborative notes, weekly submissions, presentation materials), you **must** indicate how you used the tools available so that your peers understand the reliability of what you are sharing.

If you are taking this class for a grade, you must include a GenAI Statement with your paper submission indicating how you used GenAI. You should keep track of and plan to submit each prompt that you use and note how a particular output was incorporated into your work. Note: this includes research as well as text that you might use in a given assignment.

If you use GenAI for your memos, please also provide a GenAI statement at the bottom of each memo.

You should articulate why you chose to use GenAI, how GenAI use benefited your work on the project, how you ensured the quality of your work, and how you considered the social and environmental trade-offs of using GenAI. Failure to be transparent and reflexive about your use of GenAI – even for doing research for the assignment – will be treated as plagiarism.

Please keep in mind that many academic publishers do not permit submissions of papers that include text produced using GenAI. Should you wish to publish your final paper, you should refrain from using GenAI in your paper.

Academic Integrity

Each student in this course is expected to hold each other to the highest standards of academic integrity and abide by the Cornell University Code of Academic Integrity. Any work submitted by a student in this course for academic credit will be the student's own work. For collaborative projects, students will be asked to identify who contributed what to the effort. If you have any doubts about what constitutes a violation of the Code of Academic Integrity, or any other issue related to academic integrity, please ask us.

Students agree that by taking this course, all required papers may be subject to submission for textual similarity review to Turnitin.com or a similar service for the detection of plagiarism. All submitted papers will be included as source documents in the Turnitin.com reference database solely for the purpose of detecting plagiarism of such papers. Use of the Turnitin.com service is subject to the Usage Policy posted on the Turnitin.com site.

Any student in this class suspected of plagiarism or cheating on tests or assignments will have a primary hearing. If found guilty, the student will receive a failing grade on the assignment in

question and a reduction in the overall course grade, and the results of the hearing will be reported to the CALS Academic Integrity Board. The Department of Communication's policy is based on university-wide policy and procedures. Visit the University Academic Integrity website for further information.

Grading

You have the option of taking this class for a grade or pass/fail. I **strongly** encourage you to take this class pass/fail. You will pass if you attend and contribute to every class, submit weekly memos on time, and contribute insights from the additional readings you bring to class each week.

If you take this class for a grade, you will be expected to produce a final paper that demonstrates some form of engaging theory in your written work.

The breakdown of your grades is as follows:

Attendance and Classroom Participation: 30%

Weekly Reflection Memos: 50%

Final Paper: 20%

Grading Scale

A+ = 98-100	B+ = 87-89.5 ^[L] _[SEP]	C+ = 77-79.5 ^[L] _[SEP]	D+ = 67-69.5 ^[L] _[SEP]	F = <60
A = 94-97.5 ^[L] _[SEP]	B = 84-86.5 ^[L] _[SEP]	C = 74-76.5	D = 64-66.5	
A- = 90-93.5 ^[L] _[SEP]	B- = 80-83.5	C- = 70-73.5	D- = 60-63.5 ^[P] _[SEP]	

Late Assignment Policies

For every day that an assignment is late, you will receive a deduction of 5% of the grade of that assignment (including weekly memos). If an issue related to the deadline arises, you must contact me at least 72 hours in advance to get permission for an extension. After that, a doctor's note will be necessary. Please note that extensions will be rarely given.

Assignments

Your portion. You are expected to fully read the text of that week. Each week, I will tell you what to focus on that week. In some weeks, you will be given a specific portion of the weekly reading to "own" – or be asked to bring to class a paper that builds on that weekly text. You should be especially attentive to (and ready to present on) the section you own. These sections will be chosen/assigned at least one week ahead of time (with Week 2 responsibilities selected on the first day of class). During class, you will be responsible for making sure your peers understand the contributions of your portion. You will not be asked to produce a formal

presentation. Rather, you will be asked to come with prepared notes and contribute to the discussion.

Reflection memos. Each week, by Tuesday night at 11:59PM, you should submit a ~500 word reflection memo addressing the reading for that week. This is *not* a summary. Instead, you should be trying to apply the theoretical to a research question that animates you. You might choose to propose a research project that would leverage that theoretical insight. Or you might choose to connect the theoretical insight to a particular dataset that you are working with. Or you might choose to complicate the theoretical work that week by putting it in conversation with another theory. Above all, show that you are thinking with the theory at hand. And keep in mind that you are building muscle to think with these theories.

- You may skip one week without penalty.

Final paper. If you choose to write a paper for this class, it should be the first draft of a research paper where you are actively applying theoretical work to questions that excite you. The topic of this paper – and its intended audience – are entirely up to you. You may use theories that we discuss in class or you may leverage other theories using the same techniques that we are using in class. If you plan on writing a final paper, you will have a series of check-ins throughout the semester to ensure that you are on track. You can do this paper in collaboration with others or as a chapter in your dissertation. The purpose of this is to encourage you to use theory in your own work and to talk with me about it.

- By March 2nd, send me an email describing or meet with me in office hours to discuss the paper you wish to write. What is your target audience? What do you wish to analyze? What theories will be useful? (I will then offer you additional potential theories to consider.)
- By April 13th, send me an outline of your proposed paper. I will provide feedback within a week. The earlier the better.
- At any point, schedule time in office hours to discuss your research paper. I also strongly encourage you to share your thinking with your peers for feedback.
- Your final paper is due on May 13th by 11:59PM.

Mindset

This class is intended to help you build capacity as a scholar. Many graduate students think that their job is to identify limits and critique any given text that they read. In this class, I will try to break you of this habit. As you read the texts that we will encounter, I want to offer you a few questions that you should keep in mind each week:

1. What are the contributions of this text?
2. What intellectual conversation was this scholar intervening in?
3. How have other scholars leveraged or built on these ideas?
4. How does this contribution help you think more deeply about issues you care about?

As you read, you should also flag parts where you got stuck or confused, where the text referenced information that is unfamiliar to you. The goal is to work through these texts so come to each class with questions.

Weekly Schedule

Each week, we will tackle a different topic/book. There are two weeks in which Prof boyd is traveling. During these weeks, we will not officially meet, but you are encouraged to connect with other classmates to discuss. The timing of these is scheduled so that you have more time to read the longer selections that are for the week after. There are also three weeks at the end that are TBD based on students' interests. We will talk through options earlier in the semester so that you can obtain the necessary books.

Week 1: (Jan 21) – Overview and Course Planning

In this first class, we will discuss the role of theory in our intellectual journeys and collectively discuss theories that we each appreciate. We will discuss [how to read effectively](#) and share our collective strategies. We will discuss the use of GenerativeAI, note taking strategies, literature tracing strategies, etc. Students should come to the first class prepared to describe their own research passions and offer ideas for interesting theories to collective work through.

Week 2: (Jan 28) – The Gift

Marcel Mauss' "gift" is a classic anthropology theory (originally from 1925). In this class, we will explore both the theory and how contemporary scholars in our field use this classic theory.

- Required: Mauss, Marcel. 1990. *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art. [A version is available online: <https://files.libcom.org/files/Mauss%20-%20The%20Gift.pdf>]
- Required: Ferryman, Kadija. 2017. "Reframing Data as a Gift." Presented at the Sage Assembly, Seattle, WA, April 21. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3000631.
- Required: Fourcade, Marion, and Daniel N Kluttz. 2020. "A Maussian Bargain: Accumulation by Gift in the Digital Economy." *Big Data & Society* 7 (1): 205395171989709. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053951719897092>.
- Required: Silber, Ilana F. 2009. "Bourdieu's Gift to Gift Theory: An Unacknowledged Trajectory." *Sociological Theory* 27 (2): 173–90. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9558.2009.01342.x>.

Everyone focuses on Intro. Portions: Ch1, Ch2, Ch3, Ch4, Ferryman, Fourcade/Kluttz. Bring an additional article / reference for the class.

Week 3: (Feb 4) – Agnotology

Agnotology is the study of ignorance. This edited volume contains an array of examples of people doing analysis work using this concept.

- Required: Proctor, Robert, and Londa L. Schiebinger, eds. 2008. *Agnotology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance*. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press.

- Required: Find at least one article on agnotology/ignorance that contributes to this lineage.
- Optional, but encouraged: Watch “Merchants of Doubt” (2014) to see how theory is effectively turned into a documentary film.

Everyone should be prepared to present the introductory chapter of Proctor & Schiebinger plus at least two (of 11) chapters in the book and at least one other related article on agnotology that is not in this book.

Week 4: (Feb 11) – Birth of a Clinic

This is Foucault’s classic examination of how power, knowledge, and institutions co-evolved. (Hint: communication is a big part of the story.)

- Required: Foucault, Michel. 1994. *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*. Vintage Books.
- Required: Find at least one article that responds to / builds on this book. Or prepare to summarize another Foucault contribution/book.

Everyone should be prepared to comment on the conclusion, one (of 10) chapters, and one article that builds on this Foucault. (Introducing other Foucault that you’ve previously read to the class is welcome.)

Week 5: (Feb 18) – Read Ahead.

There will be no class meeting this week, but there are TWO books for the following week. So make sure you’ve finished one of them by this point.

Week 6: (Feb 25) – The Making of Status [NOTE TWO BOOKS!]

In this class, we will put two beautiful ethnographies in conversation with one another to reveal how theory can be more passively leveraged in ethnographic studies. *Liquidated* focuses on how elite academic networks form the backbone of the financial industry while *Lower Ed* focuses on how the financial industry manipulates those seeking an education.

- Required: Ho, Karen Zouwen. 2009. *Liquidated: An Ethnography of Wall Street*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Required: Cottom, Tressie McMillan. 2017. *Lower Ed: The Troubling Rise of For-Profit Colleges in the New Economy*. New York: The New Press.

Since these are ethnographies, you are to read them entirely rather than segmenting them into sections. Pay attention to the theories that each reference. Pull out at least 3 distinct theories to bring to the table to discuss. Take notes about how ethnographies engage theory.

Week 7: (Mar 4) – Context Collapse

When Alice and I first conceptualized context collapse, we did not appreciate that we were building a theory. Let's look at this concept – how it came into being, how we understood what we were doing, and where it went.

- Required: Marwick, Alice E., and danah boyd. 2011. "I Tweet Honestly, I Tweet Passionately: Twitter Users, Context Collapse, and the Imagined Audience." *New Media & Society* 13 (1): 114–33. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444810365313>.
- Required: Meyrowitz, Joshua. 1986. *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior*. Oxford Univ. Press. (Chapters 1-3)
- Required: Brock, André L. 2020. *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures*. New York University Press. (Chapter 1) – Available online here: <https://academic.oup.com/nyu-press-scholarship-online/book/34192/chapter/289592979>
- Required: Find 1 unique article building on, complicating, or critiquing context collapse. Bring it to class to share.
- For discussion in class, make sure you can get access to these papers:
 - [*"Public Displays of Connection"*](#) (2004).
 - [*"Friendster and publicly articulated social networking"*](#) (2004)
 - [*"Why Youth \(Heart\) Social Network Sites: The Role of Networked Publics in Teenage Social Life"*](#) (2007)
 - p. 49(36)-51(38) of [*my dissertation*](#), starting with "The techniques that Carl uses..."
 - [*"I'm a Lot More Interesting than a Friendster Profile': Identity Presentation, Authenticity and Power in Social Networking Services"*](#) (2005)

Everyone must bring distinct articles to discuss.

Week 8: (Mar 11) – Publics and Counterpublics

Jürgen Habermas' theories of publics have animated a wide array of scholars. Within that lineage, both Michael Warner and Nancy Fraser offer phenomenal reconceptualizations of Habermas' work.

- Required: Warner, Michael. 2010. *Publics and Counterpublics*. Zone Books.
- Required: Chapters 1 and 5 of *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (ed. Craig Calhoun). 1992. MIT Press. [Ch 1 is Calhoun's Introduction; Ch 5 is Fraser's Rethinking the Public Sphere]
- Encouraged: Scan other pieces about public sphere in either Calhoun or Habermas itself

Week 9: (Mar 18) – Read Ahead. (danah traveling)

There will be no class meeting this week, but I want you to read an early Goffman book plus Frame Analysis to discuss the following week. Make sure you've finished one of them by this point.

Week 10: (Mar 25) – Frame Analysis

“Frames” are a way of making sense of the world. After a career of studying micro-practices in everyday life, Goffman offered this theoretical framework to ground his contributions over the decades.

- Required: Goffman, Erving. 1986. *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. Northeastern University Press.
- Required: One of the earlier books from Goffman. Specifically, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956), *Asylums* (1961), *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963), *Interaction Ritual* (1967).

[Spring Break on April 1]

Week 11: (Apr 8) – Communication Power [NOTE: NOT SHORT!]

In this class, we will work with Manuel Castells’ framework for understanding how power operates within and across networks – and the role that communication plays in this process. Castells’ work in this book is explicit theory-making.

- Required: Castells, Manuel. 2011. “A Network Theory of Power.” *International Journal of Communication* 5:15. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/1136>
- Required: Castells, Manuel. 2009. *Communication Power*. Oxford University Press.
- Scan: Renderos, Steven. 2026. *Media Capture: Who Controls the Story Controls the Future*. Media Justice. <https://mediajustice.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/MediaJustice-Media-Capture-Report.pdf>.

The IJOC piece provides a good overview of the argument. The book provides the detailed argument.

Week 12: (Apr 15) – Frictions

In this class, we’ll grapple with ways of re-imagining global connectivity.

- Read: Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. 2024. *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*. Princeton University Press.

Week 13: (Apr 22) – Seeing Like a State

For this class, we’ll look at what it means for a state to “see” from this class anthropological text.

- Read: Scott, James C. 2020. *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. Yale University Press.
- Read: Singh, Ranjit, and Steven Jackson. 2021. “Seeing Like an Infrastructure: Low-Resolution Citizens and the Aadhaar Identification Project.” *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 5 (CSCW2): 315:1-315:26. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3476056>.

Week 14: (Apr 29) – Distinction

For this class, we'll grapple with how class "tastes" are constructed, cultural capital is formed, and habitus is manifested from this classic cultural studies text.

- Read: Bourdieu, Pierre, and Pierre Bourdieu. 2002. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Harvard Univ. Press.
- Read: Ch1 from Thornton, Sarah. 2004. *Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Subcultural Capital*. Polity.
- Optional Read: Ch 2 from Hodkinson, Paul. 2002. *Goth: Identity, Style, and Subculture*. Berg.