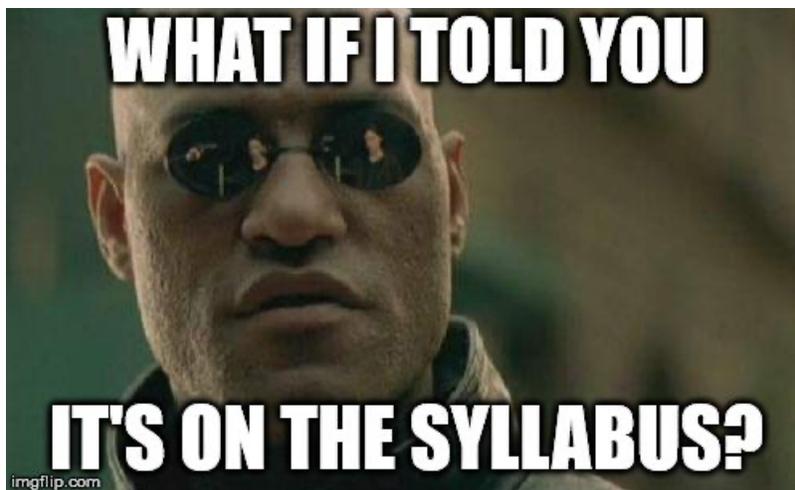


**Introduction to Communication Studies**  
**COMS 210, Fall 2020—COVID-19 Edition**  
T/Th 14:35-15:55 (sort of)

Location: many different places at once and at many different times

COMS 210 is a course in media civics: it is designed to help you become a better citizen of reality. It also offers an introduction to the field of Communication Studies as it is practiced at McGill. We live in a media-saturated world, yet despite the constant talk *about* media *by* media institutions, technologies, and personalities, most people know surprisingly little about how and why these systems work the way they do. You will learn about media economics and institutions; ecological impacts of media systems; and media practices and ideologies. Throughout the term we will attend carefully to questions of power, justice, and inequality.



Professor **Jonathan Sterne** (he/him/his—and “me” and “I” on this syllabus)

Email: [jonathan.sterne@mcgill.ca](mailto:jonathan.sterne@mcgill.ca) (list “COMS 210” as the subject of your message).

Office Hours: Thursday 3:30-4:30pm, TBA, and by appointment. A Zoom link for office hours will be posted on MyCourses.

Teaching Assistant: **Laura Boyce** (they/them/theirs though she/her/hers is ok)

Email: [laura.boyce@mail.mcgill.ca](mailto:laura.boyce@mail.mcgill.ca)

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Email: [ayasha.vemuri@mail.mcgill.ca](mailto:ayasha.vemuri@mail.mcgill.ca)

TA office hours will be announced on the course website.

We check email every weekday. If you write before we check, you’ll get a reply that day. If you write after we check on a given day, you’ll get a reply the next day. If you don’t get one after 24 hours or at the end of a Monday after a weekend, feel free to resend with “resend” in the subject line. We won’t be mad. If you write on a Friday, you

may not hear back until after email-check time on Monday (or Tuesday on holiday Mondays). We do not guarantee email replies on weekends.

### **Hey! Yes, you! Read this part!**

Email is going to be really important this term since we're not seeing each other twice a week. Please read these scorching hot tips (tl;dr: write to us like we are people): [How to email your professors \(works for all professors in all courses, also TAs\).](#)

We would like to reserve our email time for helping you learn. **Answers to questions about requirements, deadlines, etc., that are not covered on the syllabus or assignment sheets will be posted in the FAQ:** Please visit that section of the course first. If your email asks a question that can be answered by looking at the syllabus, FAQ, or MyCourses site, we will return a very short reply indicating the location of your answer.

### **Delivery Plan**

All materials for COMS 210 will be available through MyCourses. Students will not be asked to purchase any textbooks.

**Lectures:** Lectures will be delivered through weekly audio recorded "lecture" podcasts that will appear on MyCourses by Thursday at 14:35. "Answers" podcasts will appear Tuesdays. Students are strongly encouraged to download these and listen to them away from their computers and screens. More instructions will be given on the first day of class. The podcasts will be automatically transcribed by MyCourses, should students wish to refer to a print copy.

**Synchronous meetings via Zoom:** each Tuesday between 14:35-15:55, there will be an optional synchronous Zoom meeting for students who want it (there will be a link in MyCourses). The first 40 minutes of this meeting will be for small groups to work together on projects or to discuss topics from the course. The latter half is "group office hours" where students can ask us about course materials and discuss them as a group. Some Tuesdays will end early (instead of "group office hours") as the beginning of a 24-hour period in which to take a quiz.

### **Requirements and Grading**

**Quizzes:** [35%] Four times during the term you will take a timed, multiple-choice quiz during a predetermined 24-hour period. You will have plenty of notice as to when these quizzes will happen. The quiz is open-everything. You can look at your notes, refer to readings, and ask your friends. But it is timed. After the last day of class, there will be an optional fifth quiz. If you take it and score higher than your lowest prior quiz score, it will replace that quiz. If you score lower than on any of your first five quizzes, it will be averaged into your overall quiz score.

**Questions:** [20%] Approximately every other week, you will submit (via the questions assignment on MyCourses) a question on the assigned readings and lecture. TAs will go through the questions and I will answer a selection of them in the Tuesday "Answers" podcast. Questions are graded on a 5 point scale (0-4) and a rubric will be provided on MyCourses. You

are also welcome to submit an “Ask Me Anything” question any time, though this does not count towards your question grade. If it’s interesting to me, I will answer it in my podcast.

**Make Media Better:** [5% of total]: at the end of the term, in lieu of a questions assignment, the entire class will submit ideas for improving a media practice, technology, institution, policy, or system. See the assignment sheet for more details.

**Projects:** [40% of total] The projects contain a team element and an individual element (that students can elect to do collaboratively). Students will be randomly assigned into small teams (controlling for time zones), and teams will produce two projects over the course of the term. Most weeks, class time will be set aside for groups to make progress on their projects, and we will be available during class hours to consult with you about your progress.

**Flexible Assessment.** Because there are so many unknowns this term, I have decided to experiment with something called flexible assessment. The idea is that you are a better judge of your abilities than I am, and I should give you some choice in demonstrating your skills with the material. Therefore, you will be given an opportunity to select alternative weightings for some of the assignments. If you simply want to stick with the weights given to assignments, you don’t have to do anything. If you want to change the weights given to the assignments, you must make your selection on the MyCourses form by the end of add-drop, and making no selection is equivalent to selecting the weights given on the syllabus. No changes will be allowed. This will be explained more fully in the form you can submit.

**A Note on Disabilities and Access Needs:** Moving online will raise a host of unexpected and new issues around ability, disability and access. Students are welcome and encouraged to work with the Office for Students with Disabilities at McGill (514-398-6009 voice, 514-398-8198 TTY, <https://www.mcgill.ca/osd/>). BUT: you are *also* welcome and encouraged to just approach me directly regarding any disability issues, without prior contact with the OSD or a medical professional. I teach a course on disability, have a few of my own, has published on disability and impairment, and is generally very comfortable talking about the subject. To discuss an access need or request a specific accommodation, send an email to me before the end of add-drop with the subject line “COMS 210: Access Needs,” and include a paragraph discussing what kind of access needs you have. You are also welcome to attend my office hours and discuss it “in person” over a Zoom or telephone appointment if you prefer. However, any access arrangement will need to be formalized in writing.

**A Note on Covid-19:** This has jumbled up all sorts of issues around care work, paid work, bandwidth, and internet access for people. And some people will also get sick. If something related to Covid-19 affects your ability to perform in the course, please get in touch with your prof or TA.

### An Imaginary Week in COMS 210:

Here's what a typical week in COMS 210 will look like if everything goes according to plan. You are welcome to organize your time as you like, but here is a hypothetical schedule for you.

**Tuesday or Wednesday:** Do the readings for the week.

**Thursday:** The lecture podcast drops<sup>1</sup> by 14:35. Download it, and listen to the lecture,<sup>2</sup> preferably away from your computer. While you're on the website, check and see if there is a survey for the week (you can do this before you listen to the week's lecture). Student responses are incorporated into the following week's lecture podcast.

**Friday:** Every other week, you will be responsible for posting a question about the Thursday lecture or the week's assigned readings to MyCourses by the end of the day. You could also do this on Thursday if you wanted. A subset of questions will be answered on Tuesday's "answers" podcast.

**Tuesday:** For those who wish to meet synchronously, we will gather at 14:35, split into teams that will work on projects. Each week you will be given tools to make progress on the project. You can also elect to meet at other times, or asynchronously. ALSO: The "answers" podcast drops. Listen to it.

Four times during the term, you will take a timed, multiple-choice quiz on the lectures and readings. For each quiz, you will have a 24-hour window (which includes a Tuesday class time) in which to take the quiz. It is "open-everything" and you are encouraged to help one another out. There will be an optional 5<sup>th</sup> quiz at the end of term.

### Class Credos:

**More than one thing can be true:** cultural analysis only works if it is possible to hold onto apparently contradictory ideas at once, and explain how they can both be true in specific circumstances.

**No bullshit:**<sup>3</sup> we will avoid easy, prepackaged explanations of complex phenomena, and we will greet the claims of interested parties as open to interpretation and analysis. We will also not bullshit one another.

**You have the right to be wrong:** part of learning is changing one's own perspective. This is only possible where ideas can be expressed and challenged, and people are allowed to change their minds. But: no "devil's advocates" will be allowed—if you present a position, it will be interpreted as honest advocacy for that position.

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<sup>1</sup> I know. Just let me have my fun.

<sup>2</sup> If you would prefer to read the lectures instead of listening to them, MyCourses provides automatic lecture transcription. I am told the transcription is "not bad." The "official" version will be the audio recording in cases where the transcript differs from the audio.

<sup>3</sup> Yes, sometimes it's ok to swear (and use contractions) in formal writing. But you have to level up, first.

**It is everyone's job to imagine a better world:** any critique of how something is raises the question of how it ought to be. You will be asked to think carefully and imaginatively about alternatives to the way things are.

**Follow the golden rule:** treat others as you would want to be treated.

#### **Resources:**

**I. You:** "There are those who think that the speaker has a function to perform, and the hearer none. They think it only right that the speaker shall come with his lecture carefully thought out and prepared, while they, without consideration or thought of their obligations, rush in and take their seats exactly as if they had come to dinner, to have a good time while others work hard. Those people bite." – Plutarch, Greek Philosopher

Although this is a large lecture course, your participation is essential. Listen carefully. Take lots of notes on lectures and readings. Take advantage of opportunities to participate. Make friends with your classmates and help one another. Use our office hours.

**II. Your prof and TAs:** See page 1.

**III. Readings:** All required readings will be available on the MyCourses site. Additional, supplemental readings and links will also sometimes be made available.

**IV. Your classmates:** You are encouraged to work together and support one another.

#### **IV. Additional University Resources:**

The University has some additional resources to help you out. The academic resources are not remedial programs, and often the best and most advanced students use them. The cultural resources are broadly defined and inclusive.

The Writing Centre offers individual consultation on all aspects of writing. Appointments are required. Highly recommended if you want to work on your writing. 514-398-7109, <https://www.mcgill.ca/mwc/>

The Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD) provides a broad range of support and services to assist students with disabilities. 514-398-6009 (voice), 514-398-8198 (TTY), <https://www.mcgill.ca/osd/>

Counseling Services provides personal, academic, and career counseling to undergraduate and graduate students. They also offer workshops on study skills, multiple choice exams, test anxiety/stress management. Visit the Wellness Hub for more information: 514-398-6017, <https://www.mcgill.ca/wellness-hub/>

If you need support as a survivor of sexual violence, harassment, and/or discrimination on campus, you can contact McGill's Sexual Violence Response Advisor, Émilie Marcotte, at 514-

398-4486 or by email at: [osvrse@mcgill.ca](mailto:osvrse@mcgill.ca). For more information on survivor support and reporting options, visit: [www.mcgill.ca/saap](http://www.mcgill.ca/saap). The Sexual Assault Centre of the McGill Students' Society (SACOMSS), is a volunteer-run organization committed to supporting survivors of sexual assault and their allies. 514-398-8500, <http://www.sacomss.org/> The SSMU website also contains additional information on a number of resources available to survivors (<https://ssmu.ca/resources/sexual-violence/>).

Queer McGill provides social, political, and informational support for queer students by queer students. 514-398-6913, <https://www.mcgill.ca/engage/support/queer-mcgill>

First People's House provides a "home away from home" for Indigenous students, promoting academic success as well as community connection. 514-398-3217, <https://www.mcgill.ca/fph/>

Black Students' Network provides support for black students, and also works to raise awareness of black people's issues at McGill, and to make the campus safer and more accessible for black students. <https://www.mcgill.ca/engage/support/black-students-network>

McGill Office of Religious and Spiritual Life is a nondenominational religious and spiritual hub on campus. <https://www.mcgill.ca/engage/support/mcgill-office-religious-and-spiritual-life-morsl>

### **Rules and Expectations (aka "The Business End")**

Be nicer to one another than you would expect for yourselves. Be kind to your teachers. It's a tough time for everyone.

#### **0. The most important rule in the course: your right, our rights**

Everyone in COMS 210 has a right to their data and their privacy. Audio and video recordings, and other materials that we provide are for your use only and are not to be distributed beyond MyCourses (for instance, by posting online or elsewhere in the public domain). Students may not produce or circulate recordings of their teachers or classmates without their prior, explicit, written consent of the people being recorded.

We do not intend to record students or class meetings, and will give you a chance to opt in or out (depending on the assignment) of having your ideas and work shared with classmates.

Students are encouraged to freely share materials they make with one another. However, no one may sell study aids to the course without the prof's prior, expressed, written consent.

Please refer to McGill's [Guidelines for Instructors and Students on Remote Teaching and Learning](#) for further information.

**1. Just be honest with us: we do not want to be the police**

Has something gone wrong? Did you miss an assignment? Just be honest with us about what's going on and talk to us early while something can still be done.

You will never be asked for a doctor's note or some other official documentation to justify yourself. We don't want you waiting all day at a doctor's office just to get a piece of paper for our class. In exchange, we ask for your complete honesty about what's going on. That can include things that are entirely your fault. Everyone makes mistakes.

Nobody gets into teaching because they want to enforce rules. Our course policies are designed to maximize the amount of time we spend helping people learn and minimize the amount of time we (and you) spend on managing problems with the course policies. There are 4 of us and 200 of you, so our course policies are set with those limitations in mind.

The only behaviors we will be judgmental about are a) lying to us and b) grade grubbing.

**2. But we are not technical support**

We cannot troubleshoot your computer or internet connection. If there are systemic problems with MyCourses or Zoom (a real probability), please do let us know. We will deal with them in a way that does not penalize students for issues beyond their control. If you have an IT issue, please contact McGill IT support. <https://www.mcgill.ca/it/>

**3. Class conduct**

**Respectful dialogue is expected of everyone.** Everyone always has the right to change their mind, to learn and grow. We do not expect you to arrive with all the answers and we don't want you to expect that of one another. We especially do not want people worrying about whether their ideas or the ideas of others are "pure." While disagreements are expected, they should not shut down dialogue. Learning is a process: we make mistakes; we change our minds; we sometimes even regret some things we've said earlier. Our aim is to work together to learn and *un*-learn some of the things we take for granted, and to sharpen our analytic skills in the process.

**Please grant your fellow course participants courtesy and respect, whether you agree with what they say or not.** Let's avoid attacking someone's character or personhood if you disagree with something they have said: what someone thinks or says is not reducible to who and where they are. Our goal in talking with one another is to understand the texts we read, the concepts we use, and the media examples we encounter, and how they might be useful to us. As much as possible, let's work to avoid purely negative critique in comments and responses. Let's also extend the same consideration to classmates. Consider what other people say in their comments and discussion forum posts and think about how you can build on them and respond as generously as possible.

**Personal experience:** while you each bring interesting experiences to the course, you should consider whether you really want to bring them up in discussion. If you do bring up your own experience, recognize that it becomes a topic for discussion and others may provide other interpretations. Ask yourself what point you want to make by talking about yourself. Do you want others to know this about you? You also do not have to express your own opinion on a subject. You are also free to change your mind on any topic at any time.

**Difficult subject matter:** we will never do anything intentionally to shock or traumatize students. At the same time, it's our job to discuss difficult subjects in class, and nobody can predict the effect some materials may have on someone. If you are having difficulty dealing with a class discussion or a reading or recording, you may raise the issue as part of the discussion, or you may simply discretely leave class. A note to us would be helpful after the fact so that we know what happened and don't think you just got up and left.

**Zoom etiquette:** a separate document will be provided, but the short version is that all the normal rules of good classroom conduct apply. If you wouldn't do it in a class, don't do it on Zoom. Plus: mute your mic when you are not talking; do not use a distracting or offensive background (gently humorous is ok).

**Technology use:** don't multitask. When you're in class or listening to the lectures, do that. Don't do that and text your friends and shop. If you are used to listening to recordings at speeds faster than 1x, please feel free to do that with the lectures. The prof just cowrote an essay on the history of speeded listening. We recommend printing out the readings if you are able to do so.

#### **4. Problems in teams**

We want the teams to succeed, and we want students to help one another out. But problems do arise sometimes. There is a form on MyCourses for teams to submit to us if there is an issue on one of your teams. Let us know early and we will help you work it out.

#### **5. Deadlines, extensions/late/missed assignments and exams**

Everyone is expected to do all of the assignments. Students who join the class during add/drop will be given additional time to complete assignments from the beginning of term, but are not excused from doing them.

Flexible assessment allows you to influence the relative weight of different work on your assignments.

If you miss a quiz, you can take the last quiz at the end of term to replace it. If you miss more than one quiz, something is really wrong and you should be talking with us anyway.

Major assignments will have two deadlines, an official deadline and an extension deadline (in other words, you won't need to request an extension). This will be explained in class.

## 6. Grade Appeals

You can find your most up to date grades on MyCourses.

Calculation errors happen sometimes. Just let us know and we can fix it.

Should you wish to dispute a mark, it must be done according to the grade appeal policy on the course website. Keep in mind that “A” grades are awarded for superior (and not merely sufficient) performance. Meeting with your prof or TA and doing what we tell you also does not guarantee an A on a project. Although there is no quota, an “A” is a truly superior grade in this course. Most years, 20-25% of the enrolled students earned an A or A- semester grade. Also keep in mind that disputes over written work seldom result in an elevated mark and can result in a lower mark (if you ask for your assignment to be regraded, the grade can go up or down).

## 7. Language

The language of instruction at McGill University is English. However, you are allowed to submit your work in French. In discussions, Francophone students are welcome to use the French word if they can't think of the English word and we can help one another out.

## 8. Nondiscrimination Statement

Your teachers value equality of opportunity, and human dignity and diversity. In accordance with University policy, we will not tolerate discrimination or harassment on the basis of race, color, ethnic or national origin, civil status, religion, creed, political convictions, language, sex, sexual orientation, social condition, age, personal handicap or the use of any means to palliate such a handicap. Among other things, this means that you do not have to agree with your teacher, the assigned readings, or the majority of your classmates in order to do well in this course. You are, however, obligated to demonstrate an understanding of the course material *whether or not you agree with it*. If there is something we can do to make the class more hospitable, please let us know.

## 9. Cheating, Plagiarism and Exam Conduct

We've designed our assignments so that they will be timely and engaging. Cheating will either be next to impossible because you are supposed to look things up and work together, or it will be more work than just doing the assignment. We planned it that way! But here is the required official language from McGill. Please do not bullshit us.

McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the code of student conduct and disciplinary procedures (see [www.mcgill.ca/integrity](http://www.mcgill.ca/integrity) for more information).

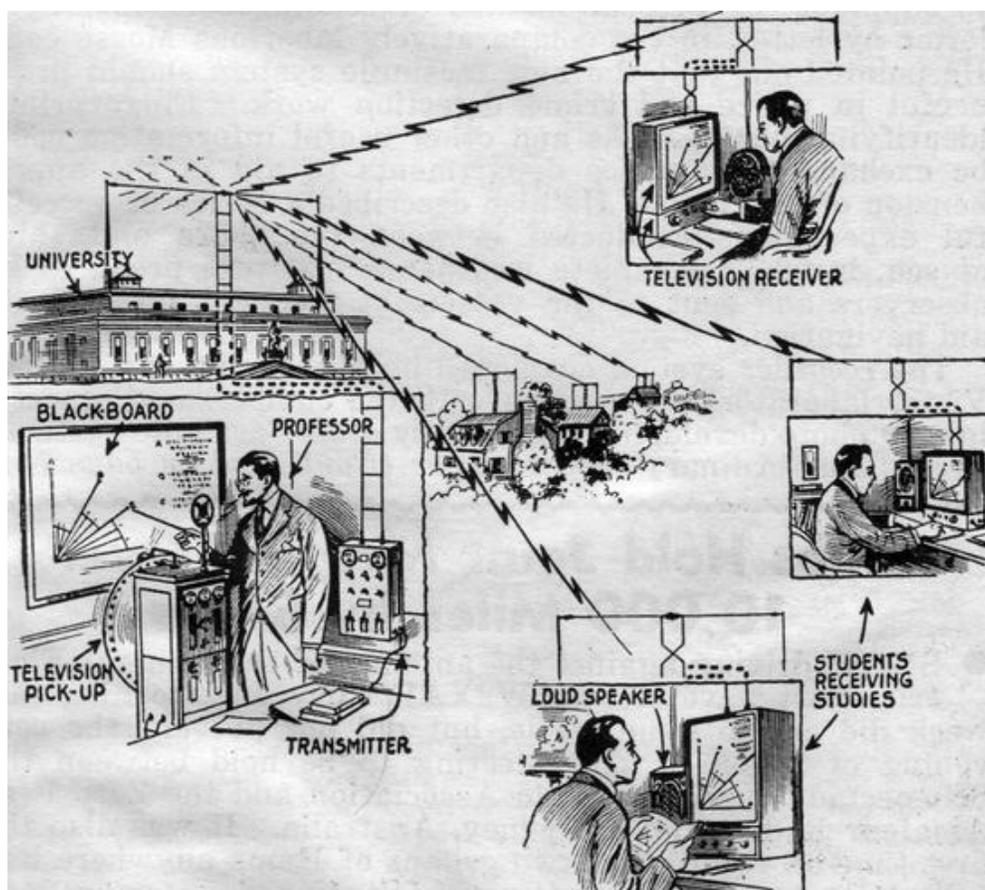
L'université McGill attache une haute importance à l'honnêteté académique. Il incombe par conséquent à tous les étudiants de comprendre ce que l'on entend par tricherie, plagiat et

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](http://www.mcgill.ca/integrity)).

#### 10. Special Required Emergency Syllabus-Eraser Clause

In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University's control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change. [insert hysterical laughter here].

#### 11. What This Class Was Predicted to be Like in 1935



Thanks: Carolyn Samuel, Casey McCormick, Victor Pickard, Neta Alexander, Steve Gennaro, Nick Seaver.