Teaching American Media and Popular Culture
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# TEACHING AMERICAN MEDIA AND POPULAR CULTURE

## Expansion, Inclusion, Interdisciplinarity



**Abstract:** This article is a reflection on its author's experiences in teaching American media at the Swedish Institute for American studies from 2015 to 2021. By way of concrete descriptions of classes taught and topics raised, Frykholm makes a case for an approach to popular media that looks beyond both an all-too-limited focus on "mass media" and the text-centric, hermeneutically based discussions about media representations that have otherwise been the most common way of engaging with media in American studies. The article also discusses challenges of interdisciplinarity that are a key concern not only when teaching media, but for the field of American studies more broadly.

**Keywords:** American media, popular culture, media spectacle, media and everyday life, globalization, media and politics, interdisciplinarity

For masses of people around the world, American media and popular culture are a constant presence in everyday life. This makes media and popular culture important areas of inquiry for American studies scholars, and it should be a priority to develop teaching methods that help our students think critically about their own media practices, as well as larger issues concerning the intersections of American media, politics, culture, and society. But how exactly can this be accomplished? And what are the prospects for doing this within the context of American studies in Sweden specifically?

The following pages offer a personal reflection on these questions. I start with an account of some of my own experiences in teaching American film, TV, and digital media at the Swedish Institute for North American Studies (SINAS) at Uppsala University.[1] I give examples of course design and topics, and I discuss strategies for meeting the challenges presented by the object of study on the one hand (ever-expanding, ever-ubiquitous) and the institutional-disciplinary context on the other (American studies at a Swedish university). Call it a double challenge of interdisciplinarity. I end with a general observation regarding the place of media and popular culture in American studies in Sweden.

In my day job I teach cinema studies at Stockholm University. But I have also been a guest teacher at SINAS on different occasions from 2015 to 2021, twice as course coordinator and main teacher for "American Mass Media I" (one of four 7.5 ECTS modules in American studies A [30 ECTS]), twice in the same role for "American Mass Media II" (one of four 7.5 ECTS modules in American studies B [30 ECTS]), once as one half of a co-teaching duo in "American Mass Media II," and once as a one-off guest lecturer.[2]

As their names indicate, these course modules were constructed with a notion of "mass media" in mind. This was especially the case for "American Mass Media I," evident in its then-current syllabus and reading list.[3] The syllabus did not spell out a clear definition, but it strongly implied an understanding of mass media as equivalent to print and broadcasting news media. Television was singled out as particularly important, as in the declaration that the course "takes up the question of how various media, primarily television, convey knowledge about politics and social issues in today's US." One of the learning outcomes mentioned, "knowledge of how news reporting in the US has changed since the advent of television," suggests that the main interest was perhaps not so much television as *TV news*. In any event, the syllabus was a relic from a pre-internet era. Further, its interpretation of the term "mass media" seemed biased against mediated forms of commercial mass culture—say, television soaps or video games—as if only the forms of media that themselves made a claim for sobriety and seriousness were worthy of taking seriously. Finally, the emphasis on the study of how media "convey knowledge" was puzzling. It was probably not meant to imply that the media was somehow neutral, but rather that it was important to think critically about the media's specific ways and means of "conveying" things—yet it posited media as a force external to, and separate from, those individuals and institutions it influences.

All of these assumptions about the media align with research traditions that should not be discarded, but that have always had problems and limitations, and that have diminishing explanatory power in the current media landscape. Media today is not so much an external institution that produces certain "effects" as an integrated feature of everyday life. And notwithstanding the significant role that the newspaper press and the broadcasting news media still play, they are part of an increasingly diverse and hybridized media landscape, in which "old" analog and

"new" digital media coexist, and in which the infrastructures of 24/7 digital connectivity allow for a wide range of social practices and media experiences. This makes it all the more interesting to study American media, but there are also challenges. The objects of study are everywhere and nowhere at once; they seem increasingly ephemeral and elusive. And it is not obvious how to hold them in place in a way that best serves the advancement of American studies.

Rephrased as a local challenge at SINAS circa 2015: how should a reconfigured concept of media be taken into account in a course constructed from a different—and arguably antiquated—point of view? I did not have to start from scratch. People who had previously taught the course had begun to address the issue, and I followed in their tracks, retaining a relatively strong emphasis on the study of American television news while also making room for other perspectives and topics. The introductory seminar was designed to let students familiarize themselves with different approaches to a scholarly study of media and how various methods and approaches in, e.g., media studies, cultural studies, mass communication studies, film studies, and television studies could be utilized in the context of American studies. This was followed by three seminars that dealt with American media history, mostly focusing on film and television. Media histories can be of great relevance in American studies, but they should be drawn differently compared to what we might do in a more discipline-specific framework. For example, familiarity with notable works within and outside the canon is not necessarily a priority in American studies classes. But giving those students a sense of how various media technological platforms and their associated social protocols have engendered certain patterns of collectivity and connectivity over time can be an essential element in their development of a more general understanding of American culture, politics, and society writ large.[4] Histories of cinema and television can be extremely useful to explore for that purpose. The media historical seminars were followed by two sessions on TV news and one that dealt with representations of race, ethnicity, class, and gender in American media, with serial TV drama as the example of choice. The course concluded with group presentations, for which the students were asked to carry out their own analyses drawing on knowledge and skills acquired in previous sessions.

In spring 2016, I returned to SINAS to co-teach American Mass Media II with Dag Blanck. The syllabus left more wiggle room than the one for the A-level module; we could either aim for a wide scope and lots of variety or identify a more limited thematic focus.[5] We chose the latter. Since the 2016 presidential election was only about six months away, we found this an opportune moment to explore the intersections of American media and politics, more specifically those relating to the presidency and the campaign for office. Hence the course, "Presidential Images and American Politics as Media Spectacle—The Election 2016 Version." We wanted to give students an opportunity to critically analyze the mediatization of American politics and the amalgamation of news, entertainment, popular culture, and celebrity culture that informs the media logic of contemporary American politics, and we wanted them to engage with methods, theories, and conceptual frameworks from a variety of academic fields, including media studies, political science, and mass communication studies. The notions of "media spectacle" and "image" were used as a conceptual and analytical starting point that we could reconnect with throughout the course. The first two class meetings served as introductions—the opening session discussed the presidential election as media spectacle and the second seminar explored the crafting and mediated circulation of presidential images from McKinley to Obama. The sessions that followed zoomed in on a selection

of media forms and modes of representation and address, including narrative feature films ("Running for Office—Hollywood Style"); documentaries ("Political Documentaries and Presidential Elections"); political advertising ("Campaign Ads, Candidate Image, and the Politics of Authenticity"); serial TV drama ("Projecting the Presidency as Political Romance and Shakespearean Tragedy: *The West Wing* vs. *House of Cards*"); news coverage of presidential debates ("American Politics and the News: Focus on the Presidential Debates"); and satire ("Political Comedy and the Presidency"). I recall lively discussions about Donald J. Trump, about the role of digital media—social media in particular—in American politics, and about an intensification of media spectacle that seemed to be reaching the point of a complete untethering of the presidency from reality (notwithstanding the many historical continuities that the course also brought into view).

Two years later I taught the same module, this time without a co-teacher. The issue of media spectacle and presidential politics was partly retained, but now subsumed under a different overall theme: "media, politics, and everyday life." The idea behind this course was to try to grapple seriously with the expansion of media that I described earlier. In other words, the aim was to explore the ways in which media has become ubiquitous in virtually all spheres of life, and how media use has become second nature for most of us. For this type of course, it is useful to start with an assignment that requires the students to keep a detailed log of their own media practices and use these logbooks as a basis for in-class discussions (within ethically appropriate boundaries). Precisely because media interactions tend to take the form of effortless habits that do not require much thought, we need to retrieve them from the murky corners of consciousness before we can start thinking critically about them. This was our point of departure. The next stop involved an effort to connect our media habits to a critical analysis of the American media and culture industries, and to establish the relevance of global media networks for American global power more broadly. Clearly, this type of engagement with media has interdisciplinary potential—students can carry it over to courses and modules that are geared toward, e.g., political science or history, or to American studies classes that are more conceptually oriented ("American Empire," "The American Century," etc.). For this to work, though, the logbook assignment should be designed to emphasize *American* media specifically. Accordingly, I asked the students to make special note of any "American element" in the media interactions they were logging. I also asked them to be on the lookout for any attempt at monetization of media interactions. Both of these prompts can stimulate something akin to ideological critique. Students may discover their place and complicity in the so-called attention economy, and they may become more critical of the ideologies of "free" choice, individual customization, and unlimited access that permeate industrial-commercial as well as popular imaginaries of digital media. With regard to "American elements," they may realize that in many instances, what is in fact an experience of American media is not tagged as such, but as just "media" pure and simple—similar to how Hollywood films are "odorless" compared to the local fragrance that films of other national origin are assumed and expected to give off.[6] This, by the way, is an example of how the study of histories of "old" media can have pay-offs in the analysis of "new" media later on.

The collaborative work on habituated media practices, as sketched above, made up the core of two introductory sessions that were meant to offer a framework for thinking about American media, politics, and everyday life. After this, we made our way through a series of more or less specific themes and media forms. One seminar focused on the news media, another on politics

and popular culture, a third on media and national identity, a fourth on media as material technology and cultural form, a fifth on social media, a sixth on media spectacle, and a seventh on the media and the truth. While the topics as such were not particularly new compared to those of the previous media courses I had been involved in at SINAS, they were at least partly recharged, updated, and rethought. One difference was a slight but significant shift away from questions of media representations—significant also because I believe that this was the clearest break from how media has usually been approached in American studies. Here I follow Uricchio, who notes that a "text-centric" approach "concerned above all with media as representation" has dominated, overshadowing other aspects of media that are equally or more relevant to explore.[7] One reason could be that much of this scholarship has been carried out not by media scholars, but by literary scholars who have reapplied certain modes of literary criticism to representations in other media. For example, "[f]ilm texts have regularly been interpreted, much as literature, deploying hermeneutic operations for insights into whatever the dominant interest of the moment happens to be—multi-culturalism, self-representation, the encounter with the Other."[8] In contrast, the aim of the course I have been describing here was to entertain a definition of media as a complex assembly of technological forms and social practices that can only be partly understood from interpretations of the products, and to try to figure out how media in this sense can be a key area of inquiry in American studies.

Briefly, a fourth example (from spring 2021): "Globalization and American Popular Culture." Here the idea was to build the core of the course around an interdisciplinary concept—"globalization"—rather than around a general concept of media or one specific medium. This allowed for the inclusion of a wide range of media objects and examples of mediated popular culture, some of which have long been part of American studies curricula and some of which are less frequently attended to. Having first covered a selection of theories of and approaches to globalization as a general concept, we made our way through sessions on film (e.g., Hollywood cinema as global cinema), television (e.g., the international trade in television formats), music (e.g., globalized cultures of hip-hop), sports, fast food and fashion, and social media and gaming. Two concluding class meetings dealt with local responses to globalized American mass culture and the future of globalized America.

The descriptions above represent idealized, on-paper versions of the courses. Whether they worked as intended is a much more complicated story. But I hope they are useful to readers as a catalog of things you *can* do if you want to teach media in an American studies program. They might also highlight how an expanded concept of media and an inclusivity in terms of objects of study require a mixed bag of theories, methods, and approaches. This brings us back to what I referred to earlier as a double challenge of interdisciplinarity. The object itself calls for a degree of interdisciplinarity or multidisciplinary eclecticism. On another level, the entire course module needs to make sense with respect to the interdisciplinarity that should characterize an American studies program as a whole. Debates about the disciplinary identity of American studies and how boundaries with regard to methods, approaches, and objects of study should—or should not—be drawn are as old as the field itself and cannot be rehashed here. But Hjorthén makes an important point about the conditions that apply to Sweden: the problems of interdisciplinarity are particularly acute here, since you cannot get a degree in American studies in Sweden, which means that Swedish American studies scholars usually have their training in other disciplines.[9] You could argue that the result is multidisciplinary exchange rather than interdisciplinary synthesis. As Lundén once argued,

American studies in Sweden is carried out by literary scholars, historians, and political scientists who happen to be studying the United States, and who primarily rely on their respective discipline-specific methods.[10] Even so, as Hjorthén points out, in a teaching context, the challenge of interdisciplinarity must be met.[11] Teachers clearly need to stay open to bringing in methods, approaches, and research traditions from a variety of fields. Teacher collaboration can also be key.[12]

As a cinema scholar who happened to be studying the United States, and who only quite belatedly came to associate this with the field of American studies, I also connect the challenge of interdisciplinarity to the question of where the study of film, media, and popular culture belongs in American studies. Internationally, the field has been described as "capacious" and as defined by its "refusal to exclude."[13] Yet it is often believed to be de facto dominated by literary scholars, historians, and political scientists.[14] Perhaps there is some truth to this in the Swedish context, and perhaps many scholars with those disciplinary affiliations are not particularly interested in the study of American movies, TV, video games, and other forms of mass culture and digital media. But this is only half the story. As Uricchio notes, a quick look at the American studies literature shows that there has been no obvious prejudice against the study of popular media.[15] This seems valid for American studies in Sweden, too. In preparation for writing this text, I surveyed the backlog of *American Studies in Scandinavia* issues and was intrigued to find a long and varied history of engagement with different kinds of media.[16] I also detected a small but significant uptick in those types of articles and book reviews after ca. 2009. The 2023 NAAS conference in Uppsala points in a similar direction: of the 117 presentations that are listed by title in the program, fifteen have titles that clearly indicate that they deal with various media, including popular forms such as video games (two papers), cinema (eight papers), and television (two papers) as well as the newspaper press (two papers) and podcasting (one paper).[17] In fact, I believe there is much more to say with regard to the Swedish (or Nordic) example of what Uricchio refers to as "the largely unacknowledged role [of media] in the field [of American studies]."[18] But that is for another time. Meanwhile, I will conclude by emphasizing that even in the light of a more nuanced view, there is still much to rethink with respect to the study of media and popular culture in American studies, and with respect to the pedagogical challenges that come with teaching American media in that particular intellectual and interdisciplinary tradition. As I have indicated, approaching the media not primarily as content and representation, but as assemblages of platforms and practices, seems crucial. Relatedly, and again with a nod to Uricchio, we could entertain the notion that current developments in digital media are not "merely" about a reconfiguration of the media landscape, but amount to a reorganization of culture in a much broader sense.[19] If this is so, the question about the place of media in American studies is a concern not just for a small (but growing) clique of media-oriented scholars—we would *all* do well to become more media curious.

## Notes

1. Please note that the examples I will be discussing are no longer part of SINAS course offerings. See also note 2.

2. The course structure at SINAS has since been revised and courses and modules renamed. See "Teaching American Studies in Sweden: Navigating an Archipelagic Field" in this issue.

3. Uppsala University, "Syllabus for American Mass Media, Valid from Spring 2013"; and Uppsala University, "Reading List."

4. Media as "platform" and "protocol" here draws on Gitelman's oft-cited definition of media as "socially realized structures of communication, where structures include both technological forms and their associated protocols." Gitelman, *Always Already New*, 7.

5. Uppsala University, "Syllabus for American Mass Media II, Valid from Autumn 2015."

6. Koichi Iwabuchi, qtd. in Uricchio, "Things to Come," 367.

7. Uricchio, "Things to Come," 381.

8. Uricchio, "Things to Come," 369.

9. Hjorthén, "Curriculum Development," 79.

10. Lundén, "The Eternal," 25–26.

11. Hjorthén, "Curriculum Development," 79.

12. Hjorthén, "Curriculum Development," 79–80.

13. Julie Sze, qtd. in Hjorthén, "Curriculum Development," 78; Deloria and Olson, *American Studies*, 3.

14. Uricchio, "Things to Come," 369; Olsson and Bolton, "Mediated America," 9–10.

15. Uricchio, "Things to Come," 369.

16. Nordic Association for American Studies, "Archives."

17. Nordic Association for American Studies, "NAAS 2023 Conference Program."

18. Uricchio, "Things to Come," 369.

19. Uricchio, "Things to Come," 380–81.

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