

PUR 4442 Public Interest Communications

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[Course Schedule](#) of Discussions, Readings and Assignments

[Course Objectives](#)

Course Overview

Effective communication is a catalyst for social change. Public interest communications is a form of strategic communication through which organizations, causes, or movements take on specific objectives that will result in a change that benefits society. This benefit extends beyond the particular interests of any single organization undertaking a campaign or communications effort.

This is an evolving field, and its practitioners are continuously applying new insights and techniques to support positive social change. The field is not as well-established as its sister fields of public relations, advertising, journalism and marketing; however, an increased recognition among change makers of the importance of communications to social change means that more resources are available than there once were. This is also an entrepreneurial field, which results in significant innovation.

Public interest communications is a large and complex field, and it will not be possible to cover all its aspects during the semester we have together. To make the most of our time, the course will focus on the principles and fundamentals of the field.

In this course, you will learn the six spheres through which we can drive social change, the strategic planning process for an effective social change communications campaign, and the tools, qualities and tactics that make these campaigns real. You will gain insight into the richness of the field, the power that effective communications has to address a problem and profoundly affect the lives of people, and begin to see the astonishing range of careers and opportunities that this field holds.

Course Objectives

After completing this course:

1. You will be able to describe the role of communication in driving positive social change.
2. You will be able to critique strategic communications plans for social change efforts.
3. You will understand and be able to apply a set of frameworks that are built on social, behavioral and cognitive science.
4. You will be able to articulate a theory of change for an issue that's important to you.
5. You will be able to determine how to use and combine the six spheres through which communicators work to achieve change: policy, media, social norms, the market, activism and communities of influence.
6. You will be able to develop communications strategies that allow you to concentrate scarce resources where they can make the biggest difference.
7. You can identify meaningful evaluative measures rooted in observable goals and meaningful calls to action.
8. You will learn the role of secondary and primary research in designing public interest campaigns and how to design research plans that inform successful campaigns.
9. You will be able to critique campaign design and results.
10. You will develop skills to interpret and incorporate fundamental changes in how we communicate as a society and their implications for this field.
11. You will learn the role of stories and narratives in social change efforts.
12. You will gain an ethical framework guiding your decision-making as you design efforts that drive change.

Course Format

Our course will include brief lectures, discussion, reflection, exercises, guest lectures, a midterm exam, final project and presentations.

Required Reading:

Required text: *Public Interest Communications: Strategy for Changemakers* by Searight Christiano and Bradbery, Routledge.

Other videos and podcasts will be assigned over the semester.

College of Journalism and Communications Objectives

The Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications requires that by graduation, all students should be able to:

- Understand and apply the principles and laws of freedom of speech and press for the United States.
- Demonstrate an understanding of the history and role of professionals and institutions in shaping communications.
- Demonstrate an understanding of gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and, as appropriate, other forms of diversity in domestic society in relation to mass communications.
- Demonstrate an understanding of the diversity of peoples and cultures and of the significance and impact of mass communications in a global society.
- Understand concepts and apply theories in the use and presentation of images and information.
- Demonstrate an understanding of professional ethical principles, and work ethically in pursuit of truth, accuracy, fairness and diversity.
- Think critically, creatively and independently.
- Conduct research and evaluate information by methods appropriate to the communications professions in which they work.
- Write correctly and clearly in forms and styles appropriate for the communications professions, audiences, and purposes they serve
- Critically evaluate their own work and that of others for accuracy and fairness, clarity, appropriate style, and grammatical correctness.
- Apply basic numerical and statistical concepts.
- Apply current tools and technologies appropriate for the communications professions in which they work and to understand the digital world.

ATTENDANCE POLICY

Attendance and active participation are mandatory. Absences count from the first class. After due warning, I may prohibit further attendance and subsequently assign a lower or failing grade for excessive absences. Since our class meets just once a week for three hours and we have just 14 class meetings, more than one unexcused absence during the semester will be considered “excessive absences.”

You are responsible for notifying me before your absence and, if it is due to illness, provide a note from your medical provider. Any absence without advance notice or documentation will be unexcused.

Acceptable excuses include: acceptable reasons for absence from class include illness, serious family emergencies, special curricular requirements (e.g., judging trips, field trips, professional conferences), military obligation, severe weather conditions, religious holidays and participation in official university activities such as music performances, student government obligations, athletic competition or debate. Absences from class for court-imposed legal obligations (e.g., jury duty or subpoena) are excused.

COURSE EVALUATION

Your grade will be based on your performance in four major areas, each of which constitutes a proportion of the final grade. Your grade will be calculated by the following:

1. In-Class Attendance & Participation: 20%

Participation means you are fully engaged in the classroom discussion, and not using cell phones or laptops except when directed to as part of classroom activities. You have read all the assigned reading. It means you arrive to class early or on time, ready to learn and engage.

2. Assignments and Quizzes: 35%

Many of your assignments will be completed in class. In-class assignments may not be made up if you miss class. Requirements for assignments and other work in this course follow [UF policies](#). Please review this syllabus for what I take points off for.

3. Case Study and final presentation: 30%

You will write and present a complete case study of an organization working to make a specific change and offer recommendations for how that organization might have taken a different approach that would have been more effective. You will present your case to the class on Monday, December 1, and your written case study is due the same day.

4. Midterm Assessment 15%

Your midterm assessment will be a written exam administered in class. You may bring a notecard of prompts to help you.

I WILL NOT ACCEPT LATE ASSIGNMENTS

The grading scale for the course is:

A 92-100%

A- 90-91.99%

B+ 88-89.99%

B 82-87.99.99%

B- 80-81.99%

C+ 78-79.99%

C 72-77.99%

C- 70-71.99%

D+ 68-69.99%

D 62-67.99%

D- 60-61.99%

E below 60.99%

Availability

Please come talk with me about any questions or concerns you have during my office hours or by appointment. (You can also reach me by email, and I'll do my best to get back to you within 24 hours.)

Guidelines for Assignment Grades:

Assignments that receive As:

- Explicitly draw on the frameworks you've learned in class
- Are interesting
- Compare favorably with the best examples of work I share in class
- Are clearly organized
- Rely heavily on stories and visual language
- Are free of grammatical, spelling, fact, or typographical errors
- Show an understanding of both the lecture and the assignment
- Include strong transitions
- Are concise but complete—not overwritten or puffy, but include relevant messages and information
- Are consistent with your message
- Are free of fact errors
- Meticulously cite source materials using APA style
- Include 5 or more credible sources of information
- Encourage me to keep reading with use of flow and narrative
- Are truthful and accurate
- Demonstrate a strong understanding of the issue
- Clearly support arguments with research

Points Off:

I take 2 points off for each of the following:

- Grammatical, spelling or typographical errors
- AP style errors
- Poorly organized paragraphs
- Puffy language

I take 10 points off for:

- Misspellings of your organization's name, or any proper name

- Missing citations
- Fact errors
- Using the wrong format
- Failing to include or address something I specifically request in an assignment
- Not using page numbers

Papers will receive an F if:

- They are late
- They don't include necessary citations
- They are generated by using ChatGPT or other AI Tools
- There is evidence of plagiarism

Class Discussion and Assignment Schedule

August 25, 2025

Week One: An Introduction to Public Interest Communications and the Science of What Makes People Care

Discussion Topics:

Introductions

What is public interest communication?

What are your causes?

Course expectations and assignment schedule

Framework 1: The Essential Elements of Public Interest Communications

Framework 2: The Science of What Makes People Care—What Social, Behavioral and Cognitive Science Teach Us About Engaging People in Causes

Classroom Activities: Make a name tag, communicating visually, making connections

Assignment: “My issues.” See full assignment in Canvas. **DUE FRIDAY, AUGUST 29, 5 pm**

September 8, 2025

Week Two: Build the World You Wish Existed

Discussion Topics:

How to understand the underlying elements of an issue.

What is systems thinking and why is it important to public interest communication?

What is human-centered design, and how does it lead us to better work?

Framework 3: Build the World You Wish Existed—Using Systems Thinking and Human-Centered Design to Find the Most Solvable Part of a Problem

Assigned Reading for Class: Textbook chapter 1	Classroom Activities: Identifying the elements in a system, the five whys, and applying human-centered design
Possible: In-class timed quiz on Week One, syllabus + assigned reading	

September 15, 2025 Week Three: Meet the Six Spheres of Influence <i>Discussion Topics:</i> Identifying the spheres through which change happens: media, policy, communities of influence, activism, industry, and social norms Framework 4: The Six Spheres of Influence Introducing the six spheres and how they intersect Choosing topics for final projects	
Classroom activities: Choosing your topic for your case analysis Creating pods for the final project Classroom Activities: Six spheres scavenger hunt Possible in-class timed quiz on readings and previous lectures	Assigned Reading for Class: Textbook chapter 2 “Stop Raising Awareness Already” “The Science of What Makes People Care”
Upload your scavenger hunt results to Canvas	

September 22, 2025 Week Four: Exploring the Six Spheres–Policy <i>Discussion topics:</i> The elements of policy and policy change Case study review

Classroom activities: Map the policy sphere for your issue Possible timed quiz on the assigned reading	Assigned Reading for Class: Textbook Chapter 3
Upload your analysis of the policy sphere to Canvas	

September 29, 2025 Week Five: Exploring the Six Spheres–Media <i>Discussion Topics:</i> How change happens in the media sphere Mapping the media sphere Case studies	
Classroom Activities: Mapping each sphere for your topic Possible timed quiz on the assigned reading	Assigned Reading for Class: Textbook Chapter 5
Upload your analysis of the media sphere to Canvas	
Assignment for next week: Project preview presentations, presented in class on October 6.	

October 6, 2025

Week Six: Exploring the Six Spheres–Activism

Discussion Topics:

How change happens through the activism sphere

Mapping the activism sphere

Case studies

Classroom Activities:

Mapping the activism sphere

Review for the Midterm assessment

Project preview presentations

Assigned Reading for Class:

Textbook Chapter 4

Upload your analysis of the activism sphere to Canvas

October 13, 2025

Week Eight: Hooray! It's Midterm Assessment DAY!

Classroom Activity: Midterm Assessment

Bring your favorite writing pens

October 20, 2025

Week Nine: Exploring the Six Spheres–Market and Industry + Social Norms

Discussion Topics:

How change happens through these spheres

Case studies

Classroom Activities:

Mapping the spheres

Possible timed quiz on the assigned reading

Assigned reading for class:

Textbook Chapters 6 and 8

Upload your analysis of the Market and Industry and Social Norms spheres to Canvas

October 27, 2025

Week Ten: Communities of Influence + Creating a Theory of Change

Discussion Topics:

How change happens through these spheres

Case studies

Writing your Theory of Change

Classroom Activities:

Mapping the social norms sphere

Possible timed quiz on the assigned reading

Assigned reading for class:

Textbook Chapters 7 and 9

Upload your analysis of the social norms sphere and your Theory of Change to Canvas

November 3, 2025

Week Eleven: Back-of-the-Envelope Strategy

Discussion Topics:

Identifying your goals and subgoals

Identifying your actors

Classroom Activities:

Answering questions 1 and 2

Possible timed quiz on the assigned reading

Assigned reading for class:

Textbook Chapters 10-12

Upload your answers to questions 1 and 2

November 10, 2025

Week Twelve: Back-of-the-Envelope Strategy

Discussion Topics:

Connecting with your actors

Identifying where your actors' attention is now

Classroom activities:

Answering questions 3 and 4

Possible timed quiz on the assigned reading

Assigned reading for class:

Textbook Chapters 13-14

Upload your answers to questions 3 and 4

November 17, 2025

Week Thirteen: Measurement that Matters + Creating Unforgettable Presentations

Discussion Topics:

Measuring Change: Aligning your theory of change, goals, calls to action, measurement and evaluation.

Input and output measures that matter

Writing and delivering unforgettable presentations

Classroom activities:

Creating unforgettable presentations

Possible timed quiz on the assigned reading

Assigned reading for class:

Textbook Chapter 15

Upload your preliminary evaluation notes

December 1, 2025

Week Fifteen: FINAL PRESENTATIONS

Classroom activities:

FINAL PRESENTATIONS

Assignments: Upload final

presentation deck and paper to Canvas

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