

ESM 442: Communication for civic engagement & grassroots organizing

Winter 2025

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Tues 5-6:15, Bren 1510

Welcome

In ESM 442, we will explore the tactics and communication strategies used by groups and social movements to affect change. Consider for example, any trending social movement hashtag – when does a hashtag become more than just a word, when does it actually spur a shift in public consciousness or policy – this is the type of puzzle our course will attempt to address. Groups, which may consist of social movements or formalized interest groups or non-governmental organizations, exist for the very purpose to instill change. In this course, change refers to any intent to move away from the status-quo. Without the perceived necessity for change, groups of any kind are unlikely to emerge.

This course will address civic engagement & grassroots organizing from four thematic areas: 1) traditional and contemporary theories of organizations; 2) the on the ground tactics employed by groups & social movements; 3) institutional barriers to organizational success and; 4) the role of communication in organizational efforts. Course lessons will rely on foundational group theory, contextualized by current events and the experiences of activists. Importantly, we will draw from a diverse set of cases that address issues of social and environmental concern. YOU will be the gatekeepers of this information and expected to contribute this knowledge on a weekly basis (as will be discussed at our first meeting).

Learning Objectives

- Chart and predict a path forward – what should the future of grassroots look like?
- Identify ‘repertoires of action’ or the tactics used by organizations to promote public engagement & affect change
- Explain how tactics change in response to political institutions and characteristics of the policy space
- Compare and contrast the communication strategies employed by groups and social movements in the traditional communication environment and now in the context of Web 2.0
- Apply your understanding of how institutions shape organizational efforts & processes in order to predict the potential for success on the part of current environmental movements

Course Flow

Everything you need to do will be updated on Canvas weekly. I will make it really clear how I want you to engage with the materials. The weekly flow will be something along the lines of this:

- Read/listen to/watch the following (1-3 sources)
- Complete your grassroots organizing activity for the week and come prepared to share in class

Assessment

This course is assessed based on regular attendance, in-class participation, and submitting 3 assignment briefs and your final pitch.

- ★ Wk 1 - pick a cause/issue and Identify the organizations involved (network/stakeholder map)
- ★ Wk 4 - observe their tactics and communication efforts (analysis of repertoires of action)
- ★ Wk 7 - describe the intuitional / policy landscape (flow chart);
- ★ Wks 9 or 10 - Predict opportunities for success and sources of failure (mock consultant pitch)

Course Outline

Week	Theme
1 (no in person class)	Org research, read view canvas
2	Review org/movement research + Civil rights
3	Campaigns and Grassroots Org
4	Guest Speaker
5	Repertoires of Action pre 2.0
6	Repertoires of Action post 2.0
7	Contemporary Communication
8	Institutional Landscape
9	Communication Pitches Rnd 1
10	Communication Pitches Rnd 2

****We will have 1-2 guest speakers this year, and their availability is still TBD.**