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Introduction to the Course

Hi, I'm Dr. A.P. Leith, and I'll be your guide through this semester's journey into research methods for mass communications.

Some professors start their introductions with "I've been fascinated by [X] since I was a child." I... didn't. In fact, I've always been a **passive media consumer**. I'm the person who prefers to watch someone else play a video game rather than pick up the controller myself. There's usually *something* playing in the background while I work — podcasts, TV series I've half-memorized, or livestreams of someone playing a game I've seen through a dozen times.

That "observer" habit ended up shaping my research: I notice strange little human patterns in communication, especially when people interact through media technology. And once I notice them, I can't *not* poke at them until I understand what's going on.

My Research in a Nutshell

A lot of my work lives at the intersection of **interpersonal communication** and **digital media platforms**. I've studied:

- **Parasocial relationships and cues** — how small things in a livestream (like a streamer's tone or how they respond to chat) can make you feel like you “know” them (*Parasocial Cues: The Ubiquity of Parasocial Relationships on Twitch*, 2021).
- **Media and grief** — how fans grieve when a fictional character dies, treating that loss like it happened to a real friend (*RIP Kutner: Parasocial Grief Following a TV Character's Death*, 2018).
- **Watching as a form of play** — why people (like me) often choose to watch games rather than play them (*Playing Games for Others*, 2018).
- **VR and platform affordances** — what features of VR worlds spark joy, trust, or frustration, from social connection to motion sickness (*Mixed Feelings and Realities*, 2023).
- **Media use during COVID** — how Twitch became a social space for integration and tension release during lockdown (*Twitch in the Time of Quarantine*, 2021).
- **Virtual meetings and accessibility** — which meeting tools people actually use, and how things like captions and avatars affect engagement (*Meeting Needs*, 2025).

These projects usually start as “*Why do people do that?*” moments. They evolve into studies using interviews, surveys, content analysis, and computational text methods — the same methods you'll be learning in this course.

Teaching Philosophy

I believe research is **formalized curiosity** — the tools and methods we use are just ways of chasing down a good question.

In this class, I want you to do more than memorize procedures. I want you to **think critically, creatively, and practically**. My role is to give you the skills and confidence to explore your own questions about the media world — and to give you the freedom to design research that matters to *you*.

That means:

- We'll balance theory with hands-on practice.
- We'll make space for trial, error, and iteration.
- We'll learn to use tools like R, RStudio, Quarto, and GitHub not just because they're “required,” but because they open doors to faster, better, and more shareable research.

A Macro View of the Course

The semester follows the following broad arc:

1. **Laying the Foundations** — Understanding what research in mass communications looks like, and setting up the digital tools you'll need.
2. **Designing Research** — Developing your own research question, finding relevant literature, and selecting the right methods.
3. **Collecting & Managing Data** — Working with surveys, interviews, or content analysis, and learning how to store and organize your data responsibly.
4. **Analyzing & Visualizing** — Using R and related packages to make sense of your findings.
5. **Communicating Results** — Writing in a way that's rigorous but also readable.

The main difference between the two courses is the **final project**: - Undergraduates work **in teams** to produce a *White Paper*. - Graduate students work **individually** to produce a full *Research Manuscript*.

What to Expect

Here's what you can count on:

- **Weekly Readings & Journals**

You'll read one textbook chapter per week and respond to **one of three prompts** in a short written journal, using a Quarto template and submitting to GitHub.

- **Hands-On Assignments**

Most weeks, you'll complete a small, applied project — like cleaning a dataset, building a visualization, or drafting a section of your final paper.

- **Skill Building in R, Quarto, and GitHub**

We'll work step-by-step so you can learn to code, analyze, and share without feeling overwhelmed.

- **Final Project**

Culminating in final research project.

My advice: Approach the semester like a curious researcher, not a box-checker. Ask questions, explore, and remember — research is just curiosity with better documentation.

“Research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose.”

— Zora Neale Hurston