HSCI 3493: The History of Media

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"On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog."
Course Description:

If knowledge is power, then communication is change. New communications technologies have enabled us to change our lives, altering how we work, how we play, and even how we think. This course will explore the history of these new media from the printing press to the present. We will strive to understand the development and use of these new media in context, paying particular attention to the ways that they mediate human interactions.

All media share this vital characteristic: they intervene between the author and the audience of a message, translating that message from its original form into one that allows it to be stored, processed, or transmitted to audiences in other times and places. While it is too much to say that “the medium is the message,” the medium does affect the message and so affects both the author and the audience as well.

As we explore the creation and development of our highly mediated world, we will pay particular attention to three recurring themes: 1) first, we will see that technologies are interfaces between the natural and the artificial, meaning that they must conform to both natural laws and human desires; 2) second, we will see that technologies never exist alone, meaning that they are always parts of extended social and technical networks; and 3) we will see that adopting new media not only means adopting new technologies but also learning new skills, thinking in new ways, and embracing new social arrangements. In short, technological change and cultural change are intimately intertwined, so much so that powerful technologies are always invented twice: the first invention is a technical solution to an recognized problem, while the second invention is the social re-invention of the purposes, uses, and meanings of the technology. Sometimes these two happen at the same time; often they are separated by a generation or more.

Course Mechanics:

You are expected to attend every class unless you have a family emergency, are ill, or have some other legitimate reason for having to miss class. If you know that you will have to miss a class, you should let me or Petar know as soon as possible. Like most professors, I am much more sympathetic to excuses presented before rather than after the fact. If you have a question or concern, please talk to me. Your job in this class is to learn, and my job is to help you do it. Asking questions helps both of us do our jobs better, and I only rarely bite off students’ heads.

Typically, on Mondays I will present a lecture intended to provide an overview of the main topic for the week. I will post my lecture slides (but not the complete notes) by midnight the night before class on the course D2L site. In general, on Fridays we will break into groups to discuss a set of questions on the readings. Wednesdays will be a mix of lecture and discussion exercises based on the lecture material. Each week, you will take a short quiz online that covers material from the lectures and the readings. I am in the process of attempting to convert a few lectures into video podcasts and readings, so a couple “lecture” days actually will involve discussion of “lectures” viewed at home. (This is an experiment, so bear with me on this.)
Each Friday, your group will turn in its answers to the week’s discussion questions at the end of class. Your individual discussion grade will depend upon both how well your group answers the questions and how much of a contribution you made individually to the discussion.

There will be one midterm and a final exam. The midterm and the final both will require you to draw on material from the lectures and the readings.

Your major semester-long assignment is to create a media journal. Your media journal is a collection of short exemplars of messages presented via different media, along with your own critical commentary on the ways that that message was related to its medium. For example, one media journal entry will be on print news and public affairs; for that journal assignment you will collect a sample of print news from the early days of newspapers that seems to you to be exemplary of the use of that medium at that time. You will submit a short (400 word minimum) commentary with each sample. Good commentaries typically consist of three or more paragraphs—one giving a general description of the sample and noting from where and when it came, a second discussing why that sample seems to you to exemplify communication in that medium at that time, and a third analyzing how the message conveyed by that clipping is related to its medium. That’s a minimum for a good commentary; if you have more to say, great! At the end of the semester you will write a 5-7 page essay on one of the major themes of this course, drawing on at least three of these exemplars.

Grade Breakdown

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quizzes</td>
<td>15%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Group Work</td>
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<tr>
<td>Individual Discussion</td>
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<tr>
<td>Media Journal (total)</td>
<td>15%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Essay</td>
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<tr>
<td>Midterm</td>
<td>15%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final Exam</td>
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Books to buy (all are available in paperback at online retailers or as ebooks):

COURSE SCHEDULE

Week 1: Course Introduction/The World Before Print

August 19: Opening Day. What are media? Why study their history?
August 21: Lecture—The World of the Scribe.
August 23: Group discussion of readings—The Written Word

Readings:
1) Umberto Eco, excerpts from *The Name of the Rose*, pp. 32-37, 78-93. [On D2L](#).
3) Anne Trubek, “Handwriting is History.” [On D2L](#).

Week 2: The Revolution of the Word

August 26: Lecture—The Printing Press and the Vernacular Bible.
August 28: Group exercises—The Materiality of Print *(Class meets in HSCI Collections!)*
August 30: Group discussion of readings—The Printed Word

Readings:
3) “In Our Time” podcast on Caxton. [Link on D2L](#).

Week 3: A Public Sphere

September 2: NO CLASS. LABOR DAY
September 4: Lecture—The Creation of the Public *(Turn in MJ 1: script)*
September 6: Group discussion of readings—The Public Sphere

Readings:

Week 4: Consumption, Exchange, and Identity

September 9: Lecture—Money, Money, Money!
September 11: Lecture—The Public Sphere and the Private Self.
September 13: Group discussions of readings—The Audience for Print

Readings:
1) Adrian Johns, “The Printing Counterrevolution” Chapter 9 of *Piracy*.
3) “In Our Time” podcast on the South Sea Bubble. [Link on D2L](#) *(Optional)*
Week 5: Communication and Empire

September 16: Lecture—Lines of Power. (Turn in MJ 2: print)
September 18: Lecture and discussion—Information and Industry
September 20: Group discussion of readings—Electric Communication and Culture

Readings:

Week 6: Beyond Text: New Media, 1850-1950

September 23: Lecture—Recording sights and sounds
September 25: Lecture—The Mass Media Revolution.
September 27: Discussion

Readings:
1) Alex Ross, “The Record Effect,” The New Yorker, June 6, 2005, pp. 94-100. On D2L.

Week 7: The New Mass Media, Continued

September 30: Discussion. (TURN IN MJ 3: 19th C. New Media)

Reading:
1) Podcast on the Invention of Radio. Link on D2L.
2) Susan Douglas, Listening In, Introduction, Chapter 1, and Chapter 4, pp. 3-40, 83-99.

October 2: Midterm review.
October 4: Midterm

Week 8: The Birth of Computing

October 7: Lecture—Computing Before Computers
October 9: Lecture—The Birth of Computing: From Tubes to Transistors.

Reading:

October 11: No Class, Texas Friday.

Week 9: The Computer Revolution

October 14: Lecture—Digital Machines, Codes, and Programs. (Turn in MJ 4: early film/radio)
October 16: Lecture—Big Computers for Big Business and Big Government.

October 18: Group discussion of readings

Readings:
2) Vannevar Bush, “As We May Think,” pp. 101-108. On D2L.

Week 10: The PC Revolution

October 21: Lecture—A New Vision: Interactive Computing

October 23: Lecture—Digital Convergence, Interactive Computing

October 25: Group discussion of readings—Interactive Computing and the PC.

Reading:
1) Steven Levy, Insanely Great, pp. 31-74. On D2L.
3) Licklider and Taylor, “Human-Computer Symbiosis,” and “The Computer as a Communications Device.” On D2L.

Week 11: The Vast Wasteland?

October 28: Lecture—TV, the Mass Medium. (Turn in MJ 5: Interactive Multimedia)

October 30: Film, shown in class, Quiz Show.

November 1: Film, shown in class, Quiz Show.

Week 12: Spinning the Web

November 4: Group discussion of readings—Television and the Public Interest

Reading:
1) Ray Bradbury, Fahrenheit 451. (Whole book. It's not long.)


November 8: Discussion of reading:
1) Fred Turner, “The WELL and the Origins of Virtual Community.” On D2L.
2) Come prepared to discuss your own membership in a virtual community

Week 13: Digital Culture

November 11: Lecture—The Computer in Film/Popular Culture, part 1. (Turn in MJ 6: The Web/Convergence)
November 13: Lecture—The Computer in Film/Popular Culture, part II.

November 15: Discussion

Readings:
1) William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (first half)
2) Watch a digital/computing-related film outside class.

Week 14: Are We Post-Human Yet?

November 18: Lecture—Screens, Screens, Everywhere There’s Screens. *(Turn in MJ 7: Screens)*

November 20: Lecture/discussion—Social Media?

November 22: Group discussion of reading.

Reading:

Week 15: Life on Screen

November 25: Group Discussion of Movie: *The Social Network*. **Final Essay Due!**

November 27: No Class. Thanksgiving Holiday.

November 29: No Class. Thanksgiving Holiday.

Week 16: Anytime, Anywhere

December 2: Lecture—Mobile Media, Global Media.

December 4: Discussion.

1) Adrian Johns, “Past, Present, and Future,” Chapter 17 of *Piracy*.

December 6: Course Finale

**Final Exam: Tuesday, December 10, 1:30-3:30 pm**