In this course, we will explore together the concept of culture as seen through its forms of communication. Beginning with the oral tradition, we will read Walter Ong’s work on orality and literacy to analyze Achebe’s, *Things Fall Apart* and Ruth Rendell’s *A Judgement in Stone* as well as the impact of writing on the spoken word as seen in Plato’s *Phaedrus*. Marshall McLuhan’s seminal work, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* will orient us towards the epistemological biases of different media and allow us to generate questions surrounding the impact of one medium on another. The course will conclude with an examination of digital culture in terms of its cognitive effects as described by Nicholas Carr in *The Shallows* along with a collection of articles that address issues of privacy and democracy. Our discussions will often focus on forms of communication as they have emerged historically as well as how they coexist in time. How do these technologies compete with one another and in so doing how are they transformed? Most importantly, how are we transformed in how and what we communicate to one another and to ourselves? Please try to raise meaningful questions which may have only approximate answers rather than seek exact answers to wrong questions.
COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

Required texts:

Walter J. Ong, Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word.

Plato, Phaedrus translated by Nehemas and Woodruff

Chinua Achebe, Things Fall Apart

Ruth Rendell, A Judgement in Stone


Nicholas Carr, The Shallows

For certain topics, there will be handouts of appropriate reading material. Selected films will be shown.

Attendance:

Attendance will be taken in every class. You are allowed 2 absences for the semester for which there is no penalty. If you exceed this number, you will need to speak to me and provide a valid reason for your absence. Excessive absences will result in a lowering of your grade. If you come to class 15 minutes late, it will count as half an absence.

Assignments and Grading Criteria:

You will be asked to write 3 response papers based on the readings and discussions in this course. Each paper must be at least 7-10 pages double-spaced. Suggested topics will be given for each paper along with the due dates. A valid reason must be provided for late papers.

Each paper is worth 30% of your grade (total 90%). Attendance and class participation which might include in-class writing assignments and occasional oral presentations will be worth 10% of your grade.

As a general rule, I prefer not to give an Incomplete grade for the course. An I grade will be given only under special
circumstances and requires that the student has submitted at least some of the work required for the course.

Policy on Plagiarism:

“As a Gallatin student you belong to an interdisciplinary community of artists and scholars who value honest and open intellectual inquiry. This relationship depends on mutual respect, responsibility, and integrity. Failure to uphold these values will be subject to severe sanction, which may include dismissal from the University. Examples of behaviors that compromise the academic integrity of the Gallatin School include plagiarism, illicit collaboration, doubling or recycling coursework, and cheating. Please consult the Gallatin Bulletin or Gallatin website [www.gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/policy/integrity.html] for a full description of the academic integrity policy.”

Readings and Class Session Topics:

All readings must be done prior to class. Please bring the assigned text to class.

Wednesday, September 5
Introductions and course overview
Setting goals for the semester

Read for Monday, September 10
Ong: Introduction and Chapter 1

Monday, September 10
Ong’s framework on technology
Definition of his terms
Orality of language

Read for Wednesday, September 12
Ong: Chapters 2 and 3

Wednesday, September 12
Characteristics of oral cultures

Read for Monday, September 17
Ong: Chapter 4
Monday, September 17
Technology and the structure of consciousness

Read for Wednesday, September 19
Ong: Chapter 5

Wednesday, September 19
Print and its impact on orality and writing

Read for Monday, September 24
Ong: Chapter 6

Monday, September 24
Structure of Narratives in oral cultures

Wednesday, September 26
FILM: BEING THERE

Monday, October 1
FILM: BEING THERE

Read for Wednesday, October 3
Rendell: A Judgement in Stone

Wednesday, October 3
Discussion of Rendell and Being There

Read for Monday, October 8
Achebe: Part I

Monday, October 8
Achebe’s use of oral language and narrative structure

Read for Wednesday, October 10
Achebe: Part II (finish book)

Wednesday, October 10
Analysis of Achebe: Literacy, Power and Colonization

NO CLASS MONDAY, OCTOBER 15

RESPONSE PAPER 1 DUE WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 17
Read for Wednesday, October 17
Plato: Phaedrus: Introduction to end of Socrates’ First Speech

Wednesday, October 17
Role of rhetoric in philosophy

Read for Monday, October 22
Plato: Finish Phaedrus

Monday, October 22
Rhetoric and persuasion in Plato

Read for Wednesday, October 24
McLuhan: Introduction and Chapters 1 and 2

Wednesday, October 24
McLuhan’s framework for understanding media

Read for Monday, October 29
McLuhan: Chapters 3 and 4

Monday, October 29
McLuhan cont’d

Read for Wednesday, October 31
McLuhan: Chapters 5, 6 and 7

Wednesday, October 31
McLuhan cont’d

Monday, November 5
Application of McLuhan to contemporary media

Wednesday, November 7
Review of Ong, Plato and McLuhan

Read for Monday, November 12
Carr: Prologue, Chapters 1, 2, 3, 4

Monday, November 12
Discussion of Carr’s ideas
Read for Wednesday, November 14  
Carr: Chapters 5,6,7

Wednesday, November 14  
Discussion on Carr

Read for Monday, November 19  
Carr: Chapters 8,9,10, Epilogue

Monday, November 19  
Critical assessment of Carr

RESPONSE PAPER 2 DUE MONDAY, NOVEMBER 19

Read for Monday, November 26  
Handout by Adam Gopnik

Monday, November 26  
Discussion of Gopnik

Read for Wednesday, November 28  
Matt Richtel, Growing Up Digital, Wired for Distraction  
Gary Wolf, The Data-Driven Life

Wednesday, November 28  
Discussion of Richtel and Wolf

Read for Monday, December 3  
Jeffrey Rosen, The Web Means the End of Forgetting and Rob Walker, Cyberspace When You’re Dead

Monday, December 3  
Discussion of privacy and identity in a digital age

Read for Wednesday, December 5  
Evgeny Morozov, The Google Doctrine and selected handouts

Wednesday, December 5  
Discussion on democracy in a digital culture

Monday, December 10  
Pros and Cons of the Digital Age
Wednesday, December 12
LAST CLASS

FINAL PAPER DUE WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 12
NO LATE PAPERS WILL BE ACCEPTED