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 examine 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 two contrasting authors, Nicholas Carr in *The Shallows* and Clay Shirky in *Cognitive Surplus*. Contemporary themes on the issue of privacy in the age of big data and the relationship between technology and democracy will be addressed through more recent articles. Our discussions will often focus on forms of communication as they have emerged historically as well as how they have coexisted 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 OBJECTIVES/LEARNING GOALS:**

1) Critical reading of texts in terms of (a) thesis; (b) assumptions; (c) methodology; and (d) findings.

2) Critical assessment of differing theories on the impact of communication technologies on culture.
3) To demonstrate in clearly articulated writing an understanding of the major ideas of the texts as they apply to specific phenomena associated with the role and effects of technology.

4) To apply the knowledge gained from the texts and class discussions to develop your own critique of technology and its impact on culture.

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


Nicholas Carr, The Shallows

Clay Shirky, Cognitive Surplus

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 4
Introductions and course overview
Setting goals for the semester

Read for Monday, September 9
Ong: Introduction and Chapter 1

Monday, September 9
Ong’s framework on technology
Definition of his terms
Orality of language

Read for Wednesday, September 11
Ong: Chapters 2 and 3

Wednesday, September 11
Characteristics of oral cultures

Read for Monday, September 16
Ong: Chapter 4
Monday, September 16
Technology and the structure of consciousness

Read for Wednesday, September 18
Ong: Chapter 5

Wednesday, September 18
Print and its impact on orality and writing

Read for Monday, September 23
Ong: Chapter 6

Monday, September 23
Structure of Narratives in oral cultures

Wednesday, September 25
Overview of Ong and Critique

Monday, September 30
FILM: BEING THERE

Wednesday, October 2
FILM: BEING THERE

Monday, October 7
Discussion on Being There

Read for Wednesday, October 9
Achebe: Part I

Wednesday, October 9
Achebe’s use of oral language and narrative structure

NO CLASS MONDAY, OCTOBER 14

Read for Wednesday, October 16
Achebe: Part II (finish book)

Wednesday, October 16
Analysis of Achebe: Literacy, Power and Colonization
RESPONSE PAPER 1 DUE MONDAY, OCTOBER 21
Read for Monday, November 18
Carr: Chapters 5, 6, 7

Monday, November 18
Discussion on Carr

Read for Wednesday, November 20
Carr: Chapters, 8, 9, 10, and Epilogue

Wednesday, November 20
Critical assessment of Carr

RESPONSE PAPER 2 DUE WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 20

Read for Monday, November 25
Shirky: Chapters, 1, 2, and 3

Monday, November 25
Discussion of Shirky

Read for Wednesday, November 27
Shirky: Chapters, 4 and 5

Wednesday, November 27
Discussion of Shirky

THANKSGIVING RECESS

Read for Monday, December 2
Shirky: Chapters, 6 and 7

Monday, December 2
Critique of Shirky and Carr

Read for Wednesday, December 4
Jeffrey Rosen, The Web Means the End of Forgetting and Rob Walker, Cyberspace When You’re Dead and Jill Lepore, Privacy in an Age of Publicity
Wednesday, December 4
Identity and Privacy in the Digital Age

Read for Monday, December 9
Evgeny Morozov, The Google Doctrine and selected handouts

Monday, December 9
Democracy in the Digital Age

Wednesday, December 11
LAST CLASS: CRITICAL OVERVIEW OF COURSE READINGS

FINAL PAPER DUE WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 11
NO LATE PAPERS WILL BE ACCEPTED