The Communication Revolutions

New York University
Gallatin School for Individualized Study

Syllabus

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Thurs. 6:20-9:00 pm
1 Washington Pl., Rm. 401
Fall 2013

I OVERVIEW
We say we live in the Information Age as if such an age never existed before. But throughout time the introduction of new forms of media and communication technologies and information systems have transformed existing social, political, and economic life creating new perceptual pathways to our understanding. This course then follows a historical track through the prism of these communication “revolutions,” beginning with the arrival of the spoken word, the development of writing systems, the spread of the printed word, the age of electricity before leading to the modern era and our own digital revolution, one that has inspired a cultural transformation with enormous social, political, psychological and ethical consequences. It is through our investigation of these previous revolutions that we may come to some greater understanding about the promises—and consequences—of our own technological age.

Shorts Reads:
1. Turkle, Flight from Conversation
2. Postman, from “Technopoly.”
3. Yule, “The origins of language”
4. Plato, The Judgment of Thamus
5. Ong, “The psychodynamics of orality”
6. Yule, “The development of writing”
7. Paper: The Kennedy-Nixon Debate
8. Turkle, “Julia”

Screenings (excerpts):
“The Gods Must Be Crazy”
The Printing Press
Edison’s experimental films; early silent films
Chaplin’s “Modern Times”
Kazan, “On the Waterfront”
Hitchcock’s “Psycho,” and “The Birds”
“The Sixties”
Nixon-Kennedy debate
“Blade Runner”
II Learning Goals:
1. Students will develop a deeper understanding of the historical and evolutionary nature of human communication and the philosophical, ethical, social and psychological ramifications that comes with the emergence of new media technologies.
2. Students will enhance research, writing, critical thinking and presentation skills through diverse assignments and projects.

III ASSIGNMENTS
All assignments must be completed by their due date to be relevant to the class and be eligible for full credit. I am interested in your take on your reading assignments, so be prepared to critically assess them in class. Likewise, your critique and research paper should demonstrate you own critical thinking (rather than simply reiterating what is in the text materials). All work should be handed in during the class session in hard copy—and please avoid email submissions unless it’s absolutely necessary. Assignments coming after deadline will be penalized five points; assignments more than a week late will not be accepted.

Major assignments and requirements are as follows:
1. Media Log: 15 Points
2. The Communications Journal Review: 20 points
3. Critical Imagination Essay: 20 Points
4. Media Technology Projects: 25 Points
5. Attendance and participation: 20 points

1. Media Log
Track and keep a log of your media habits for week, breaking down each day by noting the media you use, for how long, and for what purpose (for computers and cell phones, note the particular functions you use: e.g. email; Facebook; watching movies; accessing news, etc.). In two or three paragraphs, can you draw any conclusions as to why certain mediums are more/less appealing to you, and how these technologies in some way may affect you socially, psychologically and cognitively (2-3 pages, 15 points)

2. The Communication Revolutions Journal (CRJ)
The class will be divided into two editorial groups. You will be constructing the CRL this semester—your job is to serve as a contributing writer. Each student will select one significant piece of media criticism or analysis from a journal, book chapter or a contemporary critique and then reflect on how this work ties into our course and your understanding of our media environment. Your reflections (and include a copy of your original material) will be reviewed in class and collected and combined to form the CRJ. The two groups (A & B) will discuss their findings during two separate sessions of the course (see Schedule).

Some questions to consider: 1) What is the writer’s “thesis”?(2) How does it fit into our media ecology perspective?; 3) Do you agree with the conclusions reached by this writer?; 4) Can you expand or challenge any ideas?; 5) How does this writing apply to your understanding of our contemporary media world? (3-4 pages, 20 points each).
3. **Critical Imagination Essay:** Using your critical imagination, I would like you to add your thoughts/analysis to one of the following questions:

1. Write an essay in which you reverse a common assumption or attitude about communication and show that, in some way, the opposite is true.
2. Write an essay in which you take note of some trend of theme in the media and show what would result if it was extended into new territory or taken to its logical conclusion.
3. Write an essay in which you argue that something most people think of as progress is actually destructive to some important value.
4. Write an essay about the dumbest idea about communication or technology you have ever heard.
5. Write an essay in which you give a name to something happening in the media which has not yet been named.

(3-4 pages, 20 points)

4. **Invent a Technology**
This creative assignment asks that you design and construct a technology that does not yet exist that answers a “problem” within the culture (you may select either a media on nonmedia technology or technique that enhances in any way what you deem to be “progress”). You may “construct” this technology in various ways:

Examples:
1) a three-dimensional model
2) A diagrammatic representation (poster; Power Point, etc.)
3) A working prototype (extra credit)

The technology model/representation itself is to be accompanied by a short paper (3 pages) explaining how the technology works; its uses; its possible social and psychological consequences; its benefit/harm to one person/group or another; its impact of existing institution, or in constructing new institutions; moral concerns; and how, overall, we would be better off (or not) with this invention within our technological society.

Students will submit an abstract outlining the idea for the project. Each student will present his/her work during The Future World Conference during the final two weeks of the semester.

(25 points)

5. **Class Participation and Attendance**
I am looking for original thinking in both class activity and home assignments. The strength of our class depends on your active participation in which you engage in and formulate new ideas about media and communication. All students should feel free to share in class discussion; and keep up with readings since that are central to class lectures, discussions and our exam.

I take attendance seriously, and regular class attendance is expected. If you miss class, you essentially miss the course. Attendance is taken at the start of each session. Each unexcused absence will be penalized three points; more than two unexcused absences may result in a failing grade. Two late arrivals are equivalent to one absence. Full credit will be given to students who promptly attend each session and intelligently participate in the class give and take.

(20 points)
III GRADING
Each aspect of the class has been given a set number of points. A final grade is computed by taking points earned and converting them to a letter grade using the following scale. Extra-credit points may also be awarded on assignments and class participation.

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IV CONTACTS
Students are encouraged to meet with me at the Gallatin School, 1 Washington Pl., Room 431, on Thursday, 5-6 p.m. (appointments are advisable). Correspondence can also be left in my faculty box on the fourth floor of Gallatin. All email should be sent to my personal address at pthaler@aol.com.

V RULES
1. Academic Freedom and Responsibility
This class will deliberately address issues with the intent of challenging students’ beliefs and assumptions. During our discussions, all students should feel free to speak his or her mind without fear that that any idea will be penalized or disqualified. It is expected that every member of the class act in a respectful manner toward others.

2. Academic Honesty
Students are expected to meet the highest standards of academic integrity and adhere to the norms of a serious intellectual community. Students are required to submit their own work. Ideas, data, direct quotations, paraphrasing; any other incorporation of the work of others must be clearly referenced. To do otherwise constitutes plagiarism and will disqualify a student from receiving a passing grade in the course and subject him/her to university sanctions.

3. Academic Courtesy
Some simple rules (based on common courtesy) are important to maintaining an effective learning environment for all students:
   1. The class will start on time. If you must enter late, enter quietly and take a seat near the door;
   2. The class will end on time. Do not interrupt the class by leaving before its conclusion. If you must depart early, coordinate with me ahead of time;
   3. If you must converse with a colleague, please do so in a manner that is not disruptive to other students or the instructor;
4. Please shut off all electronic devices. No operating computers are allowed unless you receive special permission.
5. Students may bring drinks and light food into the classroom (but, please, no meals!)

SCHEDULE
While this outline sets up an overall plan, it is a living document that may be modified at any time to reflect the interests of the class. Additional reading assignments will be announced in class.

INTRODUCTION
I (Sept. 12)
Course Introduction: The media clock and five Ideas about media and culture
Course outline and requirements
Discussion: Symbolic environments and Communication Revolutions
Reading for Sept. 19: Turkle, “Flight from Conversation”
Assignment for Sept. 19 — Log: Your Media ‘Environment’

II (Sept. 19)
Student Introduction and media logs: Your media environment and social network
Com Theory: The Media Ecology communications model
Screening: from “The Gods Must be Crazy”
Reading for Sept. 26: Yule, “The Origins of Language”; Postman, from “Technopoly”

THE FIRST REVOLUTION: AGE OF THE SPOKEN WORD

III (Sept. 26)
Com Theory: Aristotle; Shannon and Weaver information models
What makes humans human? (Part I)
The Oral Greeks — and “The Judgment of Thamus” (in-class)
Reading for Oct. 3: Yule, “The development of writing”

IV (Oct. 3)
Com Theory: General semantics — how we make meaning, the uses and misuses of language
Introduction to writing systems: From Pictographs to the Alphabet

THE SECOND REVOLUTION: AGE OF THE PRINTED WORD

V (Oct. 10)
From scribal culture to the printing press as an agent of change:
Screening: The Printing Press
Assignment for Oct. 17: Group A — CRJ

VI (Oct. 17)
Early history of the American newspaper; birth of the People’s Press
In-Class: New York Times Analysis
Group A Discussion — CRJ
Assignment for Oct. 31 - Group B - CRJ
THE THIRD REVOLUTION: AGE OF ELECTRICITY AND THE IMAGE

VII (Oct. 24)
The telegraph and photograph: the decontextualization of meaning
Radio: Hearing is believing
Group B Discussion—CRJ

VIII (Oct. 31)
Movie history and the moving image revolution
Screening: Edison-Muybridge early film
The language of film
Screening: from “On the Waterfront,” “Modern Times”

IX (Nov. 7)
The film author: Hitchcock as auteur
Screening: clips from “Psycho” and “The Birds”
Group Meeting for The Future World Conference

X (Nov. 14)
Com Theory: Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs
Social and political propaganda: new information environments
Screening: product/ political commercials
Reading for Nov. 21: Paper - Kennedy-Nixon Debate
Assignment for Nov. 21: Critical Imagination Essay

XI (Nov. 21)
Television and its social-political impact
Screenings: The Sixties; Nixon-Kennedy debate
Discussion: Critical Imagination Essay
Handout: Memo for The Future World Conference
Reading for Dec, 5: Turkle, “Julia”
Assignment for Dec. 5: Project titles/abstracts

NO CLASS NOV. 28 THANKSGIVING HOLIDAY

THE FOURTH REVOLUTION: AGE OF THE INTERNET

XII (Dec. 5) What Makes Humans Human (II)—from Turing to Turkle
Social and Anti-Social New Media
Screening: from “Blade Runner”
Handout: “It Started Digital Wheels Turning”
Group Meeting for the Future World Conference
THE FUTURE WORLD CONFERENCE

XIII (Dec. 12)
Media Technology Workshop Groups 1-2

XIV (Finals Week TBA)
Media Technology Workshop Presentations Group 3-4
Final Thoughts from your prof. (time permitting): “Five Ways to Lead a Sane Life in an Insane World”