

Digital media, virtual culture

Freshman seminar

Prof. Gil Rodman

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Office hours: MW 10-11a, W 2-4p, and by appointment

Comm 1905-002

MWF 11:15a-12:05p

156 Amundson

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Course description

It has become something of a cliché to claim that the world has been “revolutionized” by digital media: i.e., the broad and eclectic range of various “new” communication technologies that includes the Internet, laptop computers, mobile phones, iPods, Blackberries, and the like. How true that cliché is, however, depends a great deal on precisely which technologies one is talking about and on just where in the world one is trying to measure their impact. This course will provide a preliminary survey of some -- but by no means all -- of the major social, cultural, and political issues raised by the growth and spread of digital media. While our readings will occasionally include brief technical discussions, this is not a course about the science of digital media (e.g., how does WiFi work? what are the acoustic limitations of satellite radio? etc.) and your ability to succeed will not depend on whether you can master the intricacies of software engineering, computer circuitry, or the like.

Bear in mind that few (if any) of the questions that we’ll address this semester have easy answers. How well you do in this class will depend on your ability to think critically about the role of digital media in contemporary society and your ability to argue your position(s) well.

Grading

Final course grades will be calculated using the following schedule:

Thought paper	10%
Critical response papers (3 @ 10% each)	30%
Oral research presentation	20%
Take-home final exam	40%

Accumulated grade point totals translate to final course grades as follows:

A	93-100	B	83-86	C	73-76	D	60-66
A-	90-92	B-	80-82	C-	70-72	F	0-59
B+	87-89	C+	77-79	D+	67-69		

“I” grades will only be given under extraordinary circumstances (i.e., major life emergencies).

Attendance/participation

Our class meetings will be structured around seminar-style discussions rather than formal lectures. This means that you should always come to class (1) having done the assigned readings carefully and thoughtfully, and (2) prepared to contribute to our discussions about those readings in productive ways. This class is not a spectator event, and I will expect everyone who shows up for class to be able and willing to participate meaningfully in our conversations. I reserve the right to penalize the final course grades of students who show up for class unprepared more than once. Please note that “being prepared” does not require you to have a full and total mastery of any given reading: simply that you’ve done the reading closely enough to contribute focused questions and or relevant comments to our discussions.

Readings

There are no textbooks for this course, and all of the required readings will be made available in class.

Written assignments: general rules

(a) Where/how to submit assignments. All written assignments *must* be submitted in *both* printed *and* digital versions, and the text of each version must be identical.

- Printed versions should be double-spaced and stapled (do *not* use plastic covers/binders).
- Digital versions should be e-mailed to rodman@umn.edu as file attachments.
- Acceptable digital formats are OpenOffice, WordPerfect, Word, RTF, PDF, HTML, and plaintext.
- I will *not* print out hard copies of digital submissions, and you will *not* receive written feedback from me unless you submit a printed version.
- If you submit printed versions outside of class, *either* hand such work directly to me *or* place it in my campus mailbox in 250 Ford. Do *not* submit work under my office door. Please note that 250 Ford is only open between 8 am and 4 pm on weekdays.

(b) Deadlines. At least one version (and, ideally, both versions) of any assignment must be submitted by 11:15 am on the listed due date. If you submit only one version on time, you have until 4:00 pm on the due date to submit the other version. After that time, grade penalties will be assessed in direct proportion to the lateness of your assignment. The *minimum* penalty for late and/or missing assignments will be one full letter grade. Deadlines are *not* negotiable or subject to extensions, except in cases involving:

- major life emergencies (with suitable documentation (hospital receipts, funeral notices, etc.)) or
- major religious holidays (with written notice presented at least a week in advance).

(c) Grammar/spelling/etc. Assignment grades will be based primarily on content and argument, rather than form and style: insightful, smartly argued essays that contain a few spelling errors will almost always receive higher grades than grammatically flawless papers that have weak arguments. Nonetheless, grammar, spelling, and style still matter to the effective presentation of a strong argument, and assignments suffering from significant “form” problems will be penalized accordingly.

(d) Handouts. Full details about particular assignments will be made available on separate handouts.

Thought paper

This assignment (750-1000 words, due 10 Sep) will be *ungraded*. Assuming you turn the paper in, you should receive full credit for doing so (though I reserve the right to give partial (or even no) credit to papers that fail to meet the assignment’s requirements).

Critical response papers

You will write at least three critical response papers (750-1000 words each, due dates vary) over the course of the semester, each of which should be a critical (i.e., thoughtful and analytical) response to the assigned readings from a particular unit of the course.

Oral research presentation

Our final five class meetings will be devoted to individual oral presentations of student research (7-10 minutes each) related to the future of digital media. You will be required to submit a proposed topic for your presentation by 1 Oct, and you should schedule a one-on-one meeting with me well in advance of that deadline to discuss this assignment.

Take-home final exam

This exam (due 20 Dec) will consist entirely of essay questions and will be based on the assigned readings and our in-class discussions. It will consist of one mandatory question and two questions that you will choose from a larger selection. Each essay should be 1000-1250 words long and will be weighted equally in your exam grade.

Course blog

In addition to our face-to-face meetings, we will conduct a significant amount of discussion and course business online via a course blog. A partial list of the ways we will use the course blog includes:

- discussions of assigned readings and other issues related to the theme of the course,
- occasional “virtual lectures” designed to stimulate (additional) online discussion, and
- course-related business announcements.

Academic integrity

The following is a partial list of major examples of academic dishonesty:

- plagiarism in any of its forms,
- copying assignments (in whole or in part) written by other students,
- having someone else research and/or write substantial portions of any graded assignment, and
- knowingly assisting someone else in their efforts to engage in any of the above practices.

The minimum penalty for academic dishonesty is a zero for the assignment in question.

Further information about the University’s official policies with respect to academic dishonesty -- including more detailed explanations of what constitutes “plagiarism” and “cheating” -- can be found online at <http://writing.umn.edu/tww/plagiarism/>

Miscellaneous

- I do not expect our class meetings to produce unanimous agreement about the issues under discussion, but I do expect all of our conversations to be characterized by mutual respect and collegiality. Strongly expressed opinions are acceptable in this class; verbal bullying and personal attacks, on the other hand, will not be tolerated under any circumstances.
- Significant disruptions of the normal flow of course-related business -- e.g., using cell phones in class, excessive side chatter -- may result in grade penalties.
- You may make audio recordings of our class meetings, provided you can do so without disrupting the ordinary flow of the class. The purchase and/or sale of either written notes or audio recordings of our class meetings, however, is strictly prohibited.
- In accordance with University policy, I will make every effort to accommodate the specific needs of students with documented disabilities.

Reading/assignment schedule

Unit #0 Introduction

Sep 5 no reading

Unit #1 New communication technologies: Utopia or dystopia?

Sep 7 James W. Carey, "Historical Pragmatism and the Internet"

Sep 10 **Thought paper due**

Jonathan Sterne, "Thinking the Internet: Cultural Studies Versus the Millennium"

Sep 12 Susan J. Douglas, "The Turn Within: The Irony of Technology in a Globalized World"

Sep 14 Gilbert B. Rodman, "The Net Effect: The Public's Fear and the Public Sphere"

Sep 17 no reading

Unit #2 Code and systems: Open source software

Sep 19 **Critical response paper #1 due**

Neal Stephenson, *In the Beginning . . . Was the Command Line* [selections]

Sep 21 Eric S. Raymond, "The Cathedral and the Bazaar"

Sep 24 Linus Torvalds and David Diamond, "Why Open Source Makes Sense"

Unit #3 Access and literacy: Digital divide(s)

Sep 26 **Critical response paper #2 due**

William Wresch, "Information Exiles"

Sep 28 Sinikka Sassi, "Cultural Differentiation or Social Segregation: Four Approaches to the Digital Divide"

Oct 1 **Presentation topic proposals due**

Lisa J. Servon, *Bridging the Digital Divide: Technology, Community, and Public Policy* [selections]

Oct 3 Jonathan Sterne, "The Computer Race Goes to Class: How Computers in Schools Helped Shape the Racial Topography of the Internet"

Oct 5 no reading

Unit #4 Identity and anonymity: The crisis of authority
Oct 8 **Critical response paper #3 due**
 Allucquère Rosanne Stone, "In Novel Conditions: The Cross-Dressing Psychiatrist"

Oct 10 Helen Nissenbaum, "Securing Trust Online: Wisdom or Oxymoron?"

Oct 12 **no class**

Oct 15 Helen Kennedy, "Beyond Anonymity, or Future Directions for Internet Identity Research"

Unit #5 Mobility and interactivity: Personal(ized) media
Oct 17 **Critical response paper #4 due**
 Henry Jenkins, "Interactive Audiences?: The 'Collective Intelligence' of Media Fans"

Oct 19 Kembrew McLeod, "Copyright Criminals: This Is a Sampling Sport"

Oct 22 Mark Tremayne, *Bloggng, Citizenship, and the Future of Media* [selections]

Oct 24 Gerald Goggin, *Cell Phone Culture: Mobile Technology in Everyday Life* [selections]

Oct 26 no reading

Unit #6 Labor and production: Making (virtual) culture
Oct 29 **Critical response paper #5 due**
 Michelle Rodino-Colocino, "Laboring Under the Digital Divide"

Oct 31 Andrew Ross, "Technology and Below-the-Line Labor in the Copyfight Over Intellectual Property"

Nov 2 Sara M. Grimes, "Online Multiplayer Games: A Virtual Space for Intellectual Property Debates"

Nov 5 no reading

<u>Unit #7</u>		Property and piracy: Gift economies
Nov 7	Critical response paper #6 due	David Tetzlaff, "Yo-Ho-Ho and a Server of Warez: Internet Software Piracy and the New Global Economy"
Nov 9		Lawrence Lessig, "Piracy"
Nov 12		Laikwan Pang, "Copying <i>Kill Bill</i> "
Nov 14		Siva Vaidhyanathan, "The Peer-to-Peer Revolution and the Future of Music"
Nov 16	no class	
Nov 19		Gilbert B. Rodman and Cheyanne Vanderdonckt, "Music for Nothing or, I Want My MP3: The Regulation and Recirculation of Affect"
<u>Unit #8</u>		Community and privacy: The surveillance society
Nov 21	Critical response paper #7 due	John Varley, "Press Enter[]"
Nov 23	no class	
Nov 26		Mark Andrejevic, "The Kinder, Gentler Gaze of Big Brother: Reality TV in the Age of Digital Capitalism"
Nov 28		Matt Carlson, "Tapping Into TiVo: Digital Video Recorders and the Transition From Schedules to Surveillance in Television"
Nov 30		Adam Greenfield, <i>Everyware: The Dawning Age of Ubiquitous Computing</i> [selections]
<u>Unit #9</u>		Trends and predictions: The future
Dec 3	Critical response paper #8 due	no reading -- student research presentations
Dec 5		no reading -- student research presentations
Dec 7		no reading -- student research presentations
Dec 10		no reading -- student research presentations
Dec 12		no reading -- student research presentations
<u>Finals week</u>		
Dec 20	no class	Take-home final exam due @ 1:30 pm