HSCI 3493: The Cultural History of Information

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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 these 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 goals; 2) second, we will see that technologies never exist alone, meaning that they are always parts of extended social and technical networks; 3) and third, we will see that while technologies evolve in incremental steps, sometimes small steps can have wide-ranging effects, especially if the innovation changes the basic processes of storing, organizing, presenting, or transmitting information.

Course Mechanics:

Each week there will be three class meetings. 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 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) after class on the course Web site. As a rule, on Wednesdays we will break into groups to discuss a set of questions on the readings and on Fridays we'll discuss student mini-papers, also in groups. You will turn in a short homework assignment on the week's readings in class each Wednesday, and there will be a short quiz in class on the week's material each Friday.
Each week, your group will turn in its answers to the discussion questions. 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 two midterms and a final. Each midterm will consist of one essay question and a few short answer (quiz-like) questions. You will be given two or three possible exam essay questions the week before each midterm, one of which will be the actual exam question. Each midterm covers the material since the previous midterm, up to and including the lecture and readings for the week of the midterm. The final will consist of two essay questions, one focusing on the last third of the course and one covering the course as a whole, plus a few short answer questions. (Think of it as a third midterm, plus a cumulative essay.) As with the midterms, you will be given a set of possible exam questions the week before the final, two of which will be the actual exam questions.

You also will write four "mini-papers" during the course. Each mini-paper will be 2-3 pages (500 to 1000 words) in length and will be based on outside reading and research. The mini-papers should deal with topics related to the lecture and readings for that week and should be based on at least one substantial outside source. You should talk to me or to Matthis the week before you're up in order to make sure that your paper will fit the week's topic. Mini-papers can range widely, from discussions of novels or films that deal with the topic in question, to analyses of primary or secondary sources, to discussions of the rest of works that we only read part of for class. The mini-papers are due in class on Wednesdays, and they will be discussed by your small groups on Fridays. Usually, each group will have two students giving mini-papers each week.

I expect that completing the readings will take 4-5 hours each week, on average, with the homeworks taking another 30 minutes to complete. Good students typically spend an additional 30 to 60 minutes each week looking over their notes and preparing for discussion.

**Grade Breakdown**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quizzes</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Homeworks</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Group Assignments</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Individual Discussion Grades</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Midterms (2)</td>
<td>20% (total)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mini-papers</td>
<td>20% (total)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final Exam</td>
<td>20%</td>
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**Books to buy:**

4) Tom Standage, *The Victorian Internet*, (Berkeley Publishing Group, 1999).
Course Schedule

Week 1: Course Introduction
August 21: Course Introduction
August 23: Group Discussion—Technology, Communications, and Society
Readings:

Week 2: Information and Communication Before the Printing Press
August 28: The World of the Scribe
August 30: Group Discussion—The Written Word
Readings:
1) Umberto Eco, excerpts from The Name of the Rose, pp. 32-37, 78-93. On D2L.
3) Jay Bolter, excerpts from Writing Space, pp. 1-26. On D2L.
September 1: Mini-Paper Discussions

Week 3: The Revolution of the Word
September 4: No Class. Labor Day.
September 6: The Printing Press and the Vernacular Bible
September 8: Group Discussions—the Print Revolution
Readings:

Week 4: A Public Sphere
September 11: The Materiality of Print [Go to HSCI Collections!]
September 13: The Creation of the Public
Readings:
1) Paul Starr, The Creation of the Media, Chapters 2-4: pp. 47-150.
September 15: Mini-Paper Discussions
Week 5: The Daily Mail/The Audience for Print/The Novel

September 18: Public Sphere/Private Self

September 20: Group Discussions—The Audience for Print

Readings:
1) Richard John, *Spreading the News*, pp. 25-63. On D2L.

September 22: Midterm #1.

Week 6: Communication and Empire

September 25: Lines of Power

September 27: Group Discussions—Electric Communication and Culture

Reading:
1) Tom Standage, *The Victorian Internet* (entire).

September 29: Mini-Paper Discussions

Week 7: Information and Control: the Organizational Revolution

October 2: Electricity, Communication, and the Second Industrial Revolution

October 4: Group Discussions—Organizing Mind, Body, and Work

Readings:
1) Selections on Babbage's Analytic Engine. On D2L.

October 6: No Class. Texas Friday.

Week 8: The Media Revolution: radio, motion pictures, television

October 9: Mass Media, Multi-Media

October 11: Group Discussions:

Readings:
2) Marshall McLuhan, selections from *Understanding Media*, pp. 3-32. On D2L.

October 13: Mini-Paper Discussions

Week 9: The Birth of Computing

October 16: The Transistor and the Program

October 18: Group Discussions—What Was a Computer For?

Readings:

October 20: Mini-Paper Discussions

**Week 10: Automation**

October 23: The Mainframe Era—Big Computers for Big Business and Big Government

October 25: The Great Automation Debate

Reading:


October 27: Mini-Paper Discussions

**Week 11: The PC Revolution**

October 30: A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Military-Industrial Complex

November 1: Group Discussions—Silicon Valley

Reading:


November 3: **Midterm #2.**

**Week 12: The Creation of the Internet**

November 6: From ARPANET to the World Wide Web

November 8: Group Discussions—Networking

Readings:


November 10: Mini-Paper Discussions

**Week 13: Digital Convergence**

November 13: Media Convergence

November 15: Group Discussions—Are We Posthuman Yet?

Reading:


November 17: Mini-Paper Discussions

**Week 14: Network Culture**

November 20: The Computer in Film/Popular Culture

November 22: No Class. Thanksgiving Holiday.
November 24: No Class. Thanksgiving Holiday.

**Week 15: Digital Identity**

November 27: On the Internet, No One Knows You’re A …

November 29: Group Discussions—Cyberspace and Identity

Readings:

December 1: Mini-Paper Discussions

**Week 16: The Road Ahead**

December 4: Cyber-Prophecies

December 6: Group Discussions—Prophets and Loss

Readings:

December 8: Mini-Paper Discussions

**Final Exam: Tuesday, December 12, 4:30-6:30 p.m.**