Course Description

Digital media are ubiquitous. They are the tools with which we communicate, the sources from which we derive information, the instruments that uphold so much of our culture. As such, they elude definition. By observing the history, technology, economy, politics and metaphysics of digital media, this course will attempt to provide a theoretical framework from within which to address the subject critically, drawing from inspiration on a wide variety of sources, from the ancient Greeks to the modern geeks.

Evaluation

Attendance and participation: 20 percent.
Three short papers: 10 percent each.
Midterm exam: 20 percent.
Final paper: 30 percent.

Short papers will apply various methods of analysis from the week’s readings to a relevant media object or phenomenon. They should be 4-5 pages in length and use proper essay formatting and citation.

As this course will consist mostly of interactive discussions, reading and preparation in advance—as well as civility in the classroom—are paramount. The attendance and participation mark will be evaluated according to the student’s attendance and engagement; more than two unexcused absences will result in a drop in grade.
Similarly, all assigned work must be handed in on time, meet the standards of proper citation and attribution, and obey the unforgiving laws of English grammar. Finally, plagiarism is not tolerated, and will result in failing the course. Consult university rules and guidelines regarding this serious breach of ethics.

Assignments

First Short Paper (Due Thursday, September 23): A large, struggling broadcast television network has hired you to develop a concept for a smash hit reality TV show. Thoroughly moved by what we discussed in class, you decide to base the show on Plato’s allegory of the cave. Write a short pitch describing the allegory’s relevance to today’s digital media environment and proposing a modern twist on the ancient myth. What would Plato’s cave look like in 2010? And what can we still learn from it?
Second Short Paper (Due Tuesday, October 19): Drawing on our discussion of Gitlin and Manovich, and taking into consideration questions of economy and language, of politics and identity production, of semiotics and of emerging sensibilities, attempt a brief answer of the seminal question at the heart of this class: What are digital media? While there may not be a singular correct answer, the ideal paper would briefly consider divergences from non-digital media and their respective consequences, as well as the question of spectatorship and the ways it is shaped anew by new media.

Third Short Paper (Due Tuesday, November 16): Following the examples we analyzed in class, select a digital media company that interests you and analyze its business model. Discuss audiences, partnerships, revenue streams, marketing strategies, and all other relevant facets. How is the company’s business model unique to the digital media landscape?

Final Paper (Due Thursday, December 9): This is an open-ended, large-scale research project allowing you the opportunity to wrestle in greater depth with one or more of the subjects we discussed throughout the course. I will speak of the paper in greater detail early on in the semester. Research proposals for the final paper are due by Tuesday, October 5.

Standards and Grading

A=Excellent. Outstanding work that demonstrates a comprehensive understanding of the course material, as well as uncommon insight and analysis.

B=Good. This work demonstrates a complete and accurate fluency in course material, but does not rise above a general level of understanding.

C=Adequate/fair. This work demonstrates a tenuous grasp on the subject matter, and remains superficial, incomplete, poorly argued, or misinformed.

D=Unsatisfactory. This work demonstrates a serious lack or error in understanding, and fails to express the most rudimentary aspects of the course.

F=Failed. Work not submitted or not attempted.

Class Schedule

Tuesday, September 7: Greetings, introductions, bonhomie.

The Prehistory of New Media, Or, Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Twitter but Didn’t Know You Should Ask Plato

Thursday, September 9: Form, formats, and wrong ideas: a brief ontological primer. Read Plato, Phaedrus.
Tuesday, September 14: What we talk about when we talk about talking: oral culture, written words, and the implications of communications. Read Eric Havelock, “Epic as record versus epic as narrative,” in Preface to Plato.


**Bits and Torrents, Or You Don’t Need a Weatherman to Know Which Way the Digital Wind Blows**

Tuesday, September 21: Here comes everything: information in the age of excess. Read Todd Gitlin, Media Unlimited.

Thursday, September 23: Media supersaturation and disposable feelings.

Tuesday, September 28: The fast and the furious: immediate media and their discontents.

Thursday, September 30: No direction home: on digital media and displacement.

**Computer Dreams, Or the Birth of the Digital Interface**

Tuesday, October 5: The rise of the machines. Read Vannevar Bush, As We May Think.

Thursday, October 7: Computer speak: the new grammar of new media. Read Lev Manovich, The Language of New Media.

Tuesday, October 12: The grammar of new media, continued.

Thursday, October 14: The grammar of new media, continued.

**I Want to Be a Super (Business) Model, Or Three Ways to Get Rich Quick in the Digital Wild West**

Tuesday, October 19: The Chaos Chamber: The Curious Case of MySpace. Read Julia Angwin, Stealing MySpace.

Thursday, October 21: MySpace, continued.

Tuesday, October 26: The Gold Farm: The Curious Case of Virtual Video Game Economies. Read Julian Dibbell, Play Money.

Thursday, October 28: Video games, continued.

Tuesday, November 2: The Leviathan: The Curious Case of Google’s Unstoppable Growth. Read Ken Auletta, Googled.
Thursday, November 4: Google, continued.

**Sexy Cyborgs and Second Lives, Or the Vicarious Thrills of the Virtually Human**

Tuesday, November 9: Our Virtual Bodies, Our Virtual Selves. Read Tom Boellstorff, *Coming of Age in Second Life*.

Thursday, November 11: Becoming One with the Machine. Read Andy Clark, *Natural-Born Cyborgs*.

Tuesday, November 16: Cyborgs, continued.

**The End of the World As We Know It, Or Digital Media’s Uncertain Futures**


Tuesday, November 23: Where Do We Go From Here? Read Chris Anderson and Michael Wolff, *The Web is Dead. Long Live the Internet*.

Thursday, November 25: Thanksgiving: No class.

**Living Digitally, Or Family, Community and Passion in a Mediated World**

Tuesday, November 30: Digital media as an airborne toxic event. Read Don DeLillo, *White Noise*.

Thursday, December 2: Continued.

Tuesday, December 7: Continued.

Thursday, December 9: Continued.

**That’s All, Folks…**

Tuesday, December 14: Summary, revelry, sagacity.