The History of Communication
Tues, Thurs 9:30-10:45. Silver 809

First half of course

Prof. Ben Kafka
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Office hours: Wed. 10-1 or by appointment

Second half of course

Prof. Aurora Wallace
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Office hours: Tues. 2-5 or by appointment

Course Description

This course has the supremely modest goal of surveying fifty thousand years of human history, from the first attempts to hold a conversation to that awkward picture of you on Facebook. How have men and women used bits of sand, fiber, skin, metal, plastic, and other materials to communicate? How have psychological, social, cultural, religious, and political forces shaped communication? How has communication shaped psyches, societies, cultures, religions, and politics?

Tracing the four great revolutions in human communication (orality, literacy, typography, and electricity) we will examine how the semiotic codes, physical structures, and time-space biases of the media wrought by these revolutions have affected such basic human communication forms as memory, myth and ritual, narration and reenactment, and visual imagery.

Course Requirements

The course will consist of lectures, recitations, written work, a midterm, and a final. Your first and foremost responsibility is to attend all sessions prepared to participate critically, creatively, and collegially. In return, we promise to do the same. Your next responsibility is to prepare two hypothetical research papers on media artifacts found at local museums. These plans will consist of an annotated bibliography, a detailed outline, sample footnotes, and a well-crafted introduction and conclusion. Details will be discussed at length in class. Your final responsibility is to pass a midterm and a final. No surprises there.

Each of these requirements (preparedness, the two research plans, midterm, final) will account for 20% of your grade.

You should already be familiar with NYU’s policies and procedures concerning plagiarism and other forms of academic misconduct. Violations will not be tolerated.

Readings

The course relies mainly on two texts, both available at the NYU Bookstore. The first is Henri-Jean Martin, The History and Power of Writing (University of Chicago Press, 1994). The second is Brian Winston, Media, Technology, and Society (Routledge, 1998). Any other readings will be made available on Blackboard.
Schedule of Lectures and Readings

**Professor Kafka:**

1/22 – Introduction(s)  
1/24 – The History of What? (READ: Martin, chapter 1)

1/29 – Learning to Speak  
1/31 – Learning to Write (Martin, chapter 2)

2/5 – Powers of the Written Word
2/7 – Ingredients of the Medieval Book (Martin, chapter 4)

2/12 – Renaissance Visions  
2/14 – The Print Revolution (Martin, chapter 6)

2/21 – The Shock of Discovery (readings on Blackboard)

2/26 – Public spectacles  
2/28 – Private thoughts (Martin, chapter 7)

3/4 – Lightning Rods and Revolutions  
3/6 – “Everything that’s solid melts into air…” (Martin, chapter 9)

3/11 – Review
3/13 – Midterm in class

**Professor Wallace:**

3/25 – Printed News and the City  

4/1 – Railways and Standard Time  
4/3 – Telegraphy to Telephony (Winston, chapters 1, 2, 3)

4/8 – Wireless Transmission  
4/10 – The Birth of Networks (Winston, chapters 4, 5, 13)

4/15 – Moving Picture Technology  
4/17 – Film Content and Movie-Going (readings on Blackboard)

4/22 – Early Television  
4/24 – Post WWII Television (Winston, chapters 6, 7, 14)

4/29 – Old Media Meets New Media  
5/1 – New Media and Exam Review (Winston, chapters 15-18)

**Final Exam to be scheduled in exam period. Consult Registrar’s site for details.**