Digital Lives

Course Description

This course examines how digital communication technologies construct and constrain the formation of online identities and social spaces. We will explore the technical, cultural, and social forces that make digital lives both familiar and unfamiliar, traditional and subversive. Throughout the course, we will develop strategies and methods for studying media and digital platforms, online materials, and popular representations of "digital life." We will use these critical tools to look at several themes that include auto/biography, social justice movements, gender, race, and more.

Our course is divided into three units:

Understanding (Digital) Media
In this unit of the course, we will be exploring the various theories and methods of analyzing media, generally, and digital media, specifically. In addition to the history of digital media, we will be learning the affordances and constraints of media: how media shape content and users' engagement with content. But we will also consider the ways users shape media and media usage, providing thematic and theoretical groundwork for the subsequent course units.

Digital Lives IRL (In Real Life)
After familiarizing ourselves with the theories and methods of analyzing the affordances and constraints of media, we will study the creation and performances of online identities on various (social) media platforms. This section will specifically focus on the ways the creation and performances of online identities negotiate social norms and engage with social justice issues.

Dirty Computers and Cyborgs
This unit zeroes in on the popular representations of cyborgs and androids in TV, film, music, and literature. Specifically, we will learn how the symbol of the cyborg/android is used in these media as a site of resistance against various intersecting oppressions. This unit presents the various representations of the cyborg as engaging with theories and histories of digital media we learned in unit one and as reflecting the lived online realities of those we covered in unit two.

Course learning outcomes:

The design of the content and schedule of the course is determined by our goals of scholarly engagement with the idea and practice of 'digital lives' and of becoming stronger academic writers in a university setting.

Knowledge—*by the end of the course you should be able to*:

Identify the basic terms by which scholars study and theorize (digital) media & online materials
Write clear and persuasive short academic papers, supported by evidence
Discuss the affordances and constraints of media, and the various cultural uses and imaginations of media.

Application—*over the course of the term you will*:

Take notes from various media and lectures to understand, remember, and apply new ideas
Interpret texts using scholarly methods of analysis
Frame persuasive arguments in writing

Integration—*this course encourages you to*:

**Develop** a clear, concise, and scholarly 'voice'
Write more professionally: conceive, research, draft, edit, and proofread your work
Connect our reading and writing strategies to the larger project of your degree

This course is **reading intensive, writing intensive,** and **participation intensive**: I expect you to do the readings, take careful notes, show up, and take part.

Required Texts

Digital Media and Society
by Simon Lindgren (*available in the Waterloo Bookstore*)
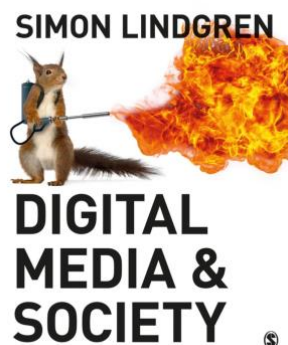
Assignments Outline

Assignment	Due	Grade
Reading response	*See description*	10%
In-class exercises	*See description*	5%
Media as Environments Response	Feb. 4	15%
Automedia Research Response	March 11	20%
History of Digital Culture Group Project	*See Description & Handout*	20% (15% for project; 5% for comments)
Final Project Proposal	April 4	5%
Final Research Project	April 16	25%

Assignment Descriptions

Readings response (Due weekly; 10%)

Each week for **Tuesday**'s class, you are to bring to class a short response about what interests you the most about that week's reading. Select a concept, a sentence, a paragraph, an image, etc. and write approximately 150 words on what interests you about that thing in relation to our course.

We will begin each class with some of us sharing this document. And you are to hand in the document at the end of class. Completing a response will give you a completion point.

This assignment does not have to be formatted. Can be handwritten with the exception of including images.

**There will be no responses on the noted dates in the Schedule*

In-class exercises (5%)

On **Thursday** classes,* there will be in-class exercises, activities, and discussions that you will be marked on. Participating in these exercises will give you a completion point. No preparation is needed, besides having done the readings for that week.

If you miss class for whatever reason, it is your responsibility to contact me and to discuss the missed exercise.

*(although there will be exceptions for the study break week and the final week of class)

Media as Environments Response (15%)

In *Digital Media & Society*, Lindgren details the way that media are environments, citing McLuhan's "the medium is the message" as an important theory to approach media. Lindgren writes, "Switching from one medium to another reconfigures our senses and alters the ways in which we comprehend and reconstruct the world around us" (19). Additionally, he argues, "we are at the same time socialised and acculturated into the symbolic environment of the medium" (19).

Selecting one medium, write a **full 2-3 page** response that argues how this medium "reconfigures our senses" through its technological affordances and social rules. You may compare this medium to another, but your response must be focused on one medium (e.g. focus on Snapchat but compare it to Instagram).

A handout will be supplied in the second week of classes.

Automedia Research Response (20%)

Consulting Chapter 13 and 14 of *Digital Media & Society* select a hashtag, a Twitch Stream, a YouTube series, a blog, or a podcast and write a **full 3-4 page** analysis of the *social actions* of your selected study. Such queries are but not limited to: How are *affinity spaces* created in your study? What kind of arguments about identity are made by the person or group of your study? How do users employ the affordances and constraints of their chosen medium? Lindgren details "layers of visual sociality" but can there also be "layers of aural sociality"?

Detailed handout will be supplied at the beginning of the second unit.

History of Digital Culture Group Project (20% = 15% project, 5% comments)

In groups of 2-4 people, your group is required to *make a video or a podcast* about a particular moment in digital history or (pop) culture. You will be given a list to choose from in the beginning of the course. The video/podcast should be 7-10 minutes. *If you are unable to make a video or podcast, you may pitch an alternative project to me and I will have to approve of it.*

Once you complete your assignment, you are to submit it to Learn via the Dropbox and in your assigned Discussion forum on the required date that your topic is associated with. You will also need to submit a Works Cited page in the Learn Dropbox. This portion of the assignment is worth 15% of your final grade.

The other 5% requires you to post a comment on other peoples' projects in their discussion forum on Learn. *To get the full 5%, you must post a comment on every group's podcast/video*. You must post within a week the project is uploaded. I check for comments on Fridays, a week after the project has been posted. Comments should not be "good job!" but should be a couple of sentences explaining what you learned from the video/podcast.

Final Project Proposal (5%)

For this assignment, you are required to write a 1-2 page double-spaced proposal on what your final project is. You must outline 1) the type of final project you are doing (see **Final Research Project** description), 2) your main argument or thesis, 3) the rough outline of your project, and 4) list the possible academic sources you will be using and why.

More details will be supplied in a handout that will be given during the second unit.

Final Research Project (Due via Learn; 25%)

The final project can either be a **research essay**, a **creative essay**, or a **critical media project**. Each of these options require 2-3 secondary academic sources that are *not* your textbook.

The **research essay** will require you to write a **full 5-6** pages on a particular research topic of your choice. *The topic can build off of the **Doing Social Media Research** response or it can be a new one related to any of the units.* You must use your secondary sources to support your arguments.

The **creative essay** is similar to the research essay in the sense that you must construct an argument on a particular research topic of your choice. However, instead of a handwritten essay, you can make a video essay, a podcast essay, or a creative format that you propose to me. Since there is no page length for these formats, your submission must be 8-12 minutes. Secondary sources must still be included to support your arguments.

The **critical media project** is a creative project, supplemented by a 3-page critical reflection. For a critical media project, you can make something (a small game, a podcast, a let's play video, a poem or a short piece of fiction) that investigates a theme or issue or topic related to this course. You are then required to write a critical reflection on your experiences and/or on the creative intent of your project, and what your project argues about that particular theme/issue/topic.

For example: You may write a short fiction story or poem that is set in the world of Janelle Monáe's *Dirty Computer*. Your story should speak to the themes of the emotional picture. Then, in your 3-page reflection, you argue what your story illuminates about *Dirty Computer* and the chosen theme/topic of your focus.

More details will be given in a handout during the second unit.

Schedule

Note: all readings must be completed before the assigned date. You should be coming into class prepared, having read the material on that date.

Unit One: Understanding Digital Media

Week 1
Topic: Logging On: What is "new" about New Media (or Digital Media)

Jan 8: Getting to know each other
Jan 10: **Read**: *Digital Media and Society*, Chapter 1, pgs 3-15

Week 2
Topic: "The Medium is the Message": Media as Environments

Jan 15: **Read**: *Digital Media & Society*, Chapter 1, pgs 16-25
Jan 17: In-class activity

Week 3
Topic: The Environments of Social Media

Jan 22: **Read:** *Digital Media and Society*, Chapter 2
Jan 24: In-class activity

Week 4
Topic: Cyber Debates + (Dis)Embodiment and Identity

Jan 29: **Read**: *Digital Media &* Society, Chapter 3
Jan 31: In-class activity

Unit 2: Digital Lives IRL

Week 5 (*No Reading Response This Week)*
Topic: Automedia + Games

Feb 5: **Read:** *Digital Media and Society,* Chapter 4 pgs 67-76 (up until "Out of Sight")
         Play: *Dys4ia* & *Invaders* (links on Learn)
Feb 7: **Read**: *Digital Media & Society*, Chapter 4 pgs 76 – end of chapter; In-class activity

Media as Environments Paper due Feb 4 via Learn

Week 6
Topic: Selfies

Feb 12: **Read**: *Digital Media & Society* Chapter 6
Feb 14: In-class activity

Week 7 (*No Reading Response*)
READING WEEK

Week 8
Topic: Podcasts and Autobiographical Coaxing

Feb 26: **Read**: *Digital Media & Society*, Chapter 7
        Listen: *Conversations with People Who Hate Me* (podcast)
Feb 28: In-class activity

Week 9
Topic: Streaming Lives

March 5: **Read**: *Digital Media & Society*, Chapter 9; please watch a couple of hours of Ninja's
        stream (on Learn)
March 7: In-class activity

Unit 3: Dirty Computers and Cyborgs

Week 10 (*No Reading Response)*
Topic: Androids and Labour

March 12: **Watch:** *Blade Runner 2022: Black Out* (available on Learn)
(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rrZk9sSgRyQ&t=802s&frags=pl%2Cwn)
        Optional: Watch "Measure of a man," *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (available on
        Netflix)

March 14: In-class exercise: Critical Media Project workshop;

*** Automedia Media Research Response due March 11

Week 11
Topic: Cyborg Writing

March 19: **Read**: Larissa Lai's "Rachel" (PDF on Learn)
March 21: **In-class exercise:** In-class discussion of Lai's "Rachel"

Week 12
Topic: Queering Androids

March 26: **Watch**: *Dirty Computer* by Janelle Monáe
(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jdH2Sy-BlNE&frags=pl%2Cwn)

March 28: In-class activity

Week 13: Logging off (*No Reading Response*)

April 2: **Peer Editing/Final Project Workshop:** Rough draft of proposal
April 4: **Due**: Proposal, Good copy; Fun end of class activity