Communication 120/220
The Rise of Digital Culture
Spring, 2021
Lectures: T/Th 10:30-11:50, Pacific Time
Sections TBA

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Course Goals:

Since the first digital computers came on the scene in the late 1940s, we have witnessed the arrival of an astonishing array of digital technologies. Personal computers, the Internet, the World Wide Web, cell phones, social media, big data and artificial intelligence – all have appeared within a single lifetime. They have also emerged alongside a series of transformations in the American economy and American culture.

In this course, we’ll explore the dynamics of digital media and at the same time, the ways those dynamics shape – and have been shaped by – ongoing processes of social and cultural change. We will pay particular attention to the relationship between technological developments and three other large-scale historical changes: the rise of the postindustrial economy in the 1960s, of postmodern culture in the 1970s, and of the surveillance economy in the 2010s.

By the end of the course, you should have a sense of how these large-scale social and cultural shifts have shaped our uses of digital media and vice versa. You should be able to critique and synthesize the ways others have characterized the social impact of digital technologies. And most important of all, you should have begun to build your own theories of how digital systems and American culture interact.

Readings:

You should buy the following books online, ideally via Bookshop.org:


*Articles and selections from other books will be available as PDFs on Canvas or via links in this syllabus.*

*Recommended readings* are just that: recommended. I’ve listed them here as a way for you to dig deeper into topics that interest you.

**Assignments:**

**Please note:** Undergraduates (Comm 120) will be required to write only about the required readings. Graduate students (Comm 220) are required to incorporate at least one recommended reading into each of their essays.

**Synthetic Essays:** You will be asked to write three synthetic essays of 5-7 double-spaced pages (1500-2100 words). In these papers, you will draw on the course readings, class discussions, and where appropriate, your knowledge of digital media, to craft a focused argument in response to an assigned question.

Your essays will be due to your TA (undergraduates) or Professor Turner (graduate students) before the start of class on the following dates:

Essay 1: April 22

Essay 2: May 19

Essay 3: June 3

**Tests:** You will take two 90-minute exams, one covering the first half of the course and another covering the second half. These are meant to encourage you to keep up with the reading and to help me make sure you’re tracking the material.

Test 1: April 29-30

Test 2: June 3-5

**Expectations:**

**Participation:**

While formally a lecture course, our class meetings will in fact be quite interactive – even on Zoom! The course lectures will be synchronous but also recorded, so if you’re in another time zone, no problem. If you’re there in real time, I’ll look for you to come with the reading done and with the ability to participate in a class discussion.

To participate effectively, you should aim to speak in a way that moves a discussion forward and increases the learning for the whole group. Contributions can
include questions, insights, and responses to other comments. They can also include provocative mistakes. Being “wrong” but intellectually adventurous can often help jump-start everyone’s thinking!

I will also call on students by name (e.g., “cold call”). Please be assured this is NOT meant to embarrass you or put you on the spot! Rather, it’s a way for me to make sure we get lots of voices in the class discussion. That’s especially important in a field like media studies, since so many of us have different experiences with media.

One other thing: Please ask questions! Just raise your hand or use the “Raise Hand” function in Zoom. There is no such thing as a bad question. I guarantee that if you have a question, at least three of your fellow students do too!

Writing:

Your writing needs to come in on time and should represent your best work at every level. Papers that come in late or with errors of fact, grammar or spelling will be penalized. As ever, the Honor Code applies to all your work.

About These Strange Times We’re Living In:

As we all know, these are strange and difficult times. We’re not only working online together, but we’re working with the many repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic. All of us on the course team want to acknowledge the challenges you’re facing and want to help you learn. We’ll need your feedback as we go to help make that happen. Please feel free to reach out to me about how the class is going at any time via email. Or stop by my virtual office hours. And given the stresses we’re all under, I want to be sure you know that Stanford offers support through Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS), available 24 hours a day at 650-723-3785.

Grading:

Participation = 10%

Test 1 = 10%

Test 2 = 20%

Essay 1 = 20%

Essay 2 = 20%

Essay 3 = 20%

Course Schedule:

Part 1: CYBERNETIC AMERICA
Week 1:

Tuesday March 30: Introduction: What ARE digital media? And what’s culture got to do with them?

Required: NONE

Recommended:


Thursday April 1: Digital Technologies and Digital Culture

Required:


Week 2: Cybernetics and Cold War Politics

Tuesday April 6: Beginnings and How to Think About Them

Required:


Recommended:


**Thursday, April 8:** The Military-Industrial Complex & Centralized Control

**Required:**


**Recommended:**


**Week 3:** Cybernetics and the Counterculture

**Tuesday, April 13:** Cybernetic Democracy

**Required:**

- Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings*. Ch’s 1-3, 5. (on Canvas)

**Recommended:**


**Thursday, April 15:** The Cybernetic Counterculture

**Required:**

• Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture,* chapters 1-4, 8.

**Recommended:**


**PART 2: THE NETWORK SOCIETY**

**Week 4: Postindustrialism**

**Tuesday, April 20:** Postindustrialism

**Required:**


**Recommended:**


**Thursday, April 22:** Sociality on the Early Internet and Web 1.0
First essay due.

Required:


Recommended:


Week 5: Commons-based Peer Production

Tuesday, April 27: Peer Production

Required:


Recommended:


**Thursday, April 29: TEST ONE**

**Required:**

**Recommended:**


**Week 6: Computing and the Body**

**Tuesday, May 4: Working**

**Required:**


**Recommended:**


**Thursday, May 6: Self-Branding and Influencers**

**Required:**

Recommended:


PART 3: SURVEILLANCE CAPITALISM

Week 7: Surveillance Capitalism

Tuesday, May 11: What is surveillance capitalism?

Second essay due.

Required:


Recommended:

Thursday, May 13: Platforms and Labor

Required:


Recommended:


Week 8: Rule by Algorithm

Tuesday, May 18: Race after Digital Technology

Required:

- Benjamin, Ruha. *Race After Technology*, Chapters 1-3

Recommended:


**Thursday, May 20:** Algorithmic justice?

**Required:**


**Recommended:**

• Kate Crawford, 2016 'Can an Algorithm be Agonistic? Ten Scenes from Life in Calculated Publics', *Science, Technology & Human Values*, 41(1), 77-92

**Week 9:** The Self, Performing and Surveilled

**Tuesday, May 25:** The Politicized Self

**Required:**


**Recommended:**

• *This American Life*. January 23, 2015:“If You Don’t Have Anything Nice to Say, SAY IT IN ALL CAPS.” [https://www.thisamericallife.org/545/if-you-dont-have Anything-nice-to-say-say-it-in-all-caps](https://www.thisamericallife.org/545/if-you-dont-have-anything-nice-to-say-say-it-in-all-caps)

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**Thursday, May 27:** Who are we now? And what are we becoming?

**Required:** Watch the film “Eighth Grade”

**Recommended:**

• Ouellette, Laurie and Jacquelyn Arcy. “‘Live Through This’: Feminist Care of the Self 2.0.” *Frame* (2015) 28.1: 95-114


**Week 10:** Where to next?

**Tuesday, June 1:**

**Required:**


**Recommended:**


**Thursday, June 3:** TEST TWO.

*Third essay due.*