Visual Studies 502:
Tacit Media and Digital Culture

Fall 2018

Burrowes 132

Mon 2:30 - 5:30

Professor Grant Wythoff
(gxw63@psu.edu)
Office Hours by appointment

Course site:
https://gwijthoff.github.io/tacitmedia

Skip to the schedule. . .

Description

The luddites, the philosophers, even the tech evangelists all seem to be in agreement that living in a digitally networked world has changed something about the way we understand ourselves as both individuals and members of a public. In a moment when digital media are complicating some of our foundational assumptions about everything from democratic consensus to the nature of privacy, we need to take stock of the kinds of humanistic research that can put these developments into perspective.

This seminar will introduce a range of frameworks useful for thinking through the history, politics, ethics, and aesthetics of digital media. Units on emerging approaches to contemporary digital infrastructures (questions of selfhood, privacy, algorithms and inequality) will be paired with an overview of the most influential paradigms in media studies to guide us through these more contemporary issues. Concepts from our readings will be operationalized with weekly exercises that include tactics for or protecting personal data, blocking unwarranted surveillance, and leaving filter bubbles. Students will leave with the basic computational literacy necessary for informed scholarship that both critiques and utilizes digital media.

Guiding us through these wide-ranging subjects will be a structuring theme: "tacit media," or the background, habitual operation of our networked devices that we take for granted and that take us for granted in turn. How can boredom, distraction, and habit—-once celebrated by media theorists as "embodied intelligence" (Susan Sontag) and "tactile appropriation" (Walter Benjamin)—-continue to be tactical modes of engagement in our current media and political environment?

Workshop Series

Data Privacy, Democracy, and The Humanities

As part of our seminar, we will lead three workshops open to the undergraduate community on privacy, surveillance, and social media practices. Each workshop will pair hands-on exercises using students' own devices with concepts from our seminar readings. Undergrads will be given new perspectives on and tactics for issues that are vital to the health of the networked public sphere today.

Each event will involve 1) a brief presentation on the issue, 2) a visiting technologist from the Philadelphia area, and 3) a hands-on lesson. Together, we will determine together the way to best teach the importance of each issue to our undergraduate students.

- **November 5:** Jessa Lingel, Annenberg School of Communication, University of Pennsylvania
- Rachel Greenstadt, Privacy, Security, and Automation Laboratory, Drexel University
- Hannah Sassaman, Media Mobilizing Project and 2017 Soros Justice Fellow

Schedule

All readings will be provided in PDF excerpts. Book titles in red are recommended for you to purchase.

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wk 1 | Aug 20 | intro

Sara M. Watson, "Toward a Constructive Technology Criticism," Tow Center for Digital Journalism (October 2016) [html] | [pdf]

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wk 2 | Aug 27 | keywords 1

data ∘ **information** {: style="text-align: center"}

Geoffrey Nunberg, "Farewell to the Information Age," in *The Future of the Book,* ed. Geoffrey Nunberg (University of California Press, 1996), 103–83. [pdf]

Daniel Rosenberg, "Data Before the Fact," in *"Raw Data" Is an Oxymoron,* ed. Lisa Gitelman (MIT Press, 2013), 15–40. [pdf]

John Durham Peters, "Information: Notes Toward a Critical History," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 12, no. 2 (July 1, 1988): 9–23. [pdf]

Jonathan Gray, "Three Aspects of Data Worlds," *Krisis: Journal for Contemporary Philosophy* issue 1 (2018). [online]

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wk 3 | Sept 10 | habit 1

Wendy Chun, *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media* (MIT Press: 2016).

Felix Ravaisson, *Of Habit,* trans. Clare Carlisle and Mark Sinclair (Bloomsbury, 2009).

Matthew B. Crawford, *The World Beyond Your Head: On Becoming an Individual in an Age of Distraction* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016).

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wk 4 | Sept 17 | keywords 2

technology ∘ **technics** ∘ **media** {: style="text-align: center"}

Eric Schatzberg, "Technik Comes to America: Changing Meanings of Technology before 1930," *Technology and Culture* 47, no. 3 (2006): 486–512. [pdf]

John Guillory, "Genesis of the Media Concept," *Critical Inquiry* 36, no. 2 (January 1, 2010): 321–62. [pdf]

Clapperton Chakanetsa Mavhunga, "Introduction," *What Do Science, Technology, and Innovation Mean from Africa?* (MIT Press, 2017). [pdf]

Jacob Bigelow, *Elements of Technology: Taken Chiefly from a Course of Lectures Delivered at Cambridge on the Application of the Sciences to the Useful Arts* (Hilliard, Gray, Little, and Wilkins, 1829) [online]

further

John Durham Peters, "Understanding Media," in *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (University of Chicago Press, 2015), 13-52. [pdf]

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wk 5 | Sept 24 | apparatus ◦ stack

Frank Kessler, "Notes on *Dispositif*" (2007)

Jean-Louis Baudry, "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus," in Philip Rosen, ed. *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader* (1986)

Baudry, "The Apparatus: Metapsychological Approaches to the Impression of Reality in Cinema," in Ibid.

Jean-Louis Comolli, "Technique and Ideology: Camera, Perspective, Depth of Field," in Ibid.

Benjamin H. Bratton, *The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty* (2015)

Christian Sandvig, "Connection at Ewiiaapaayp Mountain: Indigenous Internet Infrastructure," in *Race After the Internet,* ed. Lisa Nakamura and Peter Chow-White (Routledge, 2012), p. 168-200. [pdf]

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wk 6 | Oct 1 | keywords 3

digital ◦ analog ◦ hardware ◦ software

Ralph W. Gerard, "Some of the Problems Concerning Digital Notions in the Central Nervous System," in *Cybernetics: The Macy Conferences 1946-1953. The Complete Transactions,* ed. Claus Pias (Diaphanes, 2016 [1950]), 171–202. [pdf]

John Haugeland, "Analog and Analog," *Philosophical Topics* 12, no. 1 (Spring 1981): 213–25. [pdf]

Luciano Floridi, "Against Digital Ontology," *Synthese* 168, no. 1 (2009): 151–78. [pdf]

Friedrich Kittler, "There Is No Software," in *The Truth of the Technological World: Essays on the Genealogy of Presence* (Stanford University Press, 2013), 219–29. [pdf]

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wk 7 | Oct 8 | infrastructure ∘ organizing

Bertolt Brecht, "Radio as an Apparatus of Communication: A Talk on the Function of Radio," *Screen* 20, no. 3–4 (December 1979 [1932]): 24–28.

Hans Magnus Enzensberger, "Constituents of a Theory of the Media," *New Left Review* I 64 (December 1970): 13-36.

Jean Baudrillard, "Toward a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign," *SubStance* 5, no. 15 (1976): 111–16.

Zeynep Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest* (2017)

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wk 8 | Oct 15 | determinism ∘ affordances

John Durham Peters, " 'You Mean My Whole Fallacy Is Wrong': On Technological Determinism," *Representations* 140 (Fall 2017): 10–26.

Matthew Fuller, "The Forbidden Pleasures of Media Determining," in *Media After Kittler,* ed. Eleni Ikoniadou and Scott Wilson (Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 95–110.

introduction to *The Social Construction of Technological Systems*

James J. Gibson, "The Theory of Affordances," in *Perceiving, Acting, and Knowing,* ed. Robert Shaw and John Bransford (University of Michigan Press, 1977)

Jenny L. Davis and James B. Chouinard, "Theorizing Affordances: From Request to Refuse," *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society,* June 2017

B.P. Bloomfield, Y. Latham, and T. Vurdubakis, "Bodies, Technologies and Action Possibilities: When Is an Affordance?," *Sociology* 44, no. 3 (June 18, 2010): 415–33.

Ian Hutchby, "Technologies, Texts and Affordances," *Sociology* 35, no. 2 (May 1, 2001): 441–56.

further

Ian Hutchby, "Affordances and the Analysis of Technologically Mediated Interaction: A Response to Brian Rappert," *Sociology* 37, no. 3 (August 1, 2003): 581–89.

Brian Rappert, "Technologies, Texts and Possibilities: A Reply to Hutchby," *Sociology* 37, no. 3 (August 1, 2003): 565–80

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wk 9 | Oct 22 | habit 2

Taina Bucher, "Affective Landscapes: Everyday Encounters with Algorithms," in *If. . . Then: Algorithmic Power and Politics* (2018), 93-117.

Alexandra Schwartz, "Improving Ourselves to Death," *New Yorker,* Jan 15, 2008.

Carl Cederström and André Spicer, *The Wellness Syndrome* (Polity, 2015).

Svend Brinkmann, *Stand Firm: Resisting the Self-Improvement Craze,* (Polity, 2017).

wk 10 | Oct 29 | silicon valley

Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism* (University of Chicago Press, 2006)

Claire L. Evans, *Broad Band: The Untold Story of the Women who Made the Internet*

wk 11 | Nov 5 | algorithms ∘ inequality

Virginia Eubanks, *Automating Inequality: How High-Tech Tools Profile, Police, and Punish the Poor* (2018)

Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (2018)

wk 12 | Nov 12 | privacy

Sarah E. Igo, *The Known Citizen: A History of Privacy in Modern America* (2018)

Woodrow Hartzog, *Privacy's Blueprint: The Battle to Control the Design of New Technologies* (2018)

Sarah Jeong, "You Can't Escape Data Surveillance In America"

wk 13 | Nov 26 | the public

Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (2002)

Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (1962/1989)

Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (1983)

Noortje Marres, "Why We Can't Have Our Facts Back," Engaging Science, Technology, and Society 4, no. 0 (July 24, 2018): 423–43.

wk 14 | Dec 3 | technology and the humanities

Chad Wellmon, draft essay on history of technical and humanistic education

Nick Srncek, *Platform Capitalism*

Nick Dyer-Witheford, *Cyber-Proletariat: Global Labour in the Digital Vortex*