CPLS UN3770:   
Introduction to Digital Media  
Spring 2017  
[Room] | Tue/Thur, 1:10 - 2:25

  
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[**Skip to the schedule…**](#schedule)

# Description

Over the past decade, digital media have made strange the very fabric of our conversations, movements, aesthetic experiences, and political consciousness. These changes were prepared for by information theorists in the 1940s, cyberneticians in the 1950s and 60s, and the architects of networked computation in the 1970s and 80s. But only now have we begun to live out the futures that were dreamed of by these technologists. Today with our digital devices, we experience their dreams as habits, beliefs, and compulsions.

This class will introduce students to the history and theory of digital media. We will begin by examining the historical roots of the concept of "information," and then proceed with units on each of the following key concepts in digital studies: platforms, networks and power, code, interface, and theories of the self. Each of these concepts will be explored through a comparative framework, using readings from across the disciplines and hands-on lab activities. We will think historically (how have media been experienced as "new" at different moments in time?), theoretically (how exactly do we address "medium" as an object of study), and tactically (how can we use our local experience of digital devices as a framework for thinking global networks?).

# Grade breakdown

**20% attendance, participation, reading**

Including potential reading quizzes and in-class activities.

**20% writing exercises**

Students are required to post four total writing assignments to the CourseWorks blog by 6:00 am Tuesday during weeks 2, 4, 6, and 10 of the semester (they are marked in the schedule below). These updates can take the form of, among other things, a) an explanation, questioning, or complication of the week's readings, b) an update on your final project, or c) an interesting document, resource, or text (primary or secondary) that you've found related to the week's readings. There are no length requirements. This is simply a means of reading and thinking alongside one another as we work through these texts.

**30% midterm**

A written midterm exam, due to my inbox on the Friday before spring break (**March 10**), will consist of a selection of conceptual keywords that have emerged throughout the semester. You will be asked to define these keywords in brief explanatory essays. Please note that we're not looking for a dictionary definition, but rather an elucidation of the term as we have used it in the context of the class: in our discussions, in our readings, and in our individual research. You will be expected to cite relevant authors (though not exact quotes or page numbers) as well as class discussions.

**30% final paper / project**

A final paper of 8-10 pages (due **May #**) will engage with theoretical questions raised throughout the course and readings both from the syllabus and potentially of the student's own choosing. Because so much of the grade rests on this final paper, I encourage you to use your CourseWorks writing assignments to rehearse your arguments and speak with me throughout the term about your ideas. Potential essay topics will be offered in advance. The student may also choose her own topic.

# Policies

Weekly attendance in class is expected. If you must be absent from a session for a serious reason, then you should contact me before the missed class and explain why you will not be in attendance. Cases of continuous, unexplained absence will result in a penalty to your grade or your ineligibility to complete the course. Attendance and active participation in discussions are part of fulfilling the course requirements. I will notify an advising dean if you have three or more unwarranted absences. No extensions will be given except in extreme (and verifiable) circumstances. These circumstances include reasons of health and extenuating circumstances, such as death of a family member.

Because we will be conducting some hands-on activities in class, you are asked to bring your laptop to class. Students must practice good screen etiquette: keep it to the side and don't stare too long.

# Schedule

*Note: All readings are to be completed prior to the Tuesday session, so that students are prepared to work with the texts in class on both Tuesdays and Thursdays.*

## What are digital media?

**Week 1**

January 17, 19

Judy Wajcman, *Pressed for Time: The Acceleration of Life in Digital Capitalism,* Introduction; Working With Constant Connectivity; Time to Talk: Intimacy Through Technology (pp. 1-13, 87-110, 137-162)

**Week 2** (First writing exercise due)

January 24, 26

Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology,* Introduction; Enchantment; No Need to Call (pp. 1-22, 67-82, 187-210)

## Platforms

**Week 3**

January 31, February 2

Jonathan Sterne, *MP3: The Meaning of a Format,* Format Theory; Perceptual Technics; Is Music a Thing? (pp. 1-60, 184-226)

**Week 4** (Second writing exercise due)

February 7, February 9

Jennifer Gabrys, *Digital Rubbish: A Natural History of Electronics,* Introduction; Silicon Elephants; Media in the Dump (pp. 1-44, 127-146)

## Networks and Power

**Week 5**

February 14, February 16

Bernard Harcourt, *Exposed: Desire and Disobedience in the Digital Age,* The Expository Society; The Mortification of the Self; The Steel Mesh (pp. 1-28, 217-250)

**Week 6** (Third writing exercise due)

February 21, February 23

Nicole Starosielski, *The Undersea Network,* Introduction; Pressure Point: Turbulent Ecologies of the Cable Landing; Cabled Depths: The Aquatic Afterlives of Signal Traffic (pp. 1-25, 138-169, 198-224)

Giorgio Agamben, *What is an Apparatus*? (25pp total)

## Interface

**Week 7**

February 28, March 2

Alexander Galloway, *The Interface Effect,* Introduction; The Unworkable Interfact (pp. 1-53)

**Week 8** (Midterm)

February 7, March 9

Anne Friedberg, *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft,* Introduction; The Screen (1-24, 149-181)

*Spring Break: February 13-17*

## Code

**Week 9**

March 21, March 23

Nick Montfort et al., *10 PRINT CHR$(205.5+RND(1)); : GOTO 10* (work through entire book)

**Week 10** (Fourth writing exercise)

March 28, March 30

Orit Halpern, *Beautiful Data,* Introduction; Governing (1-38, 199-238)

## Theories of the Self

**Week 11**

April 4, April 6

Wendy Chun, *Updating to Remain the Same,* Introduction and all interstitial sections, total around 50pp

**Week 12** (Draft of final project due)

April 11, April 13

Gilbert Simondon, “The Genesis of the Individual" (19p total)

Marcel Mauss, from *Techniques, Technology, Civilisation,* Techniques of the Body; Technology; Techniques and Technology (pp. 77-140, 147-154)

## Review

**Week 13**

April 18, April 20

**Week 14**

April 25, April 27

# Academic Integrity

Columbia's intellectual community relies on academic integrity and responsibility as the cornerstone of its work. Graduate students are expected to exhibit the highest level of personal and academic honesty as they engage in scholarly discourse and research. In practical terms, you must be responsible for the full and accurate attribution of the ideas of others in all of your research papers and projects; you must be honest when taking your examinations; you must always submit your own work and not that of another student, scholar, or internet source. Graduate students are responsible for knowing and correctly utilizing referencing and bibliographical guidelines. When in doubt, consult your professor. Citation and plagiarism-prevention resources can be found at the GSAS page on Academic Integrity and Responsible Conduct of Research (http://gsas.columbia.edu/academic-integrity).

Failure to observe these rules of conduct will have serious academic consequences, up to and including dismissal from the university. If a faculty member suspects a breach of academic honesty, appropriate investigative and disciplinary action will be taken following Dean's Discipline procedures (http://gsas.columbia.edu/content/disciplinary-procedures).

# Disabilities Accommodations

If you have been certified by Disability Services (DS) to receive accommodations, please either bring your accommodation letter from DS to your professor’s office hours to confirm your accommodation needs, or ask your liaison in GSAS to consult with your professor. If you believe that you may have a disability that requires accommodation, please contact Disability Services at 212-854-2388 or disability@columbia.edu.

Important: To request and receive an accommodation you must be certified by DS.

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