

Shifting Voices: Media and Technology in 1990s America

AMS 370 / Fall 2018 / Unique # 31217

Tues/Thurs 12:30-2:00, BUR 436B

Instructor: Dr. Brendan Gaughen // bgaughen@utexas.edu

Office hours: BUR 412 // Mon 11:30-2:00; Wed 11:30-2:00

This course takes a critical look at the social and cultural impacts of the changing landscapes of media and advances in technology that occurred between the late 1980s and early 2000s, a time span that brought fundamental shifts in the ways information is transmitted and received. Particularly in the United States, this decade saw the rise of cable news, the mainstreaming of “marginal” culture, the fragmentation of mass audiences into increasingly narrow categories, and an unprecedented concentration of corporate media that occurred alongside the proliferation of new media outlets. Perhaps most profoundly, the exponential growth in the use of computers and the internet disrupted traditional forms of community as it created new ones, providing a greater voice for some groups while often silencing others. Paying attention to the historic, economic, and geopolitical context of the time period, this course turns the lens on media and technology themselves, examining how particular developments and shifts continue to impact American culture and society today.

This course carries the Writing Flag. Writing Flag courses are designed to give students experience with writing in an academic discipline. In this class, you can expect to write regularly during the semester, complete substantial writing projects, and receive feedback from me to help you improve your writing. You should therefore expect a substantial portion of your grade to come from your written work. Writing Flag classes meet the Core Communications objectives of Critical Thinking, Communication, Teamwork, and Personal Responsibility, established by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. This course also carries the Independent Inquiry flag. Independent Inquiry courses are designed to engage you in the process of inquiry over the course of a semester, providing you with the opportunity for independent investigation of a question, problem, or project related to your major. You should therefore expect a substantial portion of your grade to come from the independent investigation and presentation of your own work.

COURSE GOALS

This class has three principal content-based objectives.

- 1) Greater understanding of the changes in how people have produced and consumed information in the recent past
- 2) Greater understanding of how varying perspectives shape the remembering and retelling of history
- 3) Greater understanding of the plurality of viewpoints and experiences of Americans since the 1980s

In addition to learning about recent historical events, this course has several skills-based objectives that you will develop over the course of the semester. These skills will not only be useful over the course of your academic career, but are essential in the workplace and to the development of an active, informed, and engaged citizenry.

- 1) Writing skills. We will learn how to cogently craft an argument based on specific evidence and how to respond to counter arguments. We will also learn how to craft clear thesis statements and organize an argument effectively.
- 2) Respectful discussion. Because this course deals with some heated political topics, we will learn how to rationally and respectfully disagree with colleagues with whom we might have differences of opinion.
- 3) Close reading and analysis. We will learn how to interrogate and analyze texts that carry specific and often oblique messages to their audiences.

COURSE POLICIES

Readings. All required texts will be in the course reader, available for purchase at Jenn's Copies (2518 Guadalupe St). I encourage each of you to be active readers and interact with the texts by underlining, highlighting, and engaging with the texts as you see fit. Please bring the reader to class each day ready to discuss the assigned texts, ideally with a specific question or talking point in mind. It should go without saying that in a discussion-based course, showing up to class having done the reading is essential.

Attendance. This class is discussion-oriented so attendance is imperative. Missing an excess of four class days will result in a reduced final grade. Explained absences for religious holidays, sanctioned travel related to sports or military service, or other absences you can plan in advance will not necessarily count against you if at least one week's notice is given. Unforeseen absences, such as illness or family emergency, will be excused once proper documentation is provided, at my discretion. The attendance policy will take effect starting Tuesday, September 11.

Office hours. I strongly encourage each of you to come to office hours at least once (preferably more) during the semester so you can get the most out of the course. This is an opportunity for you to go over assignment expectations, difficult aspects of our readings, and seek feedback on your written work before you turn it in. Or just come by to say hello.

Devices. Laptops and tablets in class must be on silent and may not be used for any reason other than course-related material. I trust you all will use technology responsibly, but failure to abide by this policy may result in the revocation of in-class laptop/tablet privileges.

Communication. Course-related announcements, relevant or interesting links, and other important information will be sent to you via email, so please check your email regularly. I will respond to email within 24 hours of receipt unless unforeseen circumstances arise.

Discussion. This course is built upon discussing topics that may be controversial and difficult. I encourage all of you to share your informed opinions, feelings, and experiences, and to engage in conversations that invite productive and respectful disagreement. As such, we all must maintain respect for the classroom environment and for our colleagues: no name-calling, slurs, interrupting, or otherwise fashioning a hostile environment. Be willing to have your own points of view challenged and be willing to respectfully challenge others. The most productive and exciting intellectual growth emerges from engaging with diverse opinions.

Course website. A copy of this syllabus, instructions for individual assignments, and announcements will be posted to the course Canvas site.

Late work. Late work will receive a deduction of one letter grade per class day past the due date. Extensions will not be granted unless under extraordinary circumstances.

Written assignments. All assignments must be types with 1-inch margins, 12 point font (Times New Roman). Use a standard citation style (e.g. Chicago Style, MLA) to cite your sources when applicable. All papers must be turned in as hard copies at the beginning of class on their due dates (I prefer not to

have papers emailed to me). Somehow, printers always malfunction 10 minutes before papers are due. Please plan accordingly.

Changes to the syllabus. I may slightly modify the course schedule, assigned readings, and due dates as I see fit. You will be alerted to these changes in class and/or via email.

Undergraduate Writing Center. Given this course's writing requirements, I strongly encourage you to take advantage of the resources available to you at the Undergraduate Writing Center on campus (PCL 2.330, <http://uwc.utexas.edu>).

Students with disabilities. Any student with a documented disability who requires academic accommodations should contact Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) at (512) 471-6259 (voice) or 1-866-329-3986 (video phone). Faculty members are not required to provide accommodations without an official accommodation letter from SSD.

Academic honesty. In an effort to create an atmosphere of mutual respect and integrity in the classroom, cheating and plagiarism of any kind will not be tolerated. Cheating or plagiarism will result in an automatic zero for the assignment and will be reported to the Dean of Students. University policies regarding academic dishonesty available at http://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/sjs/acadint_whatish.php.

Grading system. This course follows a plus/minus grading system:

A 93-100 / A- 90-92 / B+ 87-89 / B 83-86 / B- 80-82 / C+ 77-79
C 73-76 / C- 70-72 / D+ 67-69 / D 63-66 / D- 60-62 / F 0-59

TL;DR version: show up to class prepared to discuss the readings, be respectful of each other, put phones away, submit assignments on time, show up to class consistently, don't plagiarize.

Two-page reading responses (5)	30%	Three due by Oct 25; two due by Dec 6
Final paper proposal (1 pg.)	5%	Due Oct 4
Annotated bibliography (3-4 pgs.)	15%	Due Nov 6
Zine contribution/reflection (3-4 pgs.)	15%	Due Nov 15
Final paper (8-10 pgs.)	30%	Due Dec 6
Attendance/participation	5%	Assessed at end of semester

→ → → COURSE SCHEDULE ← ← ←

Thu Aug 30 // Introduction to course; what is American studies?

Reminder: purchase course reader at Jenn's Copies, 2518 Guadalupe

Social critiques

Tue Sep 4 // Diminishing public discourse

Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin, 1985), chapter 5 "The Peek-a-Boo World" and chapter 7 "Now...This."

Thu Sep 6 // Front lines on the cultural battleground

James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991) chapter 9, "Media and the Arts."

Politics

Tue Sep 11 // As seen on TV: The Persian Gulf War

Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, The AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) chapter 4, "Spectacles of Memory and Amnesia: Remembering the Persian Gulf War."

Thu Sep 13 // President Clinton, the 1992 election, and the media

Richard Levine, "I Feel Your Pain," *Mother Jones*, Jul/Aug 1993.

Possibilities of the connected world

Tue Sep 18 // Web 1.0: community

Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1993), introduction.

Thu Sep 20 // Web 2.0: collaboration

Clay Shirky, *Cognitive Surplus: Creativity and Generosity in a Connected Age* (New York: Penguin, 2010), chapter 1 "Gin, Television, and Cognitive Surplus."

Realities of the connected world

Tue Sep 25 // Dialing up the electronic frontier

- 1) John Barlow, "Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace."
- 2) Amanda Hess, "Why Does Hate Thrive Online?" *Slate*, 10/16/15.
- 3) Barbara Kantrowitz, Debra Rosenberg, Patricia King, "Men, Women & Computers," *Newsweek*, 5/16/94.
- 4) Colin Beckles, "Black Struggles in Cyberspace: Cyber-Segregation and Cyber-Nazis" in Michael Petracca and Madeleine Sorapure, eds., *Common Culture: Reading and Writing About American Popular Culture* (Upper Saddle River NJ: Prentice Hall, 2001), 379-390. **NOTE: this reading contains racial slurs**

Thu Sep 27 // The dot com bubble

- 1) Jack Willoughby, "Burning Up," *Barron's*, 3/20/00.
- 2) Laurie Freeman, "Pets.com Socks it to Competitors," *Advertising Age*, 11/29/99.
- 3) "The Puppet That Ate a Dot-Com," *Slate Moneybox*, 6/6/00.
- 4) Pui-Wing Tam and Mylene Mangalindan, "Pets.com Will Shut Down, Citing Insufficient Funding," *Wall Street Journal*, 11/8/00.

Selling subcultures

Tue Oct 2 // Nevermind: rock-n-roll after Nirvana

- 1) Rick Marin, "Grunge: A Success Story," *New York Times*, 11/15/92.
- 2) Steve Albini, "The Problem with Music," *The Baffler*, Nov 93.

Thu Oct 4 // Love and theft: white appropriation of hip hop culture

Charles Aaron, "What the White Boy Means When He Says Yo" in Raquel Cepeda and Nelson George, eds., *And It Don't Stop: The Best American Hip-Hop Journalism of the Last 25 Years* (New York: Faber & Faber, 2004), 212-237.

DUE: final paper proposal

Expressing the self

Tue Oct 9 // Zines, self-expression and personal media

- 1) Stephen Duncombe, *Notes from Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture* (London: Verso, 1997) portion of chapter 1 "Zines," 1-15.

- 2) Mary Celeste Kearney, *Girls Make Media* (New York: Routledge, 2006) portion of chapter 4 "Grrrl Zines: Exploring Identity, Transforming Girls' Written Culture," 135-148.
- 3) Aaron Cometbus, "On Zines," *Cometbus* issue 29, 1993.

Thu Oct 10 // Culture jamming

Naomi Klein, *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies* (New York: Picador, 2002), chapter 12 "Culture Jamming: Ads Under Attack."

Radio

Tue Oct 16 // Talk radio

Susan Douglas, *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), chapter 11 "Talk Talk."

Thu Oct 18 // Consolidating the airwaves

Eric Boehlert, "Radio's Big Bully," *Salon.com*, 4/30/01.

Blurred lines between reality and entertainment

Tue Oct 23 // Fox News, MSNBC, and newertainment

- 1) Michael Dresser, "Microsoft, NBC to offer news joint venture," *Baltimore Sun*, 12/15/95.
- 2) Megan Garber, "The Revolution Begins Here," *The Atlantic*, 7/16/12.
- 3) David Folkenflik, "The Birth of Fox News," *Salon.com*, 10/19/13.

Thu Oct 25 // Keepin' it real: The "Real" World and the decline of scripted television

- 1) Chuck Klosterman, "What Happens When People Stop Being Polite," from *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs: A Low Culture Manifesto* (New York: Scribner, 2004), 26-41.
- 2) Steven Stark, "The Oprah Winfrey Show and the Talk-Show Furor" in Maasik and Solomon, eds., *Signs of Life in the USA: Readings on Popular Culture for Writers* (Boston: Bedford/St Martin's Press, 2000), 241-248.

DUE: first three reading responses

Industry, Inc.

Tue Oct 30 // The collapse of the music industry

Stephen Witt, "The Man Who Broke the Music Business," *New Yorker*, 4/27/15.

Thu Nov 1 // "Indie" film

Alisa Perren, *Indie, Inc: Miramax and the Transformation of Hollywood in the 1990s* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013) chapter 6 "Majors, Indies, Independents: The Rise of a Three-Tier System, Winter 1996 – Spring 1997."

Technological anxieties

Tue Nov 6 // Neo-luddites

Unabomber – *Manifesto* (selections) paragraphs 1-5, 111-113, 121-135, 167-179, 207-212

DUE: annotated bibliography

Thu Nov 8 // Apocalypse soon

- 1) Richard Lacayo, "The End of the World as We Know It," *Time*, 1/18/99.
- 2) Scott Kirsner, "Are We Headed for a Global Y2K Crisis?" *CNN.com*, 3/4/99.
- 3) "Watching for the Y2K Bug," *New York Times* Opinion Page, 12/30/99.
- 4) Ruth Bashinsky, Michele McPhee, Lisa Colangelo, "Fearing the Effects of the Y2K Bug, Families Stock up on Supplies Before the New Year," *New York Daily News*, 12/27/99.

Social worlds

Tue Nov 13 // Social media

Tom Standage, *Writing on the Wall: Social Media, the First 2000 Years* (New York: Bloomsburg, 2013), chapter 11 "The Rebirth of Social Media: From ARPANET to Facebook" and epilogue.

Thu Nov 15 // Alternative worlds

Tom Boellstorff, *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), chapter 2 "History."

DUE: zine contribution and written reflection

Almost done with the semester

Tue Nov 20 // To be determined – probably watching a film in class

Thu Nov 22 // NO CLASS – THANKSGIVING HOLIDAY

Panics and disasters

Tue Nov 27 // Mor(t)al Kombat: the moral panic of violent video games

- 1) Tristan Donovan, *Replay: The History of Video Games* (East Sussex: Yellow Ant, 2010) chapter 18, "Mortal Kombat"
- 2) David Kushner, *Masters of Doom: How Two Guys Created an Empire and Transformed Pop Culture* (New York: Random House, 2004) chapter 10, "The Doom Generation."

Thu Nov 29 // Disaster films

- 1) Paul Arthur, "Unnatural Disasters" *Film Comment* Vol. 34 No. 4 (Jul 98), 72-75.
- 2) Matthew Barrett Gross and Mel Gilles, "How Apocalyptic Thinking Prevents Us from Taking Political Action," *The Atlantic*, 4/23/12.

The recent past

Tue Dec 4 // Mass media after 9/11

- 1) Marita Sturken, *Tourists of History: Memory, Kitsch, and Consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), portion of chapter 1 "Consuming Fear and Selling Comfort," 51-70.
- 2) Lindsay Ellis, "Movies, patriotism, and cultural amnesia: tracing pop culture's relationship to 9/11," *Vox.com*, 9/11/17.

Thu Dec 6 // In-class celebration: There will be snacks!

Short discussion, distribution of completed zine, course evaluations

DUE: remaining two reading responses

DUE: final paper

This syllabus is subject to change during the course of the semester, if necessary