Course Description

> *We are all mired in historical circumstance. Some of us are knee-deep, and some of us are neck-deep. If you want to think seriously about the future, you have to think historically. There isn't any other way to do it. Otherwise you'll mistake the accidents of our current situation for some iron-clad law of the cosmos. You need to be aware of longer-term trends, how things play out. History never repeats itself, but it does kind of rhyme. Bruce Sterling, LoneStarCon 2 interview (1997)*

When you hear the word "technology," you may think of your computer or smart phone. You probably don't think of the alphabet, the book, or the printing press: but each of these was a technological innovation that changed dramatically how we communicate and perhaps even how we think. Literature has always developed in tandem with—and often in direct response to—the development of new media technologies—e.g. moveable type, the steam press, the telegraph, radio, film, television, the internet. Our primary objective in Technologies of Text will be to develop ideas about the ways that such innovations shape our understanding of classic and contemporary texts, as well as the people who write, read, and interpret them. We will compare our historical moment with previous periods of textual and technological upheaval. Many debates that seem unique to the twenty-first century—over privacy, intellectual property, information overload, and textual authority—are but new iterations of familiar battles in the histories of technology, new media, and literature. Through the semester we will get hands-on experience with textual technologies new and old through labs in letterpress printing, bibliography, digital editing, and computational text analysis, including through field trips to museums, libraries, and archives in the Boston area.

Course Objectives

By the end of this course, you will:

1. Understand technology and new media as historical rather than exclusively recent phenomenon;
2. Analyze books and other textual technologies as material objects and within their social contexts;
3. Experiment with a range of textual technologies, both historical and modern, reflecting on how these hands-on experiences lead to new humanistic understanding;
4. Examine the ways practices of reading, writing, and publishing interacted, thematically and materially, with contemporaneous technological innovations;
5. Draw parallels between literary studies and diverse fields such as information science, computer science, communications, and media studies;
6. Develop emerging proficiency exploring textual data with the computer programming language R;
7. and Create original, public, creative research projects that consciously use media to convey their messages.

Acknowledgements

This course has been developed over many years and for too long didn't include acknowledgements—which is to say I cannot trace all the teachers I should thank for their models. I owe many of the ideas here (and some of the lab assignments) to classes I've taken at the Rare Book School at the University of Virginia, and in particular Michael F. Suarez's "Teaching the History of the Book" course. I have also been inspired by syllabi from many other generous scholars, including Whitney Trettien, Meredith McGill, Kari Kraus, Alan Liu, Matthew Kirschenbaum, and Lori Emerson.

Course Policies

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Shadow Syllabus

Really, all I *want* to write here can be found in Sonya Huber’s Shadow Syllabus. There is a lot of truth in this list for your college careers and beyond. Read it and believe it.

- Meeting Days: Tuesday-Friday
- Location: Barrs Room (472 Holmes Hall)
- Professor: Ryan Cordell
- Cordell Email: r.cordell@northeastern.edu
- Cordell Office: Nightingale Hall 415
- Cordell Office Hours: Thursday 10am-noon, Friday 11:30am-12:30pm, and by appointment

9:50-11:30am Section

- Practicum Student: Bill Quinn

1:35-3:15 Section

- Practicum Student: David Medina

Required Texts

The majority of our readings will be available online or through a password protected, digital course packet (I will give you the password for this zip file in class). We will read a few books, however, which you will need to purchase:

- James Gleick, *The Information: A History, A Theory, A Flood*, Vintage (2012).
- Sydney Padua, *The Thrilling Adventures of Lovelace and Babbage: The (Mostly) True Story of the First Computer*, Pantheon (2015).
- Emily St. John Mandel, *Station Eleven*, Vintage (2015).

Class Schedule

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    - Tuesday, March 13: A Pocket Universe
    - Friday, March 16: Text as Data
    - Tuesday, March 20: Machine Writing
    - Friday, March 23: Open Lab
- Chapter 4 ☛ Memory
    - Tuesday, March 27: Obsolescence
    - Friday, March 30: The Book is Dead (Long Live the Book)
    - Tuesday, April 3: Processing Words
    - Friday, April 6: An Index of All Knowledge
    - Tuesday, April 10: Because Survival is Insufficient
    - Friday, April 13: The Museum of Civilization
    - Tuesday, April 17: Book Futures
- Epilogue ☛ ☛ ☛ ☛ ☛
    - Friday, April 20

Reading Due Dates

You should complete the readings listed under a given class session before that class begins. Any in-class assignments we complete will assume you have fully prepared all required readings for that day.

Course Reading Packet

Most of our readings this semester are freely available online. There are a few books you will need to purchase—see the required texts—a few you will need to download in this password-protect, zipped course packet. I will share the password to expand this zip file in class on the first day of class.

A Key to Alerts

These red alert boxes signal a change of our typical schedule, such as meeting in a location outside the classroom or altered office hours during the week.

These orange alert boxes signal an assignment due date.

These information boxes signal an in-class lab that we will work on together. As the semester progresses I will add links to the lab assignments to these boxes. Your fieldbook reports are due within a week of a lab session, or the final lab session for those which extend through multiple class sessions, as indicated by the presence of letters (e.g. 5a and 5b).

Preface ☛ re:Mediation

Tuesday, January 9: Romancing the Book

Introduction to the course and to each other

Friday, January 12: Media Messages

Read:

- Marshall McLuhan, “The Medium is the Message”
- Alan Liu, “Imagining the New Media Encounter”

Chapter 1 ☛ Inscription

During the week below I will be traveling from Thursday, January 18-Saturday, January 20. I will not hold my usual office hours this week. Our practicum students will lead the workshop on Friday, January 19.

Tuesday, January 16: Orality & Literacy

Read:

- James Gleick, *The Information*, prologue-chapter 2 (pg. 3-50)
- Octavia Butler, "Speech Sounds"

Friday, January 19: Making Language Visible

Prof. Cordell away today; practicum students will lead this lab at the MFA.

Meet at the Museum of Fine Arts group entrance: off Museum Road on the west side of the building.

Read:

- Christopher Woods, "Visible Language: The Earliest Writing Systems"

Tuesday, January 23: Manuscript

Lab 3: Simulating the Scriptorium

Read:

- Bede, "The Story of Cædmon"
- Ælfric, Preface to his translation of Genesis.
- Geoffrey Chaucer, "Chaucer's Words to His Scrivener"
- Excerpts from Johannes Trithemius, *In Praise of Scribes*

Watch:

- Getty Museum, "Making Manuscripts" (6:19)

This week I will not hold my usual Thursday office hours. I will hold extra hours on Wednesday, January 24 from 10-12.

Friday, January 26: Vivifying Media

Tuesday, January 30: Containing Language

Read:

- William A. Johnson, “Bookrolls as Media”
- Lionel Casson, “From Roll to Codex”
- Bonnie Mak, “Architectures of the Page”

Browse:

- John Morph, "The Page as Interface"

Chapter 2 ☛ Impression

Friday, February 2: Book Tech

Lab 5: Thinking with the Codex

Meet in the Northeastern Archives & Special Collections, 92 Snell Library (in the basement)

Read:

- Adam J. Hooks, "How to Read Like a Renaissance Reader"
- Browse the following (pick 3-4 to focus on):
  - Codex Sinaiticus
  - Lindisfarne Gospel
  - Book of Kells (this may take awhile to load)
  - Diamond Sutra
  - Sultan Baybars' Qur'an
  - The Golden Haggadah
  - The Sherborne Missal
  - The Gutenberg Bible
  - The Nuremburg Chronicle
  - Codex Arundel
  - *De Humani Corporis Fabrica*
  - Shakespeare First Folio
  - Mamusse wunneetupanatamwe Up-Biblium God naneeswe

    - Nukkone Testament kah wonk VVusku Testament
    - The Mercator Atlas of Europe
    - Nature Printing
    - *Birds of America*

Tuesday, February 6: Into the Matrix

Lab 6a: Preparing to Print

Read:

- James Gleick, *The Information*, chapter 3 (pg. 51-77)
- Ann Blair, "Introduction" from *Too Much To Know*

Watch:

- Stephen Fry, *The Machine That Made Us* (This video is about 1 hour long; plan accordingly!)

Optional, but quite useful:

- “Letterpress Printing”

- “How to Use a Composing Stick”

Friday, February 9: The Business of Print

Lab 6b: Planning Your Print Project

Read:

- Sarah Werner, "Finding Women in the Printing Shop"
- Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (pg. 7-57, ending at "The affairs of the Revolution occasion'd the interruption.")
- Lisa Gitelman, "Print Culture (Other Than Codex): Job Printing and Its Importance"

Watch (Optional)

- Tested Learns the Craft of Letterpress Printing

Tuesday, February 13: Typecasting

Lab 7a: Composing & Imposing

Read:

- Chris Gayomali, "How Typeface Influences the Way We Read and Think"
- Lindsay Lynch, "How I Came to Love the En Space"
- Pick at least one font from the Kern Your Enthusiasm series and read its blog post. You will be reporting on your chosen article in class so read it carefully.

(Optional) Watch:

- *Helvetica* movie trailer

Friday, February 16: A Mechanical Mind

Lab 7b: Pulling the Press!

Read:

- Ellen Cushman, "'We're Taking the Genius of Sequoyah into This Century': The Cherokee Syllabary, Peoplehood, and Perseverance"
- Articles about the Victoria Press
    - M. M. H., "A Ramble with Mrs. Grundy: A Visit to the Victoria

Printing Press," *English Woman's Journal* (1860)
    - "The Victoria Press," *Illustrated London News* (15 June 1861)
    - Emily Faithfull, "Women Compositors," *English Woman's Journal* (1861)

Tuesday, February 20: Media & Moral Panic

Read:

- Frank Furedi, "The Media's First Moral Panic"
- Anna North, "When Novels Were Bad for You"
- 19th-Century Commentaries on Novel Reading:
    - "On Novel Reading" (from *The Guardian; or Youth's Religious Instructor*, 1820)
    - "Devouring Books" (from the *American Annals of Education*, 1835)
    - M.M. Backus, "Novel Writers and Publishers" (from *Christian Parlor Magazine*, 1844)

Friday, February 23: Format

Lab 8: Deciphering Physical Books

Read:

- Jane Austen, Letters to her sister Cassandra (these are in order so you can read down from the first link to the next two letters):
    - Friday, January 29
    - Thursday, February 4
    - February ?? 1813
- Charles W. Chesnutt, "Baxter's Procustes"
- Leah Price, "Introduction" to *How to Do Things with Books in Victorian*

Britain

This week I will will be traveling from Tuesday, February 27 (at night) until Thursday, March 1. I will not hold my usual Thursday office hours this week.

Chapter 3 ☛ Read-Write-Execute

Tuesday, February 27: Annihilating Time & Space

Read:

- James Gleick, *The Information*, chapters 4-6 (pg. 78-203)
- Henry David Thoreau on the telegraph

Thursday, March 1

Friday, March 2: Circulation

Read:

- James Gleick, *The Information*, chapter 11 (pg. 310-323)
- Rebecca Onion, "Going Viral in the Nineteenth Century"
- Read "Beautiful Snow" and 4 other verses of your choosing from *Fugitive Verses*.
    - Read the poems and also look at the example newspaper printing linked at the top of each.

Spring Break, March 4-10

Tuesday, March 13: A Pocket Universe

Lab 9: Computational Reading I (words & ngrams)

Read:

- Sydney Padua, *The Thrilling Adventures of Lovelace and Babbage* (beginning-pg. 90)

Friday, March 16: Text as Data

Lab 10: Computational Reading II (sentiments & topics)

Read:

- Sydney Padua, *The Thrilling Adventures of Lovelace and Babbage* (pg. 147-207)

Tuesday, March 20: Machine Writing

Lab 11: Computational Writing (Building a Bot)

Read:

- Vikram Chandra, "The Beauty of Code"
- Annette Vee, "Understanding Computer Programming as Literacy"

Friday, March 23: Open Lab

Professor Cordell away: **Open Lab** with practicum students to catch up with R programming labs

Chapter 4 ☛ Memory

Tuesday, March 27: Obsolescence

Watch:

- Carl Schlesinger and David Loeb Weiss, "Farewell etaoin shrdlu" (30 mins)

Farewell - ETAOIN SHRDLU - 1978 from Linotype: The Film on Vimeo.

Read:

- Lauren J. Young, Daniel Peterschmidt, and Cat Frazier, “File Not Found Series”
  - “Ghosts in The Reels”
  - “The Librarians Saving the Internet”
  - “Data Reawakening”

(Optional) Read/Browse:

- Kenneth Goldsmith, “The Artful Accidents of Google Books”
- The Art of Google Books

Friday, March 30: The Book is Dead (Long Live the Book)

Read:

- Octave Uzanne, “The End of Books”
- Matthew Kirschenbaum, “Books After the Death of the Book”

Watch:

- “Elektrobiblioteka / Electrolibrary”

Elektrobiblioteka / Electrolibrary from printscreen on Vimeo.

Tuesday, April 3: Processing Words

Read:

- David M. Berry and Jan Rybicki, "The Author Signal, Nietzsche's Typewriter and Medium Theory"
- Matthew Kirschenbaum, "This Faithful Machine"
- ——, "Technology changes how authors write, but the big impact isn't on their style"

Friday, April 6: An Index of All Knowledge

Read:

- James Gleick, *The Information*, chapter 14-epilogue (pg. 373-426)
- Ted Chiang, "The Truth of Fact, the Truth of Feeling"

Tuesday, April 10: Because Survival is Insufficient

Read:

- Emily St. John Mandel, *Station Eleven* (to the end of section 4, page 164)

Friday, April 13: The Museum of Civilization

Read:

- Emily St. John Mandel, *Station Eleven* (to end of book)

Tuesday, April 17: Book Futures

- Jorge Louis Borges, "The Library of Babel"

Epilogue ☛ ☛ ☛ ☛ ☛

Friday, April 20

In-Class Work

Assignment Overview

- Includes written reflections, quizzes, and/or group work
- Students will sometimes work individually and sometimes with classmates
- Due during most class periods
- 20% of total grade

The Nitty Gritty

This course relies on active, engaged participation in class activities and discussions. There will be few lectures. You should come to every class having read all of the required texts (or watched the required videos, played the required games, &c.) and prepared to discuss them with your colleagues. I plan to assess your reading and course engagement through writing exercises, reading quizzes, and group work. Assuming you all seem to be reading with engagement, I will usually ask for in-class writing or group exercises, but I reserve the right to quiz if reading seems to be slipping.

In-class writing

You should be prepared to write in any class session and have appropriate materials (e.g. paper, a table, a laptop) available to you. Responses will require you to work with our readings for the day, so these must also be available to you. Not all in-class writing will be collected, but when it is such work will be graded on a five-point scale. I do not expect your responses to in-class writing exercises to reflect the same polish as papers. I do expect your writing exercises to evidence your careful reading our our class texts and to reflect critical thought about our course topics. In-class responses should:

- Respond directly to the prompt or activity. Your thinking may wander in new and unexpected directions (this is *very good*) but its connection to the source assignment should be clear.
- Refer to *specific aspects* of our assigned reading. The more specific you can be, the better. For instance, if you can quote or paraphrase from a course text to illustrate the point you hope to make, you should do so.
- They demonstrate depth of thought about the topics on hand.

Individual and Group Work

In addition to discussion of course texts, our classes will frequently ask you to complete small projects and exercises that will help you apply course concepts, learn new software, and/or contextualize course materials. For group exercises, I will ask each group member to assume a specific task related to the project; I expect each group member to contribute in significant ways to their team's effort. The outcome of group work will be various and thus will be assessed in diverse ways.

Assessing In-class Work

Here's a brief rubric for my assessment of in-class writing:

1	2	3	4	5
Response does not engage the prompt or the readings for the day, discussing something entirely unrelated, or is	Response touches on the broad themes of the prompt but does not address the readings at all, save perhaps by mentioning their title(s) or the name(s) of their author(s).	Response touches on the broad themes of the prompt and engages in cursory ways with the readings, but few specifics are	Response demonstrates a solid command of the day's reading through summarizing its ideas and relating these to the prompt.	Response connects ideas across readings and ventures creative (or even risky) interpretations in response to the prompt. Response demonstrates sophisticated analysis beyond

incoherent.		offered.		comprehension.

Reading quizzes

I would prefer not to resort to reading quizzes, which test basic comprehension rather than synthesis and analysis. However, if it becomes clear that significant portions of the class are not completing the readings (which will be obvious by the resultant lulls in conversation) then I will turn to quizzes to motivate closer attention to the readings. Reading quizzes are intended to reward careful reading, not to test your recall of obscure facts from our texts. If you read the assigned texts attentively—*if you read the assigned texts attentively*—you should do well on the quizzes. Each quiz will have six questions; if you correctly answer five of them you will receive full credit, while all six garners extra credit.

Lab Fieldbook Entries

Assignment Overview:

- A portfolio of at least 10 documents, composed in MultiMarkdown
- Individual work submitted; collaborative development encouraged
- Entries due 1 week after the final session for a given lab
- Entries will be posted on the course website and be available under Class Updates
- At least 3 entries due by Monday, February 19
- 40% of total grade

Details:

Technologies of Text is an experiential course and defined by hands-on labs throughout the semester. There will be a diversity of activities associated with labs in particular, from observations made at museums to physical documents printed on a letterpress. Some of these activities will be conducted individually and some in groups.

Your ToT fieldbook will constitute your central scholarly activity during the semester. I call this assignment a "fieldbook" rather than a "journal" to convey its hybridity: week by week, your entries will include a mix of description, analysis, code, and figures or images. This ongoing assignment will give you the chance to organize the diverse tasks of the class' experiential work, practice the skills introduced in the labs and coding sessions, bring your experiential work into conversation with class readings and personal research, and experiment with ideas that will be further developed in your Unessay projects.

Organizing Your Fieldbook

Your fieldbook will be, essentially, a folder comprising at least 10 `.md` files, perhaps including supplemental files such as images referenced in the documents. We'll work on setting this up in our first code session, so you don't need to understand precisely what this means right now. Your fieldbooks will be posted to the Class Updates section of the course website.

Composition

Your fieldbook entries will vary quite a bit from lab to lab. However, there are a few elements I will expect in each entry:

1. Completion of any lab-specific activities. Most of our experiential activities will include a specific set of outcomes. For example, I might ask you to reflect on a set of questions about your experiences or challenge you to adapt the day's code to solve some practice problems, or you might produce a specific material product such as a letterpress printed sheet. The first task of any fieldbook entry will be to demonstrate completion of these tasks. In the case of a coding session, you will likely integrate code snippets directly into the .RMD file (more on this as those labs approach). For other labs you may instead reference external proof of your work (and possibly submit that external evidence separately).

2. Prose that both describes the work done and reflects analytically on that work. This prose need not be as formal as a research paper, but it should demonstrate careful thought and preparation. You should integrate our course readings into these reflections, often through direct quotation. Use your fieldbooks to explore ideas from the readings that you found particularly interesting, and especially ideas we did not have time to discuss in class. Use this writing to experiment with intellectual pairings you think might be generative to your larger thinking and help you prepare for the class' Unessay projects.

3. Evidence of your experiential work, particularly for code entries. One reason we will produce some entries in R Markdown is that Markdown provides a way to integrate executable code with prose that comments and reflects on that code. You needn't include every snippet of code you attempted (though keep in mind "failed" code can be interesting as a subject of reflection). Instead, you should include the most enlightening or intellectual productive bits of code that help illustrate the larger ideas you are working through in your fieldbook.

4. A header that will allow me to publish your fieldbook easily on the course website and makes clear precisely which lab activity a given entry records. We will go over this header in our first lab, but I've included a model below you can simply copy, paste, and modify. As an example, you might include the following lines at the top of each file (or each entry if you're using a single file), modified to suit the specifics of each week:

```
---
layout: page
title: "Your TITLE HERE"
author: "YOUR NAME or PSEUDONYM"
categories:
    - LAB NUMBER
    - LAB TOPIC
comments: false
show_meta: true
header:
    image_fullwidth: OPTIONAL-IMAGE-NAME.FILE-EXTENSION
    caption: OPTIONAL CAPTION FOR IMAGE WITH CITATION
    caption_url: OPTIONAL URL FOR IMAGE CITATION
---
```

   If your file does not include these fields I will ask you to revise it before I can consider the entry complete.

5. The filename must also follow a very specific convention in order to post

correctly. Essentially, it lists the date (of submission) in Year, Month, Day format, followed by your last name (or pseudonym) and the lab number. Essentially, it should look like this: `YYYY-MM-DD-NAME-LAB-NUMBER.md`.

Flexibility

ToT is a challenging and full class. The semester will include 12 labs. To give you some flexibility, you must complete a fieldbook entry for 10/12 labs over the semester. You may complete more than 10 entries over the semester, so long as you continue to meet the guidelines for timing and submission outlined below. If you complete more than 10 entries, I will include only the strongest 10 in my grade book (meaning you can make up for a weaker submission).

Pacing Your Field Work

Your fieldbook should be a developing record of your thinking about our class and its activities. Thus you should be working on it steadily, responding to the labs and code sessions in a timely manner, in part to keep your thinking fresh and in part to avoid falling too far behind as new labs and code sessions approach.

Unless otherwise noted, a fieldbook entry is due within 1 week of the associated lab session. If a particular lab session extends through multiple classes, its fieldbook entry is due within 1 week of the final classroom session devoted to it. You may not wait until late in the semester to complete fieldbook entries for activities earlier in the semester, and I will collect your fieldbooks periodically to ensure you are working steadily. The coding labs, in particular, will build on each other and you will find it difficult to complete fieldbooks for later coding labs if you do not complete earlier ones.

I regularly assign ongoing assignments in my classes and every semester I strongly urge students to start working early in order to complete the work. Each semester at least a few students ignore this urging, usually to their later dismay. Complications will almost certainly arise during the semester, and if you put off starting your fieldbook entries you will struggle to earn full credit on this assignment. In order to pressure you a bit toward responsibility: **you must complete at least 3 entries by President's Day, February 19**. I strongly recommend you complete more before this date, but I will not assess more than 5 entries completed after this date if at least 3 were not completed before.

Why Markdown?

I am asking you to write in Markdown for two primary reasons:

1. Markdown makes it very easy to weave together code and prose, which I see as a necessity for a class that wants to think humanistically about code.

2. Markdown itself will help us think about text and remediation in a very direct way. Writing outside of a GUI (Graphical User Interface) like Word will challenge use to think about the structure of our texts and how that structure translates among different media. I don't want to pretend like the plain text of Markdown is somehow less mediated than a GUI; Markdown is an interface just like Word is an interface. But I suspect it is an unfamiliar interface for many of you, which will prompt you to think about how interface shapes our interactions with text.

3. Markdown is flexible. A single Markdown document can be instantly translated through a program like Pandoc into HTML, DOCX, PDF or a range of other formats, and we can use these transformations to think through the affordances and limitations of those formats for

contemporary writing.

Dead Media Poster Presentation

Assignment Overview:

- A research poster presentated in class
- Students should work together in pairs
- Due on Friday, January 25
- Claim your dead medium by signing up here (be sure to pick the sheet for your section of the class!)
- 10% of total grade

Details:

In "Imagining the New Media Encounter," Alan Liu suggests that "The déjá vu haunting of new by old media is clear enough." New technologies and new modes of communication draw, both technically and metaphorically, from older modes—including "dead media" that have, to all surface appearances, entirely disappeared.

To better understand this haunting, you will work in pairs to research a historical new medium and/or technology that flourished and then faded from popular view: some might call this "media archaeology". These new media might be very old or relatively new: new textual technologies have emerged since the invention of writing, while some popular technologies introduced as recently as a decade ago are already obsolete.

How 'Dead' is Dead?

I would ask that you employ a relatively strict, but not pedantic, definition of "dead media": it should mean less than "completely and totally banished from human culture" and more than "no longer hip." To put this idea another way:

a tiny community of dedicated enthusiasts should not rescue a technology from our calling it "dead media," while still-widely-accessible technology ignored by cutting edge users (think CDs, perhaps) should escape the label "dead media" for the purposes of this assignment.

Resources for Finding a Medium

You might consider this list from the original Dead Media Project or from the Dead Media Archive as you plan your topic. When choosing your medium, opt for the unfamiliar and the strange if at all possible—try to find a medium you suspect your classmates have never heard of, or perhaps one they will *think* they know until its reality surprises them.

The Poster

You and your partner will prepare a conference-style poster to present your "dead medium" to your classmates and instructors. If you've never created a research poster, consult the references on the "poster session" Wikipedia page for writing and design tips. Your poster should address on the following questions:

1. How did this medium innovate, diverge, or respond to even earlier media? What precisely was new about it when it was the "new media?"
2. What were the cultural effects of this medium during its heyday? Did it produce substantive changes in domestic life, politics, art, or other spheres?
3. Were there competing media that attempted to meet the same needs or fill the same niche as your chosen medium?
4. How and why did your medium decline in importance?
5. What were the lasting effects or products of your medium? Was it a media "dead end" or did new media evolve from it? How does your medium linger in descendants, images, or language?

You should not attempt on your poster to tell us everything that you might say about your chosen medium in a written paper nor explain its every nuance. When designing think CONCISE, INFORMATIVE, and CREATIVE. The idea here is that the form's restriction (paradoxically) promotes your creativity, as some might argue the formal restrictions of certain poetic forms force the poet toward ever-more-deft feats of language.

We will hold our "dead media" poster session on Friday, January 26.

The Unessay

Assignment Overview:

- Form can vary *widely!!*
- Students generally work individually, though I am open to collaborative proposals.
- Unessay 1 due March 5 by 5pm
- Unessay 2 due TBA
- 30% of total grade

The Nitty-Gritty

Twice this semester you will develop unessay projects.

1. I *highly prize* creative takes on this assignment. Before jumping into typical paper writing mode, consider other media, presentation styles, and modes of critical engagement you might employ instead.
2. This is a hands-on course about media and technology: I would be thrilled to see unessays that *do* rather than (only) *describe*. Consider using your unessay assignments to get your hands dirty (perhaps literally) with some of the media we discuss in class.
3. Take advantage of my advice and help as you develop your unessay ideas. That's what I'm here for!

You may complete your unessays on your own schedule, but they must be turned in by the listed due dates. I would strongly advise you not to put the assignment off. To motivate you to work earlier, I am happy to offer feedback on drafts submitted at least one week in advance of a given deadline. We will also workshop ideas during class sessions well in advance of each deadline.

I will also show you some stellar examples of unessays in the weeks leading up to the first deadline, and would be happy to show you others during office hours. I have a growing collection of stunning student unessay work that I love revisiting.

Assignment Background

Thanks to Daniel Paul O'Donnell for this brilliant assignment, which I've only slightly modified for our class. For more on the research behind the Unessay assignment, see the work of Emma Dering and Matthew Galea.

The essay is a wonderful and flexible tool for engaging with a topic intellectually. It is a very free format that can be turned to discuss any topic—works of literature, of course, but also autobiography, science, entertainment, history, and government, politics, and so on. There is often something provisional about the essay (its name comes from French *essai*, meaning a trial), and almost always something personal.

Unfortunately, however, as Wikipedia notes,

> *In some countries (e.g., the United States and Canada), essays have become a major part of formal education. Secondary students are taught structured essay formats to improve their writing skills, and admission essays are often used by universities in selecting applicants and, in the humanities and social sciences, as a way of assessing the performance of students during final exams.*

One result of this is that the essay form, which should be extremely free and flexible, is instead often presented as a static and rule-bound monster that students must master in order not to lose marks (for a vigorous defense of the flexible essay, see software developer Paul Graham's blog). Far from an opportunity to explore intellectual passions and interests in a personal style,

the essay is transformed into a formulaic method for discussing set topics in five paragraphs: the compulsory figures of academia.

Enter the Unessay

By contrast, the unessay is an assignment that attempts to undo the damage done by this approach to teaching writing. It works by throwing out all the rules you have learned about essay writing in the course of your primary, secondary, and post secondary education and asks you to focus instead solely on your intellectual interests and passions. In an unessay you choose your own topic, present it any way you please, and are evaluated on how compelling and effective you are. Here are the guidelines:

1. You choose your own topic.

The unessay allows you to write about anything you want provided you are able to associate your topic with the subject matter of the course and unit we are working on. You can take any approach; you can use as few or as many resources as you wish; you can even cite the Wikipedia. The only requirements are that your treatment of the topic be *compelling*: that is to say presented in a way that leaves the reader thinking that you are being accurate, interesting, and as complete and/or convincing as your subject allows.

1. You can present it any way you please.

There are also no formal requirements. Your unessay can be written in five paragraphs or twenty-six. If you decide you need to cite something, you can do that anyway you want. If you want to use lists, use lists. If you want to write in the first person, write in the first person. If you prefer to present the whole thing as a video, present it as a video. Use slang. Or don't. Write in sentence fragments if you think that would be effective. In other words, in an

unessay you have complete freedom of form: you can use whatever style of writing, presentation, citation, or media you want. What is important is that the format and presentation you do use helps rather than hinders your explanation of the topic.
Perhaps most importantly, the unessay allows you to use media deliberately and thoughtfully. You can create a digital unessay, or you can create an analog project—in fact, many of the most compelling unessays I've seen have been entirely analog.

1. You are evaluated on how compelling and effective you are.

If unessays can be about anything and there are no restrictions on format and presentation, how are they graded? The main criteria is how well it all fits together. That is to say, how *compelling* and *effective* your work is.

An unessay is compelling when it shows some combination of the following:

- it is as interesting as its topic and approach allows
- it is as complete as its topic and approach allows (it doesn't leave the audience thinking that important points are being skipped over or ignored)
- it is truthful (any questions, evidence, conclusions, or arguments you raise are honestly and accurately presented)

In terms of presentation, an unessay is effective when it shows some combination of these attributes:

- it is readable/watchable/listenable (i.e. the production values are appropriately high and the audience is not distracted by avoidable lapses in presentation)
- it is appropriate (i.e. it uses a format and medium that suits its topic and approach)

- it is attractive (i.e. it is presented in a way that leads the audience to trust the author and his or her arguments, examples, and conclusions).

Why Unessays Are Not a Waste of Your Time

The unessay may be quite different from what you are used to doing in English class. If so, a reasonable question might be whether I am wasting your time by assigning them. If you can write whatever you want and present it any way you wish, is this not going to be a lot easier to do than an actual essay? And is it not leaving you unprepared for subsequent instructors who want you to right the real kind of essays?

The answer to both these questions is no. Unessays are not going to be easier than "real" essays. There have fewer rules to remember and worry about violating (actually there are none). But unessays are more challenging in that you need to make your own decisions about what you are going to discuss and how you are going to discuss it.

And you are not going to be left unprepared for instructors who assign "real" essays. Questions like how to format your page or prepare a works-cited list are actually quite trivial and easily learned. You can look them up when you need to know them and, increasingly, can get your software to handle these things for you anyway. In our class, moreover, I will be giving you separate instruction on what English professors normally expect to see in the essays you submit to them.

But even more importantly, the things you will be doing in an unessay will help improve your "real" ones: excellent "real" essays also match form to topic and are about things you are interested in; if you learn how to write compelling and effective unessays, you'll find it a lot easier to do well in your "real" essays as well.

Model Unessays

Below are some fantastic digital unessays that students have submitted. These examples don't necessarily model the *content* of your assignments, as some were completed for classes covering very different topics, but hopefully they will give you a sense of what kinds of work you might complete.

- Operation Critique
- Beyond the Words: Text in Art
- Programming a Medium
- Know Code (music available on request)
- ESSAIS1580
- The Evolving Album Cover
- Ada on Ada: A Programmer's Manifesto
- The Best Story I Ever Wrote, Annotated
- Skeuomorphic
- Graffiti and New Media
- Which Text(s) Work(s)?

I have also added some pictures of some elements of physical unessays students have submitted. Most of these were accompanied by written components which I don't reproduce here, but I'm happy to talk about them. I will bring these and some other physical model unessays to class to discuss, or you can peruse them during office hours.