

Critical Methods and Digital Communication 605

Instructor - Dr. Tim J. Anderson

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Meetings - Thursday - 7:10-9:50 @BAL 3056

Office Hours - Wednesday 10am-12PM and by appointment

Course Description

This class surveys the major methodological approaches available to critical communication researchers. Major questions and approaches in critical theory (i.e. semiotics, structuralism, post-structuralism, Neo-Marxism, and British Cultural Studies, Queer Studies, etc.) may be addressed. Special attention is paid to various theoretical discussions that deal with the many digital communication and networked computing technologies that have evolved in the last 20 years. These include but are not limited to the questions regarding Internet, digital film, video games, mobile phones, social networks, blogs, database tools, and so on. Discussion and research will always focus the student around how these technologies and the emerging formations that come from these moments are utilized and negotiated throughout the lifespan of individuals and institutions.

Course Objectives

- 1) Understand some of the basic questions that critical and cultural theory address and how they have been applied to mass media so that they may be adopted, adapted or left behind as we address emergent new media ecosystems.
- 2) Understand the critical and cultural theories historical contingencies whose applications are both driven and restricted by specific methodological issues.
- 3) Consider the driving critical questions that all new media theorists and practitioners grapple with as they develop and engage emergent media ecosystems. These include but are not limited to questions of power, measurement, democratic participation, regulation, textual pleasure, identity, social and economic organization.
- 4) Understand how emergent media ecosystems are not new but rather part of a long tradition where media changes. Furthermore, students will understand that these changes are deeply connected to cultural, economic and political issues.
- 5) Better understand the interventionist possibilities of critical citizens with regards to emerging media systems.
- 6) Continue to investigate questions closely associated with the lives of those who must negotiate and live within and outside of these new media ecosystems. Issues such as privacy, propriety and exclusion will always be placed as key concerns throughout the readings and discussions.

- 7) Through questioning what critical cultural methods of analysis address, students will focus on those problems that new media formations are attempting to solve and/or ignoring.

Learning Outcomes

- 1) Demonstrate a fundamental understanding of critical and cultural media theory and what drives the questions that these theories pose.
- 2) Demonstrate a substantial understanding of the vocabulary that is used within new media ecosystems.
- 3) Demonstrate the ability to focus on a critical issue and apply the adequate critical and cultural theory that opens the issue up for possible interventionist actions.
- 4) Demonstrate those writing skills that interweave both theoretical and the analytical abilities needed to successfully negotiate critical and cultural theory.

Assignments

Discussion Notes, Questions and Final Presentation -- For the semester students will generate and submit sets of reading notes and preliminary reading questions to help lead the class forward their interests. These will be generated online for an online classroom space that will be limited to those in class. They should be submitted online as blogs for a Tumblr that I will set up and invite you to contribute to. They will be done so in the following manner: You will work together in groups of two or three to do this. I will model these notes in the first few discussions and give you some guidelines to address. More than anything else, these should be posted at least one day (see 24 hours) before class so that the class can read these

- 1) 50-75 word summation of the reading's "thesis"
- 2) 200-250 words that briefly explain the pertinence of the readings to the issues that the blogger finds interesting *vis a vis* the classroom's discussions and/or the researcher's topic.
- 3) Offer the class three short, thoughtful and unique guiding questions that the readers and respondent's should consider as they engage the next set of readings.
- 4) Final Presentation of your research project - Each student will bring in a few powerpoint slides that explain what their project is, how they went about researching it, examples of the evidence, and what were

These assignments will result in a substantial portion 20% of your grade.

Midterm Exams – There will be two “midterms”: one midterm that analyzes fundamental questions and another that makes a substantial contribution to the students’ final project. This first exam will be take-home, synthetic and demand that students work together. Students will draw directly from the readings to answer in a way that influences and becomes part of the student’s work. The second exam will ask the student to integrate readings from class into their own work, in essence making the second exam part of the drafting process for their final project.

Both exams will be worth 17.5% for a sum of 35%.

Participation - This should be self explanatory for graduate students and will result in 10% of your final mark.

Final Project - The project is worth 35% of the student’s final mark and the topic will be determined in conjunction with the instructor after possible topics are introduced.

The final project should result in a paper that adheres to the following:

- 1) Be prepared in accordance to MLA or APA style. Choose one and stick with it.
- 2) It should be 20 to 25 pages in length..
- 3) Very important note: This should be a research paper that applies critical and cultural theory to better understand an emergent media problem. The key here is the research, which I have found is foreign to many of the students in this class who are used to more survey driven methods or are tempted to iterate quantitative communication theory. Let me be clear: This is not what this class is about nor will it be acceptable for this paper. This will be a critical paper that asks critical/cultural questions in a qualitative manner *with* evidence. Throughout we will address this aspect. Indeed, we will devote time to this aspect both in and out of class.
- 3) The papers should lack misspellings and general errors of style and grammar. You will be given notes about these in drafts. Remember that you should be growing as a writer throughout the process.
- 4) Be submitted as a word document to tjanders@odu.edu. I will not accept any other format.
- 5) Be written with double-spaced with respectable margins and reasonable fonts.
- 6) Include a 150 word abstract on the paper’s title page.

Books needed to be purchased (*please note, I know many of you purchase these for Kindle, but I implore you to get the print versions. Many of these are used and it is much, much easier to follow with the readings as well as creating annotations, which is a skill you need to work on, in print*).

The Invention of American Broadcasting - Susan Douglas
Johns Hopkins University Press; ISBN-10: 0801838320

Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication - John Durham Peters
University of Chicago Press; ISBN-10: 0226662772

MP3: The Meaning of a Format - Jonathan Sterne
Duke University Press Books; ISBN-10: 0822352877

Television, Technology and Cultural Form - Raymond Williams
Routledge; ISBN-10: 0415314569

Personal Connections in the Digital Age - Nancy Baym
Polity; ISBN-10: 0745643329

All other readings will be provided via PDFs.

Part One - Basic Takes on Critical Media Communication through Old “New Media”

This section is meant to introduce foundational issues with which all media studies have to grapple. Namely issues surrounding the disruptive new media formations and social control. Despite their “age” these essays provide a perspective regarding widespread social change and the primary issues with which “new media” must grapple.

Week 1 - Jan 16 - Intro and basic lecture -Read Thomas Kuhn’s The Structure of Scientific Revolutions

Week 2- Jan 23 - What does it mean to be modern? - Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication - John Durham Peters (every chapter but Chapter 3)

Week 3 - Jan 30 - Communication and Cultural Change: Raymond Williams Television, Technology and Cultural Form (entire book)

Week 4 Feb 6- New Media, New Publics, and New Public Spheres - Selections from Habermas The Transformation of the Public Sphere and Miriam Hansen’s Babel and Babylon (Introduction, Chapters 1, 2 & 3)

Assign first exam

Week 5 - Feb 13 - Critical Media Dialectics (Negative and Redemptive), Cultural Materialism and Questions of Experience - Selections from Adorno and Horkheimer - "The Cultural Industry"; Walter Benjamin "Art in the Age of Mass Reproduction - Also, focus on how to gain qualitative, critical/cultural evidence. Will continue to focus on this.

Week 6 - Feb 20 - Meet with Dr. Anderson to discuss research projects and methods

Return Exam to Dr. Anderson on Friday, February 21st, by Midnight.

Part Two - New Media, New "New Media", New Industries and New Actors

Critical theory has spent significant energies in divining techniques to better understand consequential changes in experience. This section theorizes about these changes.

Within the discussion of most critical and cultural theory is the concern that media institutions and technologies alter industrial practices and is a major source of identity. As a result, questions of ideological control, media ownership and the ability of individuals and small groups to forge their own identities and meanings through media formations.

Week 7 - Feb 27 A critical historical example of technological change - Susan Douglas - The Invention of American Broadcasting -

Week 8 - Mar 6 - Convergence Theory? - Begin Jenkins Convergence Culture

Week 9 Spring Break - Enjoy & Stay Safe

Week 10 March 20 - Will meet with individuals on Monday, the 17th and the 26th, No class meeting, Thursday, finish Convergence Culture -

Second Exam assigned via email

Week 11 March 27- Format Theory and New Media Jonathan Sterne - MP3: The Meaning of a Format

Week 12 - April 3- Read - Anderson - Popular Music in and Digital Music Economy

Second Exam due by Friday, April 4 by midnight

Part Three - New Media, New Connections, New Identities

As media has altered its materials, it has also altered the manner in which it is produced and distributed. This final section of the course is designed to interrogate the who, what, when and where aspects of media in a way that searches for medium specific critiques of these new texts, connections and actors. Throughout students should apply significant amounts of skepticism about any and all of these claims about the “new”. At the same time, media became much more “micro” and “niche” in its orientation. The result has been that issues of identity such as race, class and gender have become even more pronounced by audience/producers alike.

Week 13 - April 10- Read Selection of Micro-Spaces of Identity Readings

Week 14 - April 17 - Selection from danah boyd; Personal Connections in the Digital Age-Baym

Week 15 - April 24 - Food and Presentations.

Final Papers Due on May 1st by 8pm, sent to tjanders@odu.edu as a word doc.