Digital Lives

ENGL 108D, Section 002
Tues/Thurs 10:00am - 11:20am
AL 211

Instructor Info

Instructor: Philip Miletic
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Office: PAS 1284,
Office Hours: Tues/Thurs 1:30-3:30 pm, or meet by appointment
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Course Description

This course examines how digital communication technologies construct and constrain the formation of online identities and social spaces. We will explore the technical, cultural, and social forces that make digital lives both familiar and unfamiliar, traditional and subversive. Throughout the course, we will develop strategies and methods for studying media and digital platforms, online materials, and popular representations of “digital life.” We will use these critical tools to look at several themes that include auto/biography, social justice movements, gender, race, and more.

Our course is divided into three units:

Understanding (Digital) Media
In this unit of the course, we will be exploring the various theories and methods of analyzing media, generally, and digital media, specifically. In addition to the history of digital media, we will be learning the affordances and constraints of media: how media shape content and users’ engagement with content. But we will also consider the ways users shape media and media usage, providing thematic and theoretical groundwork for the subsequent course units.

Digital Lives IRL (In Real Life)
After familiarizing ourselves with the theories and methods of analyzing the affordances and constraints of media, we will study the creation and performances of online identities on various (social) media platforms. This section will specifically focus on the ways the creation and performances of online identities negotiate social norms and engage with social justice issues.

Dirty Computers and Cyborgs
This unit zeroes in on the popular representations of cyborgs and androids in TV, film, music, and literature. Specifically, we will learn how the symbol of the cyborg/android is used in these media as a site of resistance against various intersecting oppressions. This unit presents the
various representations of the cyborg as engaging with theories and histories of digital media we learned in unit one and as reflecting the lived online realities of those we covered in unit two.

**Course learning outcomes:**

The design of the content and schedule of the course is determined by our goals of scholarly engagement with the idea and practice of ‘the superhero’ and of becoming stronger academic writers in a university setting.

**Knowledge**—*by the end of the course you should be able to:*

- **Identify** the basic terms by which scholars study and theorize (digital) media & online materials
- **Write** clear and persuasive short academic papers, supported by evidence
- **Discuss** the affordances and constraints of media, and the various cultural uses and imaginations of media.

**Application**—*over the course of the term you will:*

- **Take notes** from various media and lecture to understand, remember, and apply new ideas
- **Interpret** texts using scholarly methods of analysis
- **Frame** persuasive arguments in writing

**Integration**—*this course encourages you to:*

- **Develop** a clear, concise, and scholarly ‘voice’
- **Write** more professionally: conceive, research, draft, edit, and proofread your work
- **Connect** our reading and writing strategies to the larger project of your degree

This course is **reading intensive, writing intensive**, and **participation intensive**: I expect you to do the readings, take careful notes, show up, and take part.

**Technology Policies**

**Email policy, pt 1:** Do not expect me to respond to your email instantaneously. Give me 24h to respond on weekdays and 48h to respond on weekends.

**Email policy, pt 2:** Please be professional in your email and use your waterloo email. Use a clear subject heading, begin with a salutation (“Dear Phil”), and end with a sign off (Best, [student name]). This makes me take your email seriously, and I know right away who the email is from and what the email will be about.
Accessibility and Accommodations:

In our class environment, we will be mindful of the reality that everyone learns differently. If you have any concerns about accessing course content, participating in class discussions, or accommodating your learning style, please let me know. You can also arrange for formal accommodations with AccessAbility Services by registering at the beginning of each academic term. Their office is located in room 1401 of Needles Hall. (Phone: 519-888-4567 ext. 35082; Web: https://uwaterloo.ca/accessability-services/; Email: access@uwaterloo.ca)

Required Texts

**Digital Media and Society**
by Simon Lindgren

**Full-Metal Indigiqueer**
by Joshua Whitehead

Assignments Outline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Due</th>
<th>Grade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Readings response</td>
<td>See description</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-class exercises</td>
<td>See description</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media as Environments Response</td>
<td>October 4</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doing Social Media Research Response</td>
<td>November 6</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Assignment Descriptions

Readings response (Due weekly; 10%)

Each week for Tuesdays’s class, you are to bring to class a short response about what interests you the most about that week’s reading. Select a concept, a sentence, a paragraph, an image, etc. and write approximately 150 words on what interests you about that thing in relation to our course.

We will begin each class with some of us sharing this document. And you are to hand in the document at the end of class. Completing a response will give you a completion point.

*This assignment does not have to be formatted. Can be handwritten with the exception of including images.

**There will be no responses on Week 5, Week 10, and Week 13

In-class exercises (10%)

On Thursday classes,* there will be in-class exercises, activities, and discussions that you will be marked on. Participating in these exercises will give you a completion point. No preparation is needed, besides having done the readings for that week.

If you miss class for whatever reason, it is your responsibility to contact me and to discuss the missed exercise.

*(although there will be exceptions for the study break week and the final week of class)

Media as Environments Response (Due October 4; 10%)

In Digital Media & Society, Lindgren details the way that media are environments, citing McLuhan’s “the medium is the message” as an important theory to approach media. Lindgren writes, “Switching from one medium to another reconfigures our senses and alters the ways in which we comprehend and reconstruct the world around us” (19). Additionally, he argues, “we
are at the same time socialised and acculturated into the symbolic environment of the medium” (19).

Selecting one medium, write a **full 2-3 page** response that argues how this medium “reconfigures our senses” through its technological affordances and social rules. You may compare this medium to another, but your response must be focused on one medium (e.g. focus on Snapchat but compare it to Instagram).

A handout will be supplied in the second week of classes.

**Doing Social Media Research Response (Due November 6; 15%)**

Consulting Chapter 13 and 14 of *Digital Media & Society* select a hashtag, a Twitch Stream, a YouTube series, a blog, or a podcast and write a **full 3-4 page** analysis of the social actions of your selected study. Such queries are but not limited to: How are affinity spaces created in your study? What kind of arguments about identity are made by the person or group of your study? How do users employ the affordances and constraints of their chosen medium? Lindgren details “layers of visual sociality” but can there also be “layers of aural sociality”?

Detailed handout will be supplied at the beginning of the second unit.

**History of Digital Culture Group Project (20% = 15% project, 5% comments)**

In groups of 2-4 people, your group is required to make a video or a podcast about a particular moment in digital history or (pop) culture. You will be given a list to choose from in the beginning of the course. The video/podcast should be 7-10 minutes. *If you are unable to make a video or podcast, you may pitch an alternative project to me and I will have to approve of it.*

Once you complete your assignment, you are to submit it to Learn via the Dropbox and in your assigned Discussion forum on the required date that your topic is associated with. You will also need to submit a Works Cited page in the Learn Dropbox. This portion of the assignment is worth 15% of your final grade.

The other 5% requires you to post a comment on other peoples’ projects in their discussion forum on Learn. *To get the full 5%, you must post a comment on every group’s podcast/video.* You must post within a week the project is uploaded. I check for comments on Fridays, a week after the project has been posted. Comments should not be “good job!” but should be a couple of sentences explaining what you learned from the video/podcast.
Final Project Proposal (Rough Draft Due in class Nov 27; Final Draft due via Learn Nov 29; 10%)

For this assignment, you are required to write a one page double-spaced proposal on what your final project is. You must outline 1) the type of final project you are doing (see Final Research Project description), 2) your main argument or thesis, 3) the rough outline of your project, and 4) list the possible academic sources you will be using and why.

More details will be supplied in a handout that will be given during the second unit.

Final Research Project (Due December 9 via Learn; 25%)

The final project can either be a research essay, a creative essay, or a critical media project. Each of these options require 2-3 secondary academic sources that are not your textbook.

The research essay will require you to write a full 5-6 pages on a particular research topic of your choice. The topic can build off of the Doing Social Media Research response or it can be a new one related to either unit 2 or unit 3. You must use your secondary sources to support your arguments.

The creative essay is similar to the research essay in the sense that you must construct an argument on a particular research topic of your choice. However, instead of a handwritten essay, you can make a video essay, a podcast essay, or a creative format that you propose to me. Since there is no page length for these formats, your submission must be 8-12 minutes. Secondary sources must still be included to support your arguments.

The critical media project is a creative project, supplemented by a 3-page critical reflection. For a critical media project, you can make something (a small game, a podcast, a let’s play video, a poem or a short piece of fiction that deals with cyborgs/Androids) that investigates a theme or issue or topic related to this course. You are then required to write a critical reflection on your experiences and/or on the creative intent of your project, and what your project argues about that particular theme/issue/topic.

For example: You may write a short fiction story or poem that is set in the world of Janelle Monâe’s Dirty Computer. Your story should speak to the themes of the emotional picture and. Then, in your 3-page reflection, you argue what your story illuminates about Dirty Computer and the chosen theme/topic of your focus.

More details will be given in a handout during the second unit.
Schedule

Note: all readings must be completed before the assigned date. You should be coming into class prepared, having read the material on that date.

**Unit One: Understanding Digital Media**

**Week 1**
Topic: Logging On

September 6: Getting to know each other

**Week 2**
Topic: What is “new” about New Media (or Digital Media)

Sept 11: **Read**: Digital Media and Society, Chapter 1, pgs 3-15
Sept 13: In-class activity

**Week 3**
Topic: “The Medium is the Message”: Media as Environments

Sept 18: **Read**: Digital Media & Society, Chapter 1, pgs 16-25
Sept 20: In-class activity

**Week 4**
Topic: Cyber Debates

Sept 25: **Read**: Digital Media & Society, Chapter 3
Sept 27: In-class activity

**Week 5**:
Topic: (Dis)Embodiment and Identity

Oct 2: **Read**: Digital Media & Society, Chapter 4
Oct 4: **Due**: Media as Environments Paper; In-class activity

**Unit 2: Digital Lives IRL**

**Week 6**
Topic: Automedia

Oct 9: STUDY BREAK, NO CLASS
Oct 11: **Read**: Digital Media and Society, Chapter 2
Week 7
Topic: Tumblr and Trans Youth

Oct 16 (Guest Lecturer: Jin Sol Kim): **Read:** *Digital Media & Society*, Chapter 5
Oct 18: In-class activity

Week 8
Topic: Selfies

Oct 23: **Read:** *Digital Media & Society* Chapter 6
Oct 25: In-class activity

Week 9
Topic: Affect online, from cuteness to hate campaigns

Oct 30: **Read:** *Digital Media & Society*, Chapter 7
       **Listen:** *Conversations with People Who Hate Me* (podcast)
Nov 1: In-class activity

Unit 3: Dirty Computers and Cyborgs

Week 10
Topic: Androids and Labour

Nov 6: **Watch (in class):** “Measure of a man,” *Star Trek: The Next Generation*
       **Due:** Doing Digital Media Research Response

Nov 8: In-class exercise;
       **Watch:** *Blade Runner 2022: Black Out*  
       ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rrZk9sSgRyQ&t=802s&frags=pl%2Cw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rrZk9sSgRyQ&t=802s&frags=pl%2Cw))

Week 11
Topic: Cyborgs and Colonialism

Nov 13: **Read:** *Full-Metal Indigiqueer* by Joshua Whitehead

Nov 15: **Discussion:** *Full-Metal Indigiqueer*
Week 12
Topic: Queering Androids

Nov 20: **Watch:** *Dirty Computer* by Janelle Monáe ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jdH2Sy-B1NE&frags=pl%2Cw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jdH2Sy-B1NE&frags=pl%2Cw))

Nov 22: In-class activity

Week 13: Logging off

Nov 27: **Peer Editing:** Rough draft of final
Nov 29: **Due:** Proposal, Good copy

**Rights and Responsibilities**

Every member of this class—instructor as well as students—has rights and responsibilities to ensure a pleasant and productive experience for all. Here are some more specific expectations for this course:

You will:

- know the university policies that govern your behaviour
- attend all scheduled classes
- arrive prepared: with assigned reading and writing completed, and with appropriate materials in hand
- participate actively in your own learning, while respecting the rights of others to learn as well: this means active listening as well as active speaking
- give thoughtful consideration to instructor feedback on written and oral work

I will:

- adhere to the university policies that govern my behaviour
- attend all scheduled classes
- make myself available for consultation in person and over email
- return assignments within 2 weeks
- provide helpful and respectful feedback on your work

*On academic dishonesty:* it is a serious offense to appropriate the intellectual labour of another to yourself. Plagiarism consists of using someone else’s words or ideas without proper attribution. I expect that the work you submit in this course will be the product of your own labour, and that your research sources will be scrupulously documented. If you have any concerns or questions about appropriate practice, you are sincerely encouraged to come discuss this with me—I would really like to help.

**Absence and Late Policy**
Attendance is vital to your success in this course. If you choose not to attend, you will be missing in-class exercises upon which some of your grades will depend. There are no ‘makeups’ for this work.

Assignments are due as noted on the assignment sheets; unless prior arrangements are made late assignments will lose 5% per day late, counting weekends. Assignments more than three days late will not be accepted without documentation or explanation.