# Critical Methods and Digital Communication 605

Instructor - Dr. Tim J. Anderson
Office - BAL 3016
E-mail - tjanders@odu.edu
Class Meeting and Time - Thursday 7:10-9:50, BAL 3056
Office Hours - Monday 12pm-1pm, Wednesday 12pm-1pm and by appointment

Course Description

This class explores some of the major methodological approaches available to critical communication researchers through topics in digital and micro-media communication. Major methods in critical theory (i.e. semiotics, structuralism, post-structuralism, neo-Marxism, and British Cultural Studies, Queer Studies, etc.) are addressed. Special attention is paid to the many digital communication technologies that have emerged in the last twenty years. These include but are not limited to the questions regarding Internet, digital film, video games, mobile communication systems, social networks, online writing, and databases. 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 basic questions of critical and cultural theory and how their methodological focal points have been applied to past forms of media so that they may be adopted, adapted or left behind as we try to understand our emerging new media ecosystems.
2) Understand how critical and cultural theories have historical and contingent applications driven by specific methodological questions that are also restrictive.
3) Consider the driving critical questions that all new media theorists and practitioners grapple with as the 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 the growth of emergent media ecosystems are not new but part of a tradition of media change that are always deeply connected to issues of social, economic and political reorganization.
5) Better understand the interventionist possibilities of that these methods contain. By recognizing how critical methods explore technological systems as part of distinct cultural, political and technical concerns and prejudices we will identify moments of critique and possible change.
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) Throughout our questions, students will focus on those problems that new media formations are attempting to solve and/or ignoring.

<u>Learning Outcomes</u>

By the end of the term, students should be able to:

1) Demonstrate a fundamental understanding of critical and cultural media theories and their methodological inclinations.
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 methods 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 the methodological aspects of critical and cultural theory.
5) Demonstrate the identification of a critical communication problem that could be best addressed by a new media tool.

<u>Assignments</u>

<u>Discussion Notes and Questions</u> -- Throughout the semester students will generate and submit a sets of reading notes and preliminary reading questions to help lead the class forward their interests. These will be generated online by those in the class. These should be submitted the Monday evening before class as online blogs in the following manner:

    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 writer 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 our next set of readings.

These assignments will result in a substantial portion (20%) of the final grade.

<u>Midterm Exams</u> – There will be two midterms. The first will be a straightforward, take-home midterm that addresses questions from the readings, synthetic and demand that students to work together. It will be worth 8%. The second will be designed so that it makes a substantial contribution to the students' final projects. Each exam will ask questions in scuh a way that this will be take-home, synthetic and demand that students work together to compose answers that influence and become a part of the student's work. It will be worth 15% of the final grade.

<u>Participation</u> - This should be self explanatory and will result in 15% of your final mark.

<u>Final Project</u>  - The project is worth 37% of the student's final mark and the topic will be focused on a critical issue of methods involved in the studying lifespan communication that will be determined in conjunction with the instructor.

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

1) Be prepared in strict accordance to either MLA or APA style. We will take a poll on this at the beginning of the term and we will subscribe to one. Absolutely no deviations from the selected style.
2) The paper will come in two distinct portions, with the first portion from 20 to 25 pages in length and the second portion 4-5 pages.
3) The first portion will be a typical research paper that applies critical and cultural theory to better understand an emergent media problem.
4) The second portion will be a more formal report on the state of those communication tools that address this problem and if they adequately or inadequatly address these .
3) The papers should lack misspellings and general errors of style and grammar.
4) Be submitted as a word document.
5) Double-spaced with respectable margins and reasonable fonts.
6) Include a 150 word abstract on the paper's title page.

<u>Readings</u>: The following books are available at the bookstore with the exception of <u>The Wealth of Networks</u>, which is downloadable as a PDF for free. Other readings are available as PDFs.

<u>Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication</u> - John Durham Peters
Paperback, University Of Chicago Press (December 1, 2001)

<u>Television: Technology and Cultural Form</u> -Raymond Williams
Paperback, Routledge; 3rd edition (October 20, 2003)

<u>Protocol: How Control Exists after Decentralization</u> - Alexander R. Galloway
Paperback, The MIT Press (February 17, 2006)

<u>The Information Society: Cyber Dreams and Digital Nightmares</u> -Robert Hassan
Paperback, Polity; 1 edition (December 10, 2008)

Personal Connections in the Digital Age - Nancy Baym
Paperback, Polity; 1 edition (July 21, 2010)

The Wealth of Networks - Yochai  Benkler

http://www.benkler.org/Benkler_Wealth_Of_Networks.pdf

***Section One - Communication, Mass Society and Old "New Media" - This section is meant to introduce some foundational issues surrounding questions of method and those demands that critical and cultural media studies have concerned themselves. 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 12 - Intro and basic lecture: It's about the questions - Begin substantial selection from Thomas Kuhn - The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, pages 1-173 (we will return to this throughout the semester, but it should be finished by the first midterm); Begin John Durham Peters - Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication, Introduction and Chapter 1

Week 2- Jan 19- What does it mean to have new, "modern", communication?  Early Cinema as New Publics and New Media - Finish Durham Peters - Chapters 4,5,6 and Conclusion;  Selections from Miriam Hansen's Babel and Babylon, pgs 1-89; Tim J. Anderson - "Reforming Jackass Music"

Week 3 - Jan 26 - British Cultural Studies and Media - "British Cultural Studies and Television" - John Fiske; Raymond Williams Television, Technology and Cultural Form Foreword and Foreword to the Second Edition, Chaps 1-3, 5 and 6

Week 4 - Feb 2 - Meet with Dr. Anderson to discuss research projects and **first midterm questions assigned.**

New Media Control: Institutional Structures, Capitalism and Post Structural Texts - Throughout the last 20 years media institutions have both concentrated in terms of asset holdings and loosened in terms of distribution. The result is that to tackle new media formations one must be versed in both political economic and poststructural understandings of social control.

Week 5 - Feb 9 -  Structuralism, Capitalism, Communication and Political Economy - Selection form Adorno and Horkheimer - "The Cultural Industry", Selections from The Information Society: Cyber Dreams and Digital Nightmares - Robert Hassan - Chaps 1-4

Week 6 - Feb 16 - Poststructuralism, Capitalism, Communication and Politics - Finish <u>The Information Society: Cyber Dreams and Digital Nightmares</u> - Robert Hassan, Chaps 5-6;  Begin Alexander Galloway - <u>Protocol</u>, Chaps Foreward (Thacker), Preface, Introduction, Chapter 1 - **First midterm due by midnight, Friday Feb 17th as a word doc at at [tjanders@odu.edu](mailto:tjanders@odu.edu)**

Week 7 - Feb 23 - Poststructuralism, empowerment/resistance, and so on - Finish Galloway, chaps 2-6, "Encoding, Decoding" -Stuart Hall, read selections from Jenkins - <u>Convergence Culture</u> - Introduction, Chapters 1 and 6.

Week 8 - Mar 1 - Performing Identity and Mediating Difference - At the same time that the adaptation of poststructural theory in media studies became more and more mainstream, 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.

Readings - "Psychoanalysis, Film, and Television" - Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, Judith Butler - Chapter 1 of <u>Gender Trouble</u>, Selection from Erving Goffman <u>Frame Analysis</u>, Lisa Nakumura - "Talking Race and Cyberspace" at [http://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-0405/msg00057.html](http://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-0405/msg00057.html) - **Second exam questions assigned**

Week 9 - Spring Break  (Enjoy!)

***Section Two - New Digital Media, New Networked Connections, New Hyper Texts, New Actants/Actors - As media has altered its materials, it has also altered the manner in which it is produced and distributed. This 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.***

*Theorizing Networks - One of the problems with network computing is that many more of us believe that we understand what a network is, how it is constructed and enacted. Unfortunately, these are significant problem: simply because we are "networked" in more ways than ever, few of us understand how this transforms our lives and the lives of others. This section asks us to think about the nature of networks, what they are and how power is exacted through them.*

Week 10 - March 15 - New Media and the study of Infrastructural Standards - "Steps Toward an Ecology of Infrastructure: Design and Access for Large Information Spaces" - Star, S. L., & Ruhleder, K. (1996). Information Systems Research, 7(1), 111-134; "Reckoning With Standards" - Star and Lampland in Star, S. L., & Lampland, M. (Eds.), Standards and their Stories: How Quantifying, Classifying, and Formalizing Practices Shape Everyday Life (pp. 3-24) (2009) - Begin selections <u>The Wealth of Networks: How</u>

<u>Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom</u> - Continue Yochai Benkler, chaps. 1-10 (Bloggers should write on both Star, et. al. articles and chapters 1-4)

Week 11 - Week of March 22 - Meet with Dr. Anderson on Friday March 16th or Monday, March 19 (either online via Skype or in person)  - No class on Thursday March 22 as I am at a conference beginning Wednesday March 21 until March 25.

Week 12 - March 29 - How to talk about networks and their potentials - Finish Benkler selections, chaps. 5-10 and discuss - **Second Exam due by Friday, March 30th at Midnight at [tjanders@odu.edu](mailto:tjanders@odu.edu)**

*Databases, "Database Narratives", Economies of Scope and Social Media Networks -*

*The dominant textual forms of the 20th century mass media were narrative in composition, today we interact with databases on an everyday basis. Whether these come in the form of search engines or Netflix instant queues, we need to understand how this textual form is composed and what kind of effects it has on our aesthetics and politics.*

*The term "social network" has gone from a rarely used term at the beginning of the century to one that is ubiquitous. This has transformed social relationships as well as possible economic relationships as well. These readings are dedicated to exploring how social media has allowed one-economies of scale to become economies of scope and what this means for an emergent 21st century economy.*

Week 13 - April 5 - Manovich - "Database as Symbolic Form", Poster - "Foucault and Databases"; Begin <u>Search Engine Society</u> - Alexander Halavais pp. 1-84

Week 14 - April 12 - Finish Halavais, pp. 85-191;  <u>Personal Connections in the Digital Age</u>-Baym, pp 1-71;

Week 15 - April 19 - Finish Baym - 72-155, Catch Up, Informal presentations and discussions of projects

Final Paper Due at April 26th by 5pm at [tjanders@odu.edu](mailto:tjanders@odu.edu)