COMS 200: History of Communication
Summer 2023
Location: Arts W-215
Times: Mon, Tues, Wed, Thurs: 1:35 pm - 3:55 pm

Instructor: Jessica Fontaine (she/her)
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Email: jessica.fontaine3@mcgill.ca
Student Office Hours: Wednesdays 4-5:30 pm in Arts W-293 or by appointment on Zoom
https://mcgill.zoom.us/j/5792710328
Emails will be answered within 48 hours except on weekends.

Course Description:
This course introduces students to the history of media and communication technologies, focusing on the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries. Our geographic focus will center largely on North America. We will examine key communication and media technologies, including radio, television, and film, and analyze how their social, cultural, political, and economic contexts shaped and continue to shape their production, representation, and uses. We will also consider the roles communication technologies play in political and social practices. The following questions will guide our investigations: How do users and producers construct the meaning of media and communication technologies? How do groups and individuals engage with media and technologies in ways that shape everyday experiences? What can the history of communication tell us about communication and media today?

This syllabus draws on previous iterations of the course facilitated by Farah Atoui, Sadie Couture,Gabrielle Kielich, Kristi Kouchakji, Allyson Rogers, and Liza Tom.

Course Delivery and Materials: This course will take place in person. All required readings and materials will be available in MyCourses or through the McGill library.

Course Objectives: Students in this class will…
- Become familiar with the features and affordances of a variety of communication and media technologies
- Demonstrate a historical understanding of communication technologies and think critically about how they are used and represented
- Comprehend and define key terms and critical concepts from media studies, cultural studies, science and technology studies, feminist studies
- Apply critical concepts to interpret and investigate media histories and objects
- Develop strategies for writing and communicating rigorous and critical analysis
- Practice communicating and working in small groups

Syllabus Change: In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University's control, the content and/or evaluation scheme of this course is subject to change.

Course Assignments: Further instructions for assignments can be found on MyCourses.
Small Writing Assignments - 20% (2 x 10%)
- Final Project Proposal Worksheet (Due Friday, May 12th @ 11:59 pm)
- Media Object Analysis Worksheet (Due Friday, May 26th @ 11:59 pm)

Group Activity Reports - 10% (4 x 2.5% Pass/Fail - Due May 5th, 12th, 19th, 26th @ 11:59 p.m.)
Group Presentation - 25% (May 23rd and May 24th)
Course Participation Self Assessment - 10% (Due June 1st @ 11:59 p.m.)
Final Project - 35% (Due June 5th)

Language: This course's language of instruction and discussion is English. However, in accordance with McGill University's Charter of Students' Rights, you may submit any written work in French.

Grading: Your instructor is eager to see you do well on assignments. If you have any questions about the assignments or materials, please see your instructor during office hours. Grades will be assigned according to the scale set out in the McGill Arts and Sciences calendar scale. Grades in the "A" range will be awarded for outstanding work; grades in the "B" range will be awarded for above satisfactory work; grades in the "C" range will be awarded for satisfactory work; grades in the "D" range are applied to unsatisfactory work.

Final grades will be based on the McGill University scale reproduced here:

85-100% = A
80-84% = A-
75-79% = B+
70-74% = B
65-69% =B-
60-64% = C+
55-59% = C
50-54% = D (Conditional Pass)
0-49% = F (Fail)

Grade Appeals: All assignments are graded on performance, not effort. Grades are final, except where a mistake has been made in calculation. The instructor will change grades only in the following: (a) if an error has been made at the level of calculation, or (b) if you can convincingly demonstrate that you have not been held to the same standard as everyone else. If you seek clarification on a grade you have received, you should contact the instructor during her office hours, keeping in mind the criteria of evaluation on which your assignment was graded. The instructor will discuss ways in which you can understand the evaluation and improve upon your performance on subsequent assignments.

Extensions and Late Assignments: All assignments are announced well in advance of their due dates. This provides students with ample time to prepare and complete them. Unless other arrangements have been made in advance, a 5% penalty per day will be applied to late submissions.

Illness, Mental Health, and other Barriers: If you are having difficulty and are unable to make an assignment deadline, contact the instructor. Class assignments are announced in advance. If you should need assistance, Counseling Services provides personal, academic, and career counseling to undergraduate and graduate students. They also offer workshops on study skills, multiple choice exams, test anxiety/stress management. Students can also visit the Wellness Hub for more information: 514-398-6017.

Accommodations: If you require other accommodations for your assignments or your access to the delivery of this course, please notify your instructor and the Office for Student Accessibility and Achievement by the end of the first week of class, ideally. The Office for Student Accessibility and Achievement in Suite 410 (4ᵗʰ floor) at 1010 Sherbrooke Street West. To get in touch with the Student Accessibility and Achievement Office, you can call (514) 398-6009, (514) 398-8198 (TDD) or email access.achieve@mcgill.ca to speak with an adviser there. Please note the above commitment to accommodation applies equally to survivors of sexual assault and/or harassment on or off campus. For information about accommodations available to those students who have experienced sexual violence, please see the SSMU website for more information. Your instructor is committed to making this course as accessible as possible.

Academic Integrity: McGill University takes academic integrity very seriously. All students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offenses under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/).

Course Expectations and Etiquette: This course will discuss sensitive and difficult topics as we investigate the histories and uses of communication technologies. Some of our course materials explore or visualize themes and experiences of violence and trauma, including violence against Indigenous peoples, surveillance, and violence performed by the state. Course materials may include graphic images and offensive language, including racist slurs. Although we will discuss and analyze these images and texts, we will not repeat or use such offensive language during our discussions.

COMS 200 is designed to be a space in which we can grow as scholars, critics, writers, analysts, and perhaps, media makers. In this space, we are able to try out ideas, even if we might abandon them later. In this course, one of our goals is to give ourselves and other people the space to transform their thinking and change their minds. We do not seek a purity of ideas. We recognize that our thoughts and beliefs are contingent, often contradictory, mutable, partial, and sometimes uncertain. In the midst of all of this, clarity in what we say and write is especially valuable. **Respectful dialogue is expected of everyone**. And while disagreements are expected, they should not shut down dialogue. Learning is a process: we make mistakes; we

change our minds; we sometimes regret some of the things we've said. Our aim is to work together to learn and *un*-learn some of the things we take for granted, and to sharpen our analytic skills in the process.

To this end, **please grant your fellow course participants courtesy and respect, whether you agree with what they say or not**. Avoid attacking someone's character or personhood if you disagree with something they have said: what someone thinks or says is not reducible to who and where they are. Our goal in using the discussion forum and talking in small and large groups is to understand the texts we read, the concepts we use, and the media examples we encounter, and how they might be useful to us. As much as possible, let's work to avoid purely negative critique in comments and responses. Let's also extend the same consideration to classmates. Consider what other people say in their comments, annotations, and discussion forum posts and think about how you can build on them and respond as generously as possible.

While we all bring interesting experiences to the course, consider whether and if you want to bring them up in discussion. If you do bring up your own experience, recognize that it becomes a topic for discussion. Ask yourself what point you want to make by talking about yourself or something personal. Do you want others to know this about you? You do not have to express your own opinion on a subject. You are also free to change your mind on any topic at any time.

Reading Schedule

WEEK ONE

Monday, May 1st: Welcome and Introduction

During class time we will:
Review the syllabus and assignments.
Sign up for groups/group presentations.
Complete 'Where I know From' exercise. (Optional to post your completed exercise on the discussion board)

Tuesday, May 2nd: Media Histories and Key Terms

Gitelman, L. (2008). Introduction: Media as historical subjects. In *Always already new: Media, history, and the data of culture* (pp. 1–22). MIT Press.

Williams, R. (1983). Communication, Media, Culture. In *Keywords: A Vocabulary of culture and society* (pp. 72–73, 203–204, 87–92. Revised ed. New York: Oxford University Press.

Wednesday, May 3rd: Key Concepts Continued

Sharma, S. (2022). Introduction: A feminist medium is the message. In S. Sharma, S. & R Singh (Eds.). *Re-understanding media: Feminist extensions of Marshall McLuhan.* (pp. 1-19). Duke University Press.

Hall, S. (1996). Encoding/decoding. In S. Hall, D. Hobson, A. Lowe, & P. Willis (Eds.), *Culture, media, language: Working papers in cultural studies, 1972-79* (pp. 117–127). Routledge.

Thursday, May 4th: Group Work
Presentation Prep

WEEK 2

Monday, May 8th: Media Infrastructure

Larkin, B. (2013). The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42, 327–43.

Parks, L. (2009). Around the antenna tree: The Politics of infrastructural visibility. *FlowTV* 9,(3). http://www.flowjournal.org/2009/03/around-the-antenna-tree-the-politics-of-infrastructural-visibilitylisa- parks-uc-santa-barbara/

Tuesday, May 9th: Early Sound Recording

Sterne, J. (2016). The Making of the Phonograph. In D. J. Crowley & P. Heyer (Eds.), *Communication in history: Technology, culture, society* (Sixth edition, pp. 189–193). Routledge.

Gitelman, L. (2012) "The Phonograph's New Media Publics." In J. Sterne (Ed.), *Sound studies reader.* (pp. 283–303). Routledge.

Wednesday, May 10th: Film
Kirby, L. (1997). Introduction. In *Parallel tracks: The railroad and silent cinema* (pp. 1–17). Duke University Press.

Skim: Raheja, M. (2010). Toward a genealogy of indigenous film theory: Reading hollywood indians. In *Reservation reelism: redfacing, visual sovereignty, and representations of native americans in film.* (pp. 1-45). University of Nebraska Press.

Thursday, May 11th: Group Work
Presentation Prep

WEEK 3
Monday, May 15th: Radio and the Telephone

Martin, M. (2014). Introduction. In *"'Hello, central?'": Gender, technology, and culture in the formation of telephone systems.* (pp. 3–13). McGill-Queen's University Press.

Stoever, J. (2019). Black radio listeners in America's "golden age." J*ournal of radio & audio media*, 26(1), 119–133.

Tuesday, May 16th: Comics and Cartoons

Smith, Z. (2020). 4 Colorism: The Ashiness of It All. *Inks: The Journal of the Comics Studies Society* 4,(3), 340-356.

Skim: Wanzo, R. A. (2020). Introduction: A Visual grammar of citizenship. In *The content of our caricature: African American comic art and political belonging* (pp. 1–30). New York University Press.

Wednesday, May 17th: Television

Spigel, L. (1992). Installing the Television Set: Popular Discourses on Television and Domestic Space, 1948-1955. In L. Spigel & D. Mann (Eds.), *Private screenings: Television and the female consumer* (pp. 3–40). University of Minnesota Press.

Skim: Holdsworth, A. (2021). Introduction. In *On living with television* (pp. 1–29). Duke University Press.

Thursday, May 18th: Group Work
Presentation Prep

WEEK 4

Monday, May 22nd
NO CLASS

Tuesday, May 23rd
Group Presentations

Wednesday, May 24th
Group Presentations

Thursday, May 25th: Group Work
Final Project Prep

Week 5

Monday, May 29th: Computing Histories and Gendered technology

Lingel, J. & Crawford, K (2020). "Alexa, tell me about your mother": The history of the secretary and the end of secrecy. *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience*, *6*(1), 1-22.

OR

Light, J. (1999). "When Computers Were Women." *Technology and Culture*, 40,(3), 455-483

Tuesday, May 30th: Data

Benjamin, R. (2019). Engineered Inequity. In *Race after technology: Abolitionist tools for the new jim code* (pp. 33-52). Polity Press.

Skim: Chun, W. H. K., & Barnett, A. (2021). Introduction: How to destroy the world, one solution at a time. In *Discriminating data: Correlation, neighborhoods, and the new politics of recognition* (pp. 9–28). The MIT Press.

Wednesday, May 31st: Wearable Technologies and Course Wrap-Up

Crawford, K., Lingel, J., & Karppi, T. (2015). Our metrics, ourselves: A hundred years of self-tracking from the weight scale to the wrist wearable device. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 18(4–5), 479–496.

Skim: Elman, J. P. (2018). "Find your fit": Wearable technology and the cultural politics of disability. *New Media & Society*, 20(10), 3760–3777.

Thursday, June 1st: Final Project Writing Day
NO CLASS

Final Projects Due on Monday, June 5th