Visual Studies 502:
Tacit Media and Digital Culture

Fall 2018

Burrowes 132

Mon 2:30 - 5:30

Professor Grant Wythoff
(gxw63@psu.edu)
Office Hours by appointment

Resources and tutorials at course site:
https://gwijthoff.github.io/tacitmedia

Skip to the schedule. . .

Description

This seminar will introduce a range of frameworks useful for thinking through the history, politics, ethics, and aesthetics of digital media. Units on emerging approaches to contemporary digital infrastructures (questions of selfhood, privacy, algorithms and inequality) will be paired with an overview of the most influential paradigms in media studies. In what ways do canonical media theories, keyed to the analysis of older media (cinema, radio), address contemporary issues in digital culture and politics?

Concepts from our readings will be operationalized with weekly exercises that include tactics for or protecting personal data, blocking unwarranted surveillance, and leaving filter bubbles. Students will leave with the basic computational literacy necessary for informed scholarship that both critiques and utilizes digital media.

Guiding us through these wide-ranging subjects will be a structuring theme: "tacit media," or the background, habitual operation of our networked devices that we take for granted and that take us for granted in turn. How can boredom, distraction, and habit—-once celebrated by media theorists as "embodied intelligence" (Susan Sontag) and "tactile appropriation" (Walter Benjamin)—-continue to be tactical modes of engagement in our current media and political environment?

Workshop Series

Data Privacy, Democracy, and The Humanities

As part of our seminar, we will lead three workshops open to the undergraduate community on privacy, surveillance, and social media practices. Each workshop will pair hands-on exercises using students' own devices with concepts from our seminar readings. Undergrads will be given new perspectives on and tactics for issues that are vital to the health of the networked public sphere today.

Each event will involve 1) a brief presentation on the issue, 2) a visiting technologist from the Philadelphia area, and 3) a hands-on lesson. Together, we will determine together the way to best teach the importance of each issue to our undergraduate students.

- **Oct 8-9:** Kristene Unsworth, STS and Computer Science, Drexel University, researches information policy, ethics, and civil society
- **Oct 22-23:** Hannah Sassaman, Media Mobilizing Project and 2017 Soros Justice Fellow
- **Nov 5-6:** Jessa Lingel, Annenberg School of Communication, University of Pennsylvania

Schedule

All readings will be provided in PDF excerpts. Book titles in red are recommended for you to purchase.

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wk 1 | Aug 20 | intro

Sara M. Watson, "Toward a Constructive Technology Criticism," Tow Center for Digital Journalism (October 2016) [html] | [pdf]

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wk 2 | Aug 27 | keywords 1

data ◦ **information** {: style="text-align: center"}

Geoffrey Nunberg, "Farewell to the Information Age," in *The Future of the Book,* ed. Geoffrey Nunberg (University of California Press, 1996), 103–83. [pdf]

Daniel Rosenberg, "Data Before the Fact," in *"Raw Data" Is an Oxymoron,* ed. Lisa Gitelman (MIT Press, 2013), 15–40. [pdf]

John Durham Peters, "Information: Notes Toward a Critical History," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 12, no. 2 (July 1, 1988): 9–23. [pdf]

Jonathan Gray, "Three Aspects of Data Worlds," *Krisis: Journal for Contemporary Philosophy* issue 1 (2018). [online]

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wk 3 | Sept 10 | habit 1

Wendy Chun, *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media* (MIT Press: 2016). [excerpts]

Felix Ravaisson, *Of Habit,* trans. Clare Carlisle and Mark Sinclair (Bloomsbury, 2009 [1838]). [excerpts]

Matthew B. Crawford, *The World Beyond Your Head: On Becoming an Individual in an Age of Distraction* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016). [excerpts]

Exercises

Explore Google Maps "Timeline" and the multiple steps required to actually turn it off.

View the ad categories Facebook has assigned you and learn how to track and block them with Fuzzify.me

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wk 4 | Sept 17 | keywords 2

technology ∘ **technics** ∘ **media** {: style="text-align: center"}

Eric Schatzberg, "Technik Comes to America: Changing Meanings of Technology before 1930," *Technology and Culture* 47, no. 3 (2006): 486–512. [pdf]

John Guillory, "Genesis of the Media Concept," *Critical Inquiry* 36, no. 2 (January 1, 2010): 321–62. [pdf]

Clapperton Chakanetsa Mavhunga, "Introduction," *What Do Science, Technology, and Innovation Mean from Africa?* (MIT Press, 2017). [pdf]

Jacob Bigelow, *Elements of Technology: Taken Chiefly from a Course of Lectures Delivered at Cambridge on the Application of the Sciences to the Useful Arts* (Hilliard, Gray, Little, and Wilkins, 1829) [online]

Further

John Durham Peters, "Understanding Media," in *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (University of Chicago Press, 2015), 13-52. [pdf]

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wk 5 | Sept 24 | keywords 3

digital ∘ **analog** ∘ **hardware** ∘ **software**

Ralph W. Gerard, "Some of the Problems Concerning Digital Notions in the Central Nervous System," in *Cybernetics: The Macy Conferences 1946-1953. The Complete Transactions,* ed. Claus Pias (Diaphanes, 2016 [1950]), 171–202. [pdf]

John Haugeland, "Analog and Analog," *Philosophical Topics* 12, no. 1 (Spring 1981): 213–25. [pdf]

Luciano Floridi, "Against Digital Ontology," *Synthese* 168, no. 1 (2009): 151–78. [pdf]

Friedrich Kittler, "There Is No Software," in *The Truth of the Technological World: Essays on the Genealogy of Presence* (Stanford University Press, 2013), 219–29. [pdf]

Exercises

Install Mozilla's suite of recommended privacy plugins.

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wk 6 | Oct 1 | apparatus ∘ stack

Benjamin H. Bratton, *The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty,* (MIT Press, 2015) [pdf]

Jean-Louis Baudry, "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus," *Film Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (1974 [1970]). [pdf]

Frank Kessler, "Notes on *Dispositif*" (2007) [pdf]

Further

Kate Crawford and Vladan Joler, "Anatomy of an AI System: The Amazon Echo As An Anatomical Map of Human Labor, Data and Planetary Resources," AI Now Institute and Share Lab, September 7, 2018.

Philip Rosen, ed. *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader* (1986)

Christian Sandvig, "Connection at Ewiiaapaayp Mountain: Indigenous Internet Infrastructure," in *Race After the Internet,* ed. Lisa Nakamura and Peter Chow-White (Routledge, 2012), p. 168-200. [pdf]

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wk 7 | Oct 8 | infrastructure ∘ organizing

Zeynep Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest,* (Yale UP, 2017) [pdf]

Tufekci, "How Social Media took us from Tahrir Square to Donald Trump," *Technology Review,* Aug 14, 2018.

Hans Magnus Enzensberger, "Constituents of a Theory of the Media," *New Left Review* I 64 (December 1970): 13-36. [pdf]

Jean Baudrillard, "Requiem for the Media," in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign,* trans. Charles Levin (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1981) [pdf]

Further

Bertolt Brecht, "Radio as an Apparatus of Communication: A Talk on the Function of Radio," *Screen* 20, no. 3–4 (December 1979 [1932]): 24–28. [pdf]

Data Privacy Workshop Series: Kris Unsworth

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wk 8 | Oct 15 | habit 2

James Williams, *Stand out of our Light: Freedom and Resistance in the Attention Economy* (Cambridge UP, 2018) [pdf]

Alexandra Schwartz, "Improving Ourselves to Death," *New Yorker,* Jan 15, 2018.

Taina Bucher, "Affective Landscapes: Everyday Encounters with Algorithms," in *If. . . Then: Algorithmic Power and Politics* (2018), 93-117. [pdf]

Exercises

Using the data trails you've left behind, reconstruct the day of October 15, 2015 (three years ago today) as best you can. Search your social media postings, camera roll, calendar, filter Gmail by date, and use mysql to access your iMessage archive.

Further

Carl Cederström and André Spicer, *The Wellness Syndrome* (Polity, 2015).

Svend Brinkmann, *Stand Firm: Resisting the Self-Improvement Craze,* (Polity, 2017).

Neta Alexander, "Rage Against the Machine: Buffering, Noise, and Perpetual Anxiety in the Age of Connected Viewing," *Cinema Journal* 56, no. 2 (Winter 2017): 1–24.

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wk 9 | Oct 22 | algorithms ∘ inequality

Virginia Eubanks, *Automating Inequality: How High-Tech Tools Profile, Police, and Punish the Poor,* (St. Martins, 2018) [pdf]

Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism,* (NYU Press, 2018) [pdf]

Data Privacy Workshop Series: Hannah Sassaman

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wk 10 | Oct 29 | determinism ∘ affordances

John Durham Peters, " 'You Mean My Whole Fallacy Is Wrong': On Technological Determinism," *Representations* 140 (Fall 2017): 10–26. [pdf]

Matthew Fuller, "The Forbidden Pleasures of Media Determining," in *Media After Kittler,* ed. Eleni Ikoniadou and Scott Wilson (Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 95–110. [pdf]

James J. Gibson, "The Theory of Affordances," in *Perceiving, Acting, and Knowing,* ed. Robert Shaw and John Bransford (University of Michigan Press, 1977) [pdf]

B.P. Bloomfield, Y. Latham, and T. Vurdubakis, "Bodies, Technologies and Action Possibilities: When Is an Affordance?," *Sociology* 44, no. 3 (June 18, 2010): 415–33. [pdf]

Further

Jenny L. Davis and James B. Chouinard, "Theorizing Affordances: From Request to Refuse," *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society,* June 2017

Ian Hutchby, "Technologies, Texts and Affordances," *Sociology* 35, no. 2 (May 1, 2001): 441–56. See also Brian Rappert's reply and Hutchby's response in v. 37, n. 3.

Exercises

Install the "People You May Know Inspector" to keep track of how Facebook recommends "friendships" across your extended social networks, and read up on its unsuccessful attempts to kill this and other tools developed by journalists to investigate the platform.

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wk 11 | Nov 5 | privacy

Sarah E. Igo, *The Known Citizen: A History of Privacy in Modern America,* (Harvard UP, 2018)

Sarah Jeong, "You Can't Escape Data Surveillance In America," *The Atlantic,* April 29, 2016

Further

Woodrow Hartzog, *Privacy's Blueprint: The Battle to Control the Design of New Technologies* (2018)

Digital Privacy Workshop Series: Jessa Lingel

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wk 12 | Nov 12 | silicon valley

Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism* (University of Chicago Press, 2006), Intro, Ch. 2 and 3 [pdf]

Claire L. Evans, *Broad Band: The Untold Story of the Women who Made the Internet,* (Penguin Random House, 2018) Intro, Ch. 7 and 8 [pdf]

Phone call with Gerd Stern on the history of USCO and 1960s media art collectives.

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wk 13 | Nov 26 | platforms and feudalism

Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism,* (Polity, 2016) [pdf]

Joshua A.T. Fairfield, "The 'internet of things' is sending us back to the Middle Ages," *The Conversation,* Sept 5, 2017

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wk 14 | Dec 3 | presentations

Final essays due Monday, December 10