Living with Digital Technology: To be Human in the Digital Era

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Spring 2019
Monday & Wednesday: 12-1:15 pm
Office Hours: Monday & Wednesday: 2-4 pm; Friday: 12:30-3 pm

As access to online publics and new media has increased, and a growing number of technologies have become embedded in our daily lives, anthropology has turned its attention to how digital technologies shape our everyday experiences. Digital technologies—like mobile phones, computers, tablets, the internet, cameras, drones—have allowed humans to build upon existing technologies and create often novel forms of communication, representation, and interaction. New modes of the circulation and management of information have been key to the social changes that digital technologies have impacted. Our use of digital technologies shapes processes of knowledge production—how we come to know and represent ourselves, others, and the world. Power, inequality, and political economic contexts continue to shape access to digital technologies, differentiated levels of visibility, and levels of participation in the creation, circulation, and consumption of information and technology. Across the globe, people have employed digital technologies, online publics, and social media to create spaces for representation and belonging, document and share experiences, and contest their marginalization. At the same time, many have used digital technologies to participate in violence and exclusion. Through digital technologies we have perhaps gained new forms of interpersonal, intergroup, cross-cultural, and even interspecies interactions. As we surround ourselves by and participate in ever-developing technologies, how does this shift what it means to be human—the perennial concern of anthropology? As much as digital technologies raise new questions, we often find ourselves circling back to familiar inquiries into human interaction, communication, relations of power, and global connection.

This syllabus introduces participants to anthropology’s forays into studying digital technologies and how they have impacted people’s lives. The readings grapple with questions of what it means to be human in this digital era.

Learning Objectives:

This is an exploratory course, designed to familiarize students with anthropological theory and research methods. By the end of the course, students will get first-hand experience of:

Methods

a) qualitative research methods, like ethnographic data collection
b) how to analyze data collected through ethnography, intensive fieldwork and participant observation
c) how to present research in different formats

Theory

This class will equip students with anthropological approaches to digital living. Students will:

a) become familiar with how digital technologies impact social lives and relations, and
b) develop a critical approach and understanding of digital technologies

**Syllabus Design**

Assigned class readings are mandatory. In addition, if recommended readings are listed, students are strongly advised to read them but can exercise their discretion. Students will be required to submit response papers that comprise 2-3 questions and observations based on readings a day prior class. Discussion topics for the class will be drawn from these questions. Each student is required to undertake independent research through the semester. Assignments will be based on this research and are divided between oral presentation and written papers. Class attendance and participation carry weight.

**Policies:**

a) Use of electronic gadgets (phone, laptop, ipad) is NOT permitted during class. If students need an exemption from this rule, they need to get my permission and will have to furnish credible reasons for the same.

b) Make-up exams and extensions will only be granted in cases of extreme duress, like documented medical emergencies and/or religious observance.

c) If some form of academic accommodation is needed, students should contact me at the earliest with documented proof to support accommodation and to discuss whether such accommodation can be provided.

d) Please familiarize yourself with the school’s policies on Academic Integrity and Plagiarism.

**Assignments**

The final assignment is a term paper based on original research that each student will undertake independently on a topic of choice that explores some aspect of social life with digital technologies. Throughout the course, we will work towards this aim. Detailed prompts for each assignment will be provided through the course of the semester. Meetings with me to discuss assignment progress are mandatory at different stages.

**Research and Fieldwork Notes (10%)**: Students are required to undertake independent research through the semester for 3 hours per week, for 10 weeks (3x10=30 hours). Fieldwork notes will comprise details of research question, participants, core findings, verbatim quotes, emerging themes and preliminary analyses. These will be submitted twice to me for assessment (submission dates in the syllabus).

**Assignment #1 (5%)**: Frame a research question. Decide on a research population. Decide on method of data collection and format for presenting research findings. 250-400 words. One meeting necessary prior to submission date.

**Assignment #2 (15%)**: Written assignment. 1500-2000 words. Review 5-7 sources. At least 3 sources should be from the syllabus. One meeting necessary prior to submission date.

**Assignment #3a (15%)**: Each student will make a 10 minutes presentation in class to share their research question, data collection methods, research participants and primary research findings. One meeting necessary prior to presentation.
**Assignment #3b (25%):** Submit a final assignment that explains: (1) the topic of your project; (2) research methods and participants; (3) literature you will enter into dialogue with; (4) your hypothesis, findings, and conclusion.

**Class Attendance and Participation (15%)**
- Class attendance and participation are mandatory. After 1 absence from class, students will be penalized 0.5% from their final grade for each unexcused absence.
- Students will also be divided into groups and each group will make ONE presentation on the course readings.
- Students are expected to complete their assigned readings and come to class prepared to discuss these readings.
- The classroom is a safe learning environment for students. All of us must collectively work towards ensuring that everyone feels secure and confident to participate in classroom discussions.
- Students must be respectful and receptive towards the viewpoints of their peers and be mindful of the fact that their peers come from diverse backgrounds. Disagreements must be expressed thoughtfully and in ways that do not constitute personal attacks, ridicule or discriminatory behaviors.

**Response Papers (15%)**
- Response papers set the tone for class discussions and are therefore, absolutely essential.
- The class will be divided into two groups and each group will submit response papers on alternate days. All students of the designated groups are required to submit individual response papers. **THIS IS NOT A GROUP EXERCISE.**
- Response papers comprise 2-3 questions or observations on the scheduled readings. They should be emailed to me at rbhandari@richmond.edu
- Response papers are due by **11 pm on the night before class.**
- Students can miss up to 1 response paper per semester. Failure to turn in response papers as per schedule will affect your grades.

**Class Schedule**

**January 14:** Introduction and syllabus discussion

**The Internet & Social Media: Introduction**

- **January 16**
  Michael Wesch. The Machine is Us/ing Us
  [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NLlGopyXT_g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NLlGopyXT_g)


**Self and Sociality**
- **January 23**

- **January 28**

- **January 30**

**Hand in drafts of proposed research question for term paper.**

- **February 4:** Visit by Carver Weakley, Instructor, Department of Focused Inquiry, VCU. Carver will discuss how research can be presented in different formats and medium aside from written papers.

**Love and Intimacy**

- **February 6**

  Required: Rohit Dasgupta on Queer Desires and Digital Technologies.

  Pick One of Three on Disability and online dating:


  https://www.thedailybeast.com/so-can-you-fck-what-its-like-to-online-date-with-a-disability


**Online Communities: Care and Belonging**

- **February 11**

  https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/28/world/americas/isis-online-recruiting-american.html

  Griefwork Online

**Assignment #1 to be turned in.**
Selfies: Identity and Representation

- **February 13**


- **February 18**: Visit by Nell Haynes, Assistant Professor in Anthropology, Georgetown University. Nell will talk about the everyday uses of social media in Chile.

  **MUST READ**: Haynes, Nell. 2016. Visual Posting – The Aesthetics of Alto Hospicio (Ch 3). In Social Media in Northern Chile.

  **FEBRUARY 20**: Watch Fyre Festival Documentary: Netflix. Group Presentation.

Conflict and Abuse

- **February 25**


- **February 27**
  Podcasts, This American Life. Group Presentation.

Ask not for whom the bell trolls, it trolls for thee: [https://www.thisamericanlife.org/545/if-you-dont-have-anything-nice-to-say-say-it-in-all-caps](https://www.thisamericanlife.org/545/if-you-dont-have-anything-nice-to-say-say-it-in-all-caps)

If you don’t have anything nice to say, say it in all caps: [https://www.thisamericanlife.org/545/if-you-dont-have-anything-nice-to-say-say-it-in-all-caps/act-one](https://www.thisamericanlife.org/545/if-you-dont-have-anything-nice-to-say-say-it-in-all-caps/act-one)

Submit Fieldwork Notes #1.

Anxieties and Loneliness

- **March 4**
  Group Presentation:
The Future of Loneliness: https://www.theguardian.com/society/2015/apr/01/future-of-loneliness-internet-isolation

Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?  

March 6: Submit Assignment #2: Lit Review.

--SPRING BREAK--

Protests and Activism

- March 18


The List of Sexual Harassers in Academia

Wildlife Conservation

- March 20


Dangerous Speech

- March 25


Class Visit: Sean Furmage, PhD, Anthropology, on Dangerous Speech and elections in Kenya.

Development and Economic Lives

- March 27


[Criminal] Entrepreneurship

- **April 1**
  Group Presentation:


  Barry, Ellen. 2017. India’s Call-Center Talents Put to a Criminal Use: Swindling Americans.  

Submit Fieldwork Notes #2.

Aspirations and Subversion

- **April 3**
  Group Presentation:


  Fake it till you make it:  


Trust/Mistrust

- **April 8**
  Cambridge Analytica, Facebook:  


- **April 10: Class presentation (#3a)**

- **April 15: Class Presentation (#3a)**
- **April 17**: Class Presentation (#3a)

- **April 22**: Class Visit: What it means to live without Technology: The Amish Life. Gretchen Schafft, Professor, Anthropology, American University.

- **April 24**: Wrap Up.

- **April 30**: Assignment #3b to be submitted.