

# Disability, Technology, Communication

COMS 411 (001)— Fall 2016

Tuesdays 11:30-14:30, 230 Ferrier

Professor Jonathan Sterne

Office: Arts W280

Office hours: T 14:30-15:30 (no appointment necessary—please drop in!) and by appointment; please allow some lead time for appointments, I am often heavily booked but would be happy to see you.

Office Phone: 398-5852 (I rarely pick up; I check voicemail at least once a day on days I am on campus)

Email: jonathan.sterne@mcgill.ca. I check at least once daily M-F when I'm in town—please allow a couple days for a reply. If your email requires a long reply I may ask you to see me. If you have a question that is easily answered on the course website or in course materials, I will direct you there.

## Prospectus

This course explores the intersections of disability and media scholarship in order to rethink our basic concepts of communication, technology and culture, as well as to advance our understandings of disability. We will consider critical accounts of disability against theories of technology and communication. Most available theories of communication and technology presuppose a fully “able” subject, even though there is little warrant for doing this when we consider the full variety of human conditions. What happens if we remove that presupposition and instead begin by presupposing the human variety?

## Requirements

### Books:

Required: Pullin, Graham. *Design Meets Disability*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009. ISBN: 0262516748 (ready for purchase)

Highly Recommended: Adams, Rachel, Benjamin Reiss and David Serlin, eds. *Keywords for Disability Studies*. New York: NYU Press, 2015. ISBN: 978-1-4798-3952.

Pullin is available at *The Word Bookstore*, 469 Milton. Please bring cash. You can order *Keywords* there or via the usual online outlets. Both books are also on reserve (*Keywords* is an e-book).

**Additional required readings will be available through the course website.**

### Etiquette:

1. Your goal is full attendance, attention, participation, listening and reading all of required texts. I expect the very best you can give.

2. Show good faith and good humour toward your colleagues in the classroom. For both: disagreements are expected and encouraged, but please keep nitpicking to a minimum; personal attacks and intimidation are not acceptable under any circumstance. Follow the Golden Rule. Encourage basic questions as well as advanced ones. You are free to change your mind at any time; so are others. Arguments are not contests.
3. Avoid “seek and destroy” criticism of others’ ideas (or ideas in the readings). If you have something critical to say, be ready to explain how the piece could be improved. If you disagree with the premise of a piece, then read for what motivates the argument. (Students will be allowed one “seek and destroy” per term—use it wisely.)
4. Personal experience is sometimes a necessary part of discussion, but be thoughtful before bringing it up. Is it really relevant to the topic? Do you want others to know what you are about to say? Are you prepared to seriously consider others’ (equally valid) interpretations of your experience if they differ from your own? Anecdotes are not the same thing as systematically collected scholarly evidence.
5. Be mindful of your own use of technology. You should put away laptops, mobile phones, and other personal communication technologies (apart from writing utensils, paper and class texts) except when required for an activity or necessary for a student’s accommodation.
6. Content notes: As your prof, I will never do anything intentionally to shock or traumatize students. At the same time, it’s our job to discuss difficult subjects in class, and nobody can predict the effect some materials may have on someone. I will try and give previews of the kinds of content you will encounter before you encounter it. If I forget, feel free to ask. If you are having difficulty dealing with a class discussion or a reading, you may raise the issue as part of the discussion (keeping in mind #4 above), or you may simply discretely step out of class. A note to me (the prof) would be helpful after the fact so that I know what happened and don’t think you just got up and left.

## **Product (and % of Semester Grade):**

### **I. Weekly Response Papers (30%)**

For each class (except those noted below in the schedule), write a 1-2 page (double spaced—350-500 words) scholarly response to one of the assigned readings (or part of a book if a book is assigned). The response should be scholarly in the sense that it works through and engages with an idea or example from the reading but it should not be a take-down of the author. You may mention other things you’ve read or experiences you’ve had, or examples from the culture around you, but the main

goal is to say something substantial and intellectual about one of the assigned readings for the week. Ideally, your response will help stimulate discussion in the class. All class members should be prepared to say something about what they wrote, and I will have one or a few students read their responses each week as a way of starting the discussion.

Responses should be posted to the MyCourses site by 3pm each Monday before class. **I will grade them on a pass/fail basis to encourage risk-taking, but will note exceptional effort or achievement over the course of the term, as well as lackluster effort.** I will give your first two responses a collective letter grade and written feedback to give you an idea of my assessment.

I encourage you to read one another's responses before class.

## **II. Dates Project (10%)**

**For 17 October**, 3pm, students will write a slightly longer, 5-6 page double-spaced paper (plus scholarly apparatus). Students will apply Graham Pullin's book (and any other readings they choose) by planning an accessible date in Montreal, from start to finish. The date can be for any configuration of abilities, genders, sexualities or number of people: the important thing is that you think through accessibility in terms of getting around the city and engaging with its cultural life. You may work alone or with a partner.

The assignment may be completed on its own terms, but may also be folded into a larger semester project.

Students will informally present their dates in class on 18 October.

## **III. Discussion Participation (15%)**

I expect everyone to participate regularly in class discussion. You should come every week ready to discuss the required readings. (Recommended readings, including keywords, are not required.) I notice (and appreciate it) when students make good contributions to the course online or in other ways besides speaking up in class. I distinguish between quantity and quality. Students will be marked down for talking while others are talking, rude behaviour, text messaging, social media activity during class, or using laptops or phones for purposes other than advancing class discussion.

**Bringing in materials and examples:** students are encouraged—but not required—to bring in materials related to the week's readings or discussion. Examples from social media, music, news, television, fiction, medicine, other courses—any field is welcome. If you bring something, please make a short post about it with a link on the "Class Related Discussion and Links" topic.

#### **IV. Semester Project (45%)**

The semester project is organized according to the principal of resonant design.

The semester project must represent a major undertaking by one or more students in the course. It could, for instance, take the form of a 15-20pp scholarly research paper with citations and proper scholarly apparatus. However, I am also very interested in students pursuing other kinds of major undertakings. The project could also take the form of a group project that aims to transform some aspect of our lived or cultural environment. It could take the form of research service to a disability rights group on campus or elsewhere. It must, of course, substantially engage with the themes in the course and exhibit vigorous intellectual inquiry on your part.

The semester project will consist of:

- For 28 October: a proposal of approximately 2 pages (or longer) describing the project in some detail: what will you do? What are your intellectual goals (ie, what will you learn by doing it?) What resources will you need to carry it out? How can it be evaluated?
- For 25 November: a 5 page (or equivalent) progress report to be posted on the course website.
- For 29 November: A short presentation in which you describe colleagues' work based on the paper from the 25<sup>th</sup> and provide them with feedback.
- For 2 December: The final project, completed. In terms of amount of work, it should be the equivalent of a 15-20 page paper. Group projects obviously can be somewhat larger but it need not be a 1:1 ratio (eg, the equivalent of a 60-80 page paper from 4 people). Quality is more important than quantity.

We will discuss the semester projects in more detail as the course unfolds.

### **Class Schedule**

#### **Bring Printed Copies of Readings to Class**

**6 Sep: Apologia: some basic concepts for the study of technology and disability**

**13 Sep: Disability and Technology: Take I**

Pullin, Graham. *Design Meets Disability*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009.

Keywords: Disability, Ability, Design, Impairment, Normal

**20 Sep: Some Preliminary Definitions and Concepts**

Mitchell, David and Sharon Snyder. "Narrative Prosthesis and the Materiality of Metaphor."  
In *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*, 47-64. Ann

- Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001.
- Schweik, Susan. "Introduction." In *The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public*. New York: New York University Press, 2009, 1-20
- Siebers, Tobin. "Introduction." *Disability Theory*, 1-33. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008.
- Kafer, Alison. "Introduction: Imagined Futures." *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 1-24. Indiana University Press, 2013.

Keywords: Crip, Gender, Identity, Minority, Queer, Race, Stigma

Recommended:

- Kleege, Georgina. "Blindness and Visual Culture: An Eyewitness Account." *Journal of Visual Culture* 4 (2005): 179-190.

**27 Sep: Technology 1: Scripting Ability and Debility**

- McRuer, Robert. "Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence," *Crip Theory*. 1-33. New York: New York University Press. (note: the .pdf wrongly attributes the essay to Michael Bérubé—he's the book series editor, not the author)
- Mills, Mara. "Do Signals Have Politics?: Inscribing Abilities in Cochlear Implants." In *The Oxford Handbook of Sound Studies*, edited by Karin Bijsterveld and Trevor Pinch. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Ellcessor, Elizabeth. "Transformers: Accessibility, Style and Adaptation." *Restricted Access: Media, Disability and the Politics of Participation*, 89-121 (notes 214-219). New York: New York University Press, 2016.

Keywords: Activism, Accommodation, Embodiment, Sex

Recommended:

- Akrich, Madeleine. "The De-Description of Technical Objects." *Shaping Technology, Building Society: Studies in Sociotechnical Change*, edited by Wiebe Bijker and J. Law, 205-24. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992.

**4 Oct: Technology 2: Assistive and Resistive Contexts**

- Sobchack, Vivian. "A Leg to Stand On: Prosthetics, Metaphor, and Materiality." *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*, 205-225. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.
- Williamson, Bess. "Electric Moms and Quad Drivers: People with Disabilities Buying, Making and Using Technology in Postwar America." *American Studies* 52, no. 1 (2012): 5-29.
- Kirkpatrick Bill. "'A Blessed Boon': Radio, Disability, Governmentality, and the Discourse of the 'Shut-In,' 1920-1930." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 29:3 (2011): 165-184.
- Hagood, Mack. "Listening to Tinnitus: roles of Media When Hearing Breaks Down." *Sounding Out!* (16 July 2012)

<https://soundstudiesblog.com/2012/07/16/listening-to-tinnitus-roles-of-media-when-hearing-breaks-down/>

Keywords: Dependency, Rehabilitation, Technology, Work

Recommended:

Jain, Sarah S. Lochlann. "Keyboard Design." *Injury: The Politics of Product Design and Safety Law in the United States*, 86-123. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.

**11 Oct: Of Different Minds / Neurodiversity**

Peters, John Durham. "Broadcasting and Schizophrenia." *Media, Culture and Society* 32, no. 1 (2010): 123-40.

Price, Margaret. "Introduction," *Mad at School Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life*, 1-24. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011.

Pinchevski, Amit, and John Durham Peters. "Autism and New Media: Disability between Technology and Society." *New Media & Society*, (8 July 2015, online first) doi:10.1177/1461444815594441: 1-17.

Keywords: Affect, Madness, Medicalization, Passing

Recommended:

Bérubé, Michael. "Disability and Citizenship." *Dissent*, Spring 2003.  
<http://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/?article=506%5D>

17 October, 3pm: 5-6 page Dates Project paper due, posted on course website.

**18 Oct: Dates Assignment**

Kafer, Alison. "Accessible Futures, Future Coalitions." In *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 149-169. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013.

Keywords: Access, Rights, Space

Recommended:

Hahn, Harlan. "Disability and the Urban Environment: A Perspective on Los Angeles." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 4 (1986): 279-88.

Americans with Disabilities Act Guidelines for design:

[http://www.ada.gov/2010ADASTandards\\_index.htm](http://www.ada.gov/2010ADASTandards_index.htm)

And the website for the institute for human-centered design

<http://www.adaptiveenvironments.org/>

**25 Oct: Aesthetics and Representation 1: Disability and Music – Jessica Holmes special guest star (Prof in Europe this week)**

28 October, 5pm: 2-4 page project proposal due, posted on course website.

## **1 Nov: Aesthetics and Representation 2: Some Different Disability Hermeneutics**

- Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. "Looking Away, Staring Back." *Staring: How We Look*, 79-94. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Siebers, Tobin. "Disability and Art Vandalism," *Disability Aesthetics*, 83-99 (notes 145-6). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010.
- Cvetkovich, Anne "From Dispossession to Radical Self-Possession: Racism and Depression." *Depression: A Public Feeling*, 115-153 (notes 230-236). Durham: Duke University Press, 2012.

Keywords: Aesthetics, Invisibility, Visuality, Performance

### Recommended:

- Haller, Beth A. "Not Worth Keeping Alive? *New York Times* Narratives About Assisted Suicide." In *Representing Disability in an Ableist World*, 67-86. Louisville: The Avacado Press, 2010.

## **8 Nov: Panic, Anxiety, Fear**

- Orr, Jackie. "History, Memory, Story: Openings." *Panic Diaries: A Genealogy of Panic Disorder*, 3-31 (notes 281-285). Durham: Duke University Press, 2006.
- Plan C Collective, "We Are All Very Anxious: Six Theses on Anxiety and Why It Is Effectively Preventing Militancy, and One Possible Strategy for Overcoming It." Blog post (4 April 2014): <http://www.weareplanc.org/blog/we-are-all-very-anxious/>
- Jain, Lochlann. "Fallout: Minuets in the Key of Fear." *Malignant: How Cancer Becomes Us*, 179-201. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013.

Keywords: History, Human, Illness, Madness

### Recommended:

- Titchkosky, Tanya, and Katie Aubrecht. "WHO's MIND, Whose Future? Mental Health Projects as Colonial Logics." *Social Identities* 21, no. 1 (January 2, 2015): 69-84.

## **15 Nov: Advancing Disability and Media Theory—Some Interesting Directions**

- Livingston, Julie. "Introduction," *Debility and the Moral Imagination in Botswana*, 1-25 (notes 247-250). Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005.
- Puar, Jasbir. "Keyword: Disability." *TSQ: Trans Studies Quarterly* 1:1 (2014): 77-81.
- Alper, Meryl. "Introduction." *Giving Voice: Mobile Communication, Disability and Inequality*, 1-34. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017.

Mills, Mara and Jonathan Sterne. "Dismediation: Three Proposals, Six Tactics."  
Forthcoming in *Disability Media Studies*, eds. Elizabeth Ellcessor and Bill Kirkpatrick. New York: NYU Press, 2017 or 2018.

Read about the AUMI: Adaptive Use Musical Instrument here:

<http://deeplisting.org/site/adaptiveuse> . Feel free to download it and try it out yourself.

**22 Nov:** Work Collectively On Your Projects, meet with prof as needed.

25 Nov: 5-page progress report due.

**29 Nov: Student Peer Feedback Session**

**2 Dec, 5pm: Final Projects Due**

## Other Policies

**Grades:** I am eager to help you do well on assignments before they are due. Please visit me during office hours to ask questions about material for the course and assignments on which you are working.

Generally I evaluate in terms of letter grades, and then assign them numbers in terms of the baselines on the scale set out in the Arts and Sciences calendar (85=A, 70=B, etc), which allows them to be properly weighted and averaged. Grades in the "A" range are awarded only for superior work (and not merely sufficient performance). Grades in the "B" range are awarded for work that is above satisfactory. In the "C" range they are awarded for satisfactory/sufficient work. And in the "D" range, they reflect unsatisfactory work. You can always check your grades on MyCourses.

Students are allowed to miss one class during the term without penalty, though you are still expected to notify me of your absence. Additional absences will result in a reduction of their final grade.

**Accommodation:** If you require special accommodations or classroom modifications of any kind, please notify both the professor and Office for Students with Disabilities by the end of the first week in which you are enrolled in the course. They are located in Room RS56, Redpath Library Bldg., 398-6009 (voice), 398-8198 (TTY), [<http://www.mcgill.ca/osd/>].

**French:** You have the right to submit your written work in French. If you plan to write in French, please get in touch with me during add-drop so we can talk about how to handle it, as I am not fluent in French. Since there is a writing-intensive component to the class, we should discuss logistics.

Class discussions are in English, but you're certainly welcome to resort to French if you can't find the right word in English and we'll figure it out together.

**Nondiscrimination:** I value equality of opportunity, and human dignity and diversity. In accordance with University policy, I will not tolerate discrimination or harassment on the basis of race, colour, ethnic or national origin, civil status, religion, creed, political convictions, language, sex, sexual orientation, social condition, age, personal difference or the use of assistive technology in negotiating that difference. Among other things, this means that you do not have to agree with your teacher, the assigned readings, or the majority of your classmates in order to do well in this course. You are, however, obligated to demonstrate an understanding of the course material *whether or not you agree with it*. If there is something I can do to make the class more hospitable, please let me know.

**Late papers** may not receive comments and will earn a reduced grade (one increment of a letter grade for the first two days, then an increment per day, including weekends).

**It is your responsibility to make sure I receive any assignment you turn in. It is also your responsibility to properly back up your work:** keep more than one digital copy and always have a paper copy of anything you submit.

**You must complete all the major assignments (all parts of final project, dates assignment, etc) to pass the course.**

**Required Academic Integrity Statement:** McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see [www.mcgill.ca/integrity](http://www.mcgill.ca/integrity) )

**Special Required Emergency Syllabus-Eraser Clause:** In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University's control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.

Thanks: Dylan Mulvin, Mara Mills, Julie Ellman, Jessica Holmes. Comic: <http://cripzthecomix.com>

