

Disability, Technology, Communication

COMS 411 (001)— Winter 2015

Thursday 11:30-14:30, W5 Arts

Professor Jonathan Sterne

Office: Arts W280

Office hours: Th 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 Th)

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 disability scholarship in order to rethink our basic concepts of communication, technology and culture. 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:

Pullin, Graham. *Design Meets Disability*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009. ISBN: 0262516748
Siebers, Tobin. *Disability Aesthetics*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010. ISBN: 0472051008

Books are available at *The Word Bookstore*, 469 Milton. Please bring cash.

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 humor 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.
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.

Product (and % of Semester Grade):

I. Weekly response papers (30%)

For each class (except those noted below), write a 1-2 page (double spaced—350-500 words) response to one of the assigned readings (or part of a book if a book is assigned). The response should be “critical” in the sense that it works through and engages with an idea from the reading but it should not be a take-down of the author. 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 critiques each week as a way of starting the discussion.

Responses should be posted to the MyCourses site by 3pm each Wednesday 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 to give you an idea of my assessment.

II. Dates Project (10%)

For the class on 5 February, students will write a slightly longer, 5-6 page double-spaced paper (plus scholarly apparatus) based on an assignment (due on the 4th, 3pm). Students will apply Graham Pullin’s book 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.

III. Discussion Participation (15%)

I expect everyone to participate regularly in class discussion. You should come every week ready to discuss the readings. 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, text messaging, or using laptops for purposes other than advancing class discussion.

IV. Semester Project (45%)

This year, I am taking the lid off the semester project and applying the principle 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.

The semester project will consist of:

- For 19 February: 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 7 April: a 5 page (or equivalent) progress report to be posted on the course website
- For 9 April: A short presentation in which you describe colleagues' work and provide them with feedback.
- For 16 April: 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

8 Jan:

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

15 Jan:

Disability and Technology: Take I

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

22 Jan: Stigma, Identity, Affiliation

Goffman, Erving. "Stigma and Social Identity." *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1963, 1-40

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.

Mills, Mara. "Hearing Aids and the History of Electronics Miniaturization." *IEEE Annals of the History of Computing* 33, no. 2 (April-June 2011): 24-44.

29 Jan:

Scripting Ability: Technology and Radical Monopoly

Illich, Ivan. "Radical Monopoly," *Tools for Conviviality*, 51-57. New York: Harper and Row, 1973.

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.

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)

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.

5 Feb

Dates assignment

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

And the website for the institute for human-centered design

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

12 Feb

Representing Disability

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.

Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. "Looking Away, Staring Back." *Staring: How We Look*, 79-94. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

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.

Kirpatrick 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.

19 Feb

Of Different Minds / Neurodiversity (+ 1-2 page proposal due)

Grandin, Temple. "Thinking in Pictures: Autism and Visual Thought." *Thinking in Pictures and Other Reports from My Life with Autism*, 19-42. New York: Vintage Books, 1995.

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

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

26 Feb

Prosthesis: Technologies, Bodies, Abilities

Lorde, Audre. "Breast Cancer: Power vs. Prosthesis." *The Cancer Journals*, 55-77. Argyle, NY: Spinsters, Ink, 1980.

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.

Cartwright, Lisa & Brian Goldfarb. "On the Subject of Neural and Sensory Prosthesis." *The Prosthetic Impulse: From a Posthuman Present to a Biocultural Future*, edited by Marquard Smith and Joanne Morra, 125-154. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006.

Ellcessor, Elizabeth. "Captions On, Off, on TV, Online: Accessibility and Search Engine Optimization in Online Closed Captioning," *Television and New Media*, 13:4(2011): 329-352.

5 March Spring Break!

12 March: Aesthetics

Siebers, Tobin. *Disability Aesthetics*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

19 March Disability and Music

Iverson, Jennifer. "Mechanized Bodies: Technology and Supplements in Björk's Electronica." *The Oxford Handbook to Music and Disability*, edited by Blake Howe, Stephanie Jensen-Moulton, and Joseph N. Straus. New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming.

McKay, George. "Johnnie-Be-Deaf: One Hearing-Impaired Star, and Popular Music as a Disabling (Deafening) Culture." *Shakin' All Over: Popular Music and Disability*, 120-149. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013.

Waltz, Mitzi, and Martin James. "The (Re)marketing of Disability in Pop: Ian Curtis and Joy Division." *Popular Music* 28/3 (2009): 367-80.

23-27 March: McGill Disability Awareness Week. Stay tuned for events.

23 March, 4pm Disability Studies Roundtable sponsored by Media@McGill. Details forthcoming.

26 March: SCMS Guest Discussion

Participants TBA. Bring your questions about disability and technology (we will discuss in advance).

29 March (yes, Sunday) 1-2:45pm: "What Can Disability Studies Do for Media Studies" Roundtable at Society for Cinema and Media Studies, featuring Bill Kirkpatrick, Elizabeth Elcessor, Mara Mills, Tasha Oren, and Jonathan Sterne. Location TBA. Technically, you'll have to sneak in.

2 April: Work Collectively On Your Projects

9 April LAST DAY: students present

16 April: 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 unexcused 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, color, 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 (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)

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>

