

Disability, Technology, Communication

COMS 492 (001)—Special Topics in Power, Difference and Justice, Fall 2011

Tuesdays 11:30-14:30, 230 Ferrier

Professor Jonathan Sterne

Office: Arts W280

Office hours: 14:30-15:30, Tuesdays (no appointment necessary—please drop in!)
and by appointment.

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

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, with a special focus on communication in its many technologized forms. 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 human variation?

Requirements

Books:

Davis, Lennard, ed. *The Disability Studies Reader*. 3rd edition. London and New York: Routledge, 2010

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

***Note: MIT Press says that *Design Meets Disability* will be coming out in paperback on September 29th. The bookstore should have it the first week of October.

A set of required and recommended readings will also be provided.

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. Ideally, your critique will help stimulate discussion in the class. All class members should be prepared to say something about what they wrote, and I will have a few students read their critiques each week as a way of starting the discussion.

Critiques 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.

II. Normative Projects (20%)

For the classes on 1 November and 22 November, students will write slightly longer, 5-page double-spaced papers (plus scholarly apparatus) based on an assignment. Both projects ask you to think normatively: that is, you must engage with aspects of the world that are not as they should be, and consider how they ought to be changed and what it would take to do it.

Both assignments must be completed on their own terms, but may be folded into a larger semester project.

For November 1st, students will apply 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.

For November 22nd, students will identify one aspect of media or technological practice or policy that need to be changed. The paper will offer an account for why the present state of affairs is the way it is, what must be done to change it and how it should be changed.

III. Discussion Participation and Facilitation (10%)

Participation:

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.

Facilitation:

Once during the term you (or you and a colleague) will be designated **Finder(s) of Objects**. The Finder of Objects will help me locate objects for us to discuss in relation to the readings. Your object may be an image, a sound recording, a device, or anything else you see fit to bring in. I prefer that people bring in objects created by someone other than themselves, but if you made something particularly cool, please consult with me. The classroom is equipped with a VGA cable and 1/8th inch (3.5mm) stereo audio cable to hook up laptops. If you require other equipment, please let me know by 10:00 Monday morning before your class. Audiovisual material should be of short duration—ideally, about 5 minutes.

IV. Semester Project (40%)

All semester projects will result in

- a 2-3 page proposal due electronically on the 27th of October
- a short presentation talk on the 29th of November
- a formal scholarly paper (15-20pp, plus scholarly apparatus) or alternative due by 1 December

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

How to Present on November 29th

It is my preference that students present in as fluid a fashion as possible—i.e., give a speech, don't just read a paper. However, recognizing that not everyone is comfortable doing that, students may elect to read from a written text. If you choose to read to us, please make enough copies of your text so that everyone can follow along. If time limits are short, you will need to read an excerpt.

Class Schedule

Bring Printed Copies of Readings to Class

(readings without full citations are in Davis, *The Disability Studies Reader*, 3rd Edition).

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

13 Sep: Defining disability—Intersectionality and Impairment

Davis, "Enforcing Normalcy," 3-19

Linton, "Reassigning Meaning," 223-236

Clare, Eli. "Freaks and Queers." In *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness and Liberation*, 67-102. Boston: South End Press, 1999.

Wendell, "Toward a Feminist Theory of Disability," 336-352

Siebers, "Disability and the Theory of Complex Embodiment—For Identity Politics in a New Register," 316-335

Recommended:

Barnes, "A Brief History of Discrimination and Disabled People," 20-32

Wilson, "Disability and the Human Genome," 52-62

20 Sep: Stigma, Identity, Affiliation

Brown, "Stigma: An Enigma Demystified," 179-192

Kleege, "Blindness and Visual Culture: An Eyewitness Account," 522-530

Padden and Humphries, "Deaf People, A Different Center," 393-402

Edwards, "Hearing Aids Are Not Deaf," 403-416

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.

Recommended:

Goffman, Erving. *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1963 (especially 1-40).

Brueggemann, "On (Almost) Passing," 209-219

Hogan, Anthony. "Carving out a Space to Act: Acquired Impairment and Contested Identity." In *Disability Discourse*, edited by Marian Corker and Sally French. 79-91.

Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1999.

27 Sep: Representing Disability (of and for)

Garland-Thomson, "Beholding," 199-208

Hevey, "The Enfreakment of Photography," 507-521

Shakespeare, Tom. "Art and Lies? Representations of Disability on Film." In *Disability Discourse*, edited by Marian Corker and Sally French. 164-72. Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1999.

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.

Mitchell, Davis and Sharon Snyder. "Body Genres: An Anatomy of Disability in Film," *The Problem Body: Projecting Disability on Film*, edited by Sally Chivers and Nicole Markotic, 179-206. Ohio State University Press, 2010.

Recommended:

Chivers, Sally, and Nicole Markotic, eds. *The Problem Body: Projecting Disability on Film*. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2010.

Thomson, Rosemary Garland. *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997.

4 Oct: (Mara Mills class visit) Disabled Self-Representation

Downey, Gregory J. "Captioning Television for the Deaf Population." *Closed Captioning: Subtitling, Stenography, and the Digital Convergence of Text with Television*, 53-102. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008.

Haller, Beth A. "The Changing Landscape of Disability News" and "Pity as Oppression in the Jerry Lewis Telethon." In *Representing Disability in an Ableist World*, 1-24, 137-52. Louisville: The Avacado Press, 2010.

Mills, Mara. "Deafening: Noise and the Engineering of Communication in the Telephone System." *Grey Room*, no. 43 (Spring 2011): 118-43.

Watch:

Amanda Baggs, "In My Language":

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JnylM1hI2jc>

Heron Sanctuary on Second Life:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UV52WRXm1Cg>

Lisa Bufano: <http://www.lisabufano.com/video/jan7cc.mov>

"The Kids Are All Right": <http://www.thekidsareallright.org/>

Behind The Shadow of Merrick: <http://www.le.ac.uk/ms/merrick1492.aspx>

Annie Dearest: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MXNUN5OCZdY>

11 Oct: Media and The Politics of Accessibility

Goggin, Gerard, and Christopher Newell. "Holding the Line: Telecommunications and Disability" and "Digital Disability TV/DIY Disability" *Digital Disability: The Social Construction of Disability in New Media*, 39-62 and 96-109. New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003.

Dobranski, Kerry, and Eszter Hargittai. "The Disability Divide in Internet Access and Use." *Information, Communication & Society* 9, no. 3 (2006): 313-34.

Ellis, Katie, and Mike Kent. "Does that Face-'Book' Come in Braille?: Social Networking Sites and Disability" and "Challenges and Opportunities: the Road Ahead for Disability in a Digital World." *Disability and New Media*, 95-112, 131-47. New York: Routledge, 2011.

Kennedy, Helen. "Chapter 5: The Fragile Ethics of Web Accessibility," *Net-work: Ethics and Values in Web Design*. Forthcoming. Ms pages 79-95.

Recommended:

Constantine, Wendy (2007) "Museums and the Digital Curb Cut,"
http://www.museotech.com/?page_id=29

Cheu, J. (2004) Degenerates, replicants and other aliens: (Re)defining disability in futuristic film, in: M. Corker and T. Shakespeare (eds.), *Disability/postmodernity: Embodying disability theory*, 198-212. London: Continuum.
<http://www.le.ac.uk/ms/research/pub1129.html>

18 Oct: Scripting Ability: Technology and Radical Monopoly

McRuer, "Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence," 383-392.

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

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

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

Goggin, Gerard, and Christopher Newell. "Disabling Cell Phones." In *The Cell Phone Reader*, edited by Anandam Kavoori and Noah Arceneaux, 155-72. New York: Peter Lang, 2006.

Recommended:

Latour, Bruno. "Mixing Humans and Nonhumans Together: The Sociology of a Door-Closer." *Social Problems* 35, no. 1 (1988): 298-310.

Illich, Ivan. "Convivial reconstruction." *Tools for Conviviality*, 10-45. New York: Harper and Row, 1973.

**25 Oct – no class, prof out of town; no office hours or meetings this week.
Project proposals due.**

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

1 Nov: Disability and Design (and Dates)

(Discuss Pullin and date 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/adastd94.pdf>

And the website for the institute for human-centered design

<http://www.adaptiveenvironments.org/index.php?option=Project&Itemid=208&pid=176>

8 Nov: Prosthesis: Technologies, Bodies, Abilities

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

Sobchack, Vivian. "A Leg to Stand On: Prosthetics, Metaphor, and Materiality." In *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*, 205-225. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.

Hayles, N. Katherine. "Flesh and Metal: Reconfiguring the Mindbody in Virtual Environment." In *Data Made Flesh: Embodying Information*, edited by Robert Mitchell and Phillip Thurtle, 229-248. London: Routledge, 2004.

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

Recommended:

Ihde, Don. "Program One: A Phenomenology of Technics." *Technology and the Lifeworld: From Garden to Earth*, 72-123. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990.

Haraway, Donna. "A Cyborg Manifesto." In *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, 149-182. New York: Routledge, 1991.

Haraway, Donna. "Able Bodies and Companion Species." In *When Species Meet*, 161-179. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007.

15 Nov: Of Different Minds

Gould, Stephen J. "Introduction" and "The Hereditarian Theory of IQ: An American Invention." *The Mismeasure of Man* (Revised and Expanded Edition), 51-61; 176-

263. New York: W.W. Norton, 1996.
- 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. "Genetic Destiny." *Life as We Know It: A Father, a Family and an Exceptional Child*, 3-39. New York: Pantheon Books, 1996.
- Peters, John Durham. "Broadcasting and Schizophrenia." *Media, Culture and Society* 32, no. 1 (2010): 123-40.

Recommended:

- Strauss, "Autism as Culture," 535-559
- Kennedy, Helen, Simon Evans, and Siobhan Thomas. "Can the Web Be Made Accessible for People with Intellectual Disabilities." *The Information Society* 27, no. 1 (2011): 29-39.
- Lewis, "A Mad Fight: Psychiatry and Disability Activism," 160-176

22 Nov: Media Activism and Policy

- Bérubé, Michael. "Disability and Citizenship." *Dissent*, Spring 2003.
<http://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/?article=506%5D>
- Goggin, Gerard, and Christopher Newell. "The Business of Digital Disability." *The Information Society* 23, no. 3 (2007): 159-68.
- D'Aubin, April. "Working for Barrier Removal in the ICT Area: Creating a More Accessible and Inclusive Canada." *The Information Society* 23, no. 3 (2007): 193-201.
- Clark, Jo. "This is How the Web Gets Regulated," *A List Apart* (18 November 2008)
<http://www.alistapart.com/articles/thisishowthewebgetsregulated/>
- Elicessor, Elizabeth. "Bridging Disability Divides." *Information, Communication & Society* 13, no. 3 (2010): 289-308.

Also have a look at:

- The Government of Canada, "Defining Disability: A Complex Issue" <http://dsp-psd.communication.gc.ca/Collection/RH37-4-3-2003E.pdf>
- Disability Policy in Canada: <http://www.disabilitypolicy.ca/policy/docs/gdocs.php>

Recommended:

- Bérubé, Michael. "Bragging and Rights." *Life as We Know It: A Father, a Family and an Exceptional Child*, 179-249. New York: Pantheon Books, 1996.
- Scotch, Richard. "American Disability Policy in the Twentieth Century." In *The New Disability History: American Perspectives*, edited by Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky, 375-92. New York: New York University Press, 2001.
- Charlton, "The Dimensions of Disability Oppression," 147-159

29 Nov: Student Presentations

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.

Grades are assigned based on the scale set out in the Arts and Sciences calendar (85-100=A, etc). 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. 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 suite 3100 Brown Student Services Bldg., 398-6009 (voice), 398-8198 (TDD), [<http://www.mcgill.ca/osd/>].

Language: You have the right to submit your written work in French. If you plan to do so, please contact me well in advance of the due date so I can make arrangements for evaluation, as I am not fluent in French. All verbal presentations must be in English.

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 or the assigned readings 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.

Unpleasant Business:

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

Activities for which you must be present (e.g., inquisitor, finder of objects, cleaner) **cannot be made up**. If you know you will be absent on a day for which you are obligated, trade with one of your colleagues. Notify me of the trade if it happens. This is your responsibility, not mine.

It is your responsibility to make sure I receive any assignment you turn in.

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 for more information).

Thanks: Dylan Mulvin and Emily Raine.