

Disability, Technology, Communication

COMS 411 (001)— Fall 2019

Wednesdays 11:35-14:25, W220 Arts Building¹

Professor Jonathan Sterne

Office: Arts W280

Office hours: W 14:30-15:30, right after class (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. No office hour 23 October.

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 studies in order to rethink our basic concepts of communication, technology and culture, as well as to advance our understandings of disability and the technocultural environments in which it exists. We will consider critical accounts of disability against theories of technology and communication. Through readings, discussions, and student research, we will develop scholarship that provides alternatives to the idealized norms of able-bodiedness that pervade the humanities and social sciences.

Requirements

Book (available at *The Word Bookstore*, 469 Milton. Please bring cash):

Pullin, Graham. *Design Meets Disability*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009. ISBN: 9780262516747.

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. You, your classmates, the prof, and all the authors have the right to be wrong. Show good faith and good humour toward your colleagues in the classroom. Disagreements

¹ McGill University is situated on unceded Indigenous lands in Tiohtiá:ke (Montreal), a place that has long served as a site of meeting and exchange for Indigenous people. The Kanien'kehà:ka (Mohawk) of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy are recognized as the traditional custodians of these lands and waters.

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; people are more than their intellectual and political positions at any given time.

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 material 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 can learn from it (and so don’t think you just got up and left).

Work for Evaluation (and % of Semester Grade):

I. Weekly Response Papers (15%)

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. If you are not

comfortable reading your writing aloud in class, please speak with me the first week of class.

Responses should be posted to the MyCourses site by 3pm each Tuesday 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 of how you're doing.

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

II. Going Out Project (25%)

For 22 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 outing in Montreal, from start to finish. The event 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. It could be conceived of as a date, or as a trip to work, or as some other kind of social or cultural event.

The assignment may be completed on its own terms. But after its completion, you may fold it into a larger semester project.

Students will informally present their outings in class on **23 October**.

III. Discussion Participation / Course Contributions (15%)

I expect everyone to be fully present for class and to participate in it constructively. You should come every week ready to discuss the required readings, to listen to others' ideas about them. (Recommended readings 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, etc.

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 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 engaged 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 excerpt from a draft of the longer project, or a 5-page progress report.
- For **27 November**: A short presentation in which you describe colleagues' work based on their paper from the 25th, and provide them with feedback.
- For **4 December**: The final project, completed. In terms of amount of work, it should be the equivalent of a 15-20 page academic 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; changes to the schedule will be announced in class.

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

11 Sep: Some Preliminary Definitions and Concepts

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.

Norris, Heather. "Colonialism and the Rupturing of Indigenous Worldviews of Impairment and Relational Independence: A Beginning Dialogue towards Reclamation and Social Transformation." *Critical Disability Discourse / Discours Critiques dans le Champ du Handicap* 6 (2014): 53-79.

Rose, Sarah F. "Introduction." *No Right to Be Idle: The Invention of Disability, 1840s-1930s*, 1-13. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017.

Recommended:

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

18 Sep: Technology 1: Scripting Ability and Debility

- McRuer, Robert. "Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence." *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*, edited by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Brenda Jo Brueggemann, and Sharon L. Snyder, 88-99. New York: MLA Publications, 2002.
- Mills, Mara. "Do Signals Have Politics?: Inscribing Abilities in Cochlear Implants." *The Oxford Handbook of Sound Studies*, edited by Karin Bijsterveld and Trevor Pinch. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Schweik, Susan. "Introduction." *The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public*, 1-20. New York: New York University Press, 2009.
- Hilton, Leon J. "Avonte's Law: Autism, Wandering, and the Racial Surveillance of Neurological Difference." *African American Review* 50, no. 2 (July 21, 2017): 221-35.

25 Sep: Disability and Design 1

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

2 Oct: Subjects of Ability and Disability

- Puar, Jasbir. "Preface: Hands up, Don't Shoot!" *The Right to Maim: Debility | Capacity | Disability*, ix-xxiv. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017.
- Yergeau, Melanie. "Introduction: Involution." *Authoring Autism: On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness*, 1-34. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018.
- Piepzna-Samarasinha, Leah Lakshmi. "Care Webs: Experiments in Creating Collective Access." *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice*, 32-68. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018.
- Pickens, Therí. "Conversation I: Making Black Madness." *Black Madness:: Mad Blackness*, 23-49. Durham: Duke University Press, 2019.

Recommended:

- Peters, John Durham. "Broadcasting and Schizophrenia." *Media, Culture and Society* 32, no. 1 (2010): 123-40.
- Bérubé, Michael. "Disability and Citizenship." *Dissent*, Spring 2003.
- Butler, Octavia. *Fledgling*. New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005. Also available as an audio book here (you will need to be logged in):
<https://mcgill.libraryreserve.com/10/50/en/ContentDetails.htm?id=DBE386D3-5B10-4C71-B033-9A407AC6EBA5>

9 Oct: Disability and the Environment

- Chen, Mel Y. "Lead's Racial Matters." *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*, 160-188. Durham: Duke University Press, 2012.
- Jain, Lochlann. "Fallout: Minuets in the Key of Fear." *Malignant: How Cancer Becomes Us*, 179-201. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013.
- Hall, Kim Q. "Crippling Sustainability, Realizing Food Justice." *Disability Studies and the Environmental Humanities*, eds. Sarah Jaquette Ray, Jay Sibara, and Stacy Alaimo, 422-446. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017.
- Wong, Alice. "The Rise and Fall of the Plastic Straw: Sucking in Crip Defiance." *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 5, no. 1 (2019): 1-12.

Recommended:

- Saxson, Masha and Alex Ghenis. "Commentary: Disability and Climate Change: Impact on Health and Survival. *Environmental Health News* (18 May 2018), <https://www.ehn.org/climate-change-and-disability-2569643231.html>
- Any other chapter from *Disability Studies and the Environmental Humanities*. (Available through the McGill Library).

16 Oct: Disability and Design 2

- Hamraie, Aimi. "Barrier Work: Before and After the Americans With Disabilities Act." *Building Access: Universal Design and the Politics of Disability*, 175-221. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017.
- Gotkin, Kevin. "Crip Club Vibes." *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 5, no. 1 (2019): 1-7.
- Williamson, Bess. "Berkeley. California: An Independent Style of Access." *Accessible America: A History of Disability and Design*, 96-128. New York: NYU Press, 2019.
- 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.

Recommended:

- Mingus, Mia. "Access Intimacy." <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2011/05/05/access-intimacy-the-missing-link/> *Leaving Evidence*, 5 May 2011.

22 October, 3pm: 5-6 page Going Out Assignment paper due, posted on course website.

23 Oct: Going Out Assignment Discussion

Recommended:

- Hahn, Harlan. "Disability and the Urban Environment: A Perspective on Los Angeles." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 4 (1986): 279-88.
- Kafer, Alison. "Accessible Futures, Future Coalitions." *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 149-169. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013.

Hamraie, Aimi. "Entangled Principles: Universal Design and the Politics of Disability." *Building Access: Universal Design and the Politics of Disability*, 223-254. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

Americans with Disabilities Act Guidelines for design:
http://www.ada.gov/2010ADAstandards_index.htm
And the website for the institute for human-centered design
<https://www.humancentereddesign.org>

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

30 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.

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.

Dolmage, Jay. "Canada's Pier 21 and the Memorialization of Immigration." *Disabled Upon Arrival: Eugenics, Immigration and the Construction of Race and Disability*, 51-71. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2018.

Recommended:

Read about the AUMI: Adaptive Use Musical Instrument here: <http://aumiapp.com>. Feel free to download it and try it out yourself.

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.

6 Nov: Aesthetics and Representation 1: Media Politics

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.

Alper, Meryl. "Introduction." *Giving Voice: Mobile Communication, Disability and Inequality*, 1-34. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017.

Hagood, Mack. "Tinnitus and Its Aural Remedies." *Hush: Media and Sonic Self-Control*, 31-72. Duke University Press, 2019.

Recommended:

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

13 Nov: Split Class:

Part I: Medical Approaches Beyond the Medical Model: Stefanie Blain-Moraes, special guest star

Blain (-Moraes), Stefanie and Patricia McKeever. "Revealing Personhood Through Biomusic of Individuals Without Communicative Interaction Ability."

Augmentative and Alternative Communication 27:1 (2011), 1-4.

Sample, Matthew *et al.* Brain-computer Interfaces and Personhood: Interdisciplinary Deliberations on Neural Technology. *Journal of Neural Engineering*, in press.

Part II: Aesthetics and Representation 2: Some Different Disability Hermeneutics (or getting beyond "representations of")

Mitchell, David and Sharon Snyder. "Narrative Prosthesis and the Materiality of Metaphor." *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.

Recommended:

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

Siebers, Tobin. "Disability and Art Vandalism." *Disability Aesthetics*, 83-99 (notes 145-6). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010.

20 Nov: Flex week. (Explained in class)

Recommended:

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/>

25 Nov: 5-page progress report/paper draft due online

27 Nov: Student Peer Feedback Session

4 Dec, 5pm: Final Projects Due

Other Policies

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

410, 1010 Sherbrooke St. W., 398-6009 (voice), 398-8198 (TTY),
(<http://www.mcgill.ca/osd/>).

The above commitment to accommodate applies equally to survivors of sexual assault and/or harassment on or off campus. Survivors are encouraged to consult the resources provided by the Students' Society of McGill University (<https://ssmu.ca/resources/sexual-violence/>), the Sexual Assault Centre of the McGill Students' Society (<http://www.sacomss.org/wp/>) and the McGill Office for Sexual Violence Response, Support and Education (<https://www.mcgill.ca/osvrse/>).

Universal/Resonant Design: My courses are intentionally designed to be modular and flexible and to address different learning styles and needs. Nevertheless, aspects of this syllabus—requirements, classroom expectations, etc.— may conflict with an accommodation you require because of a disability. I can be flexible if you come to me within the first two weeks of class to discuss your accommodation needs. Note that some accommodation requests could potentially conflict with *others'* accommodation needs (or the prof's), and/or the pedagogical goals of the course, in which case they might need to be modified.

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 and one weekly response 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.

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. 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).

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

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://cripz.jeffpreston.ca/about/>

