

**"TECHNOLOGY GIVETH AND IT TAKETH AWAY."** Neil Postman  
**"THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE."** Marshall McLuhan

## **Media Ecology (Fall 2008)**

### **Communication 475**

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**July/August Issue of Atlantic Monthly**



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## REQUIRED TEXTS:

Gibaldi, Joseph. MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers. 6<sup>th</sup> Ed. New York: MLA, 2003

McLuhan, Marshall. Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man. 1964. Corte Madera, CA: Gingko P, 2005.

Postman, Neil. Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business. New York; Penguin, 2005.

## SELECT READINGS ON RESERVE--MEMORIAL LIBRARY

Lum, Casey Man Kong, Ed. Perspectives on Culture, Technology and Communication: The Media Ecology Tradition. Cresskill, N.J.: Hampton P, 2006.

## COURSE DESCRIPTION:

This is an advanced liberal arts course, about the effects of communication media. Media Ecology (hereafter ME) is concerned with the “complex symbiotic relationship among the media and . . . between media and the various forces in society” (Lum). ME studies “How the form and inherent biases of communication media help create the environment or symbolic and cognitive structure in which people symbolically construct the world they come to know and understand, as well as its social, economic, political, and cultural consequences” (Lum 1-2).

Theorists considered in this course represent diverse fields of scholarly inquiry: English, Communication, Media, History, Sociology, Education, Classics, Economics, Music, Philosophy, Business, Computer Technology, Theology, Anthropology, Visual Communication, etc. Our nation, church and professions within which and for whom you will work need “visionaries,” those whose thinking keeps an eye to the future. A ME mind learns to engage in intelligent speculation about the complex effects of new media and technology based upon a critical consideration of past and present effects.



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## COURSE GOALS:

- To introduce students to the field of Media Ecology, its nature, terms, purpose, major theorists and unique perspective regarding the material world and communication.
- To explore ME in a manner which creates student interest in the subject and a valued appreciation for its perspective.
- To intellectually sensitize our faculties to the “complex symbiotic relationship among the media” and their intersection with “various forces in society” (cf. Lum).
- To develop the ability to theorize the social and psychological effects of media.
- To become aware of how media use is dynamically linked to space and time constraints.

- To explore the validity and consequences of McLuhan's dictum that "we become what we behold" and that while "we shape our [media] tools . . . afterwards our tools shape us" by their "bias" (cf. Innis).
- To develop the critical and creative ability to think about the effects of present and future technological development upon various forms of oral, literate and visual communication.
- To become aware of your own personal biases for and against various media and, by understanding the implications of such bias, to encourage self-reflection that aids personal change and which encourages leadership to improve the future use of communication.
- To encourage students to get excited about the value of the media ecology perspective and to use its insights for critical and creative work in future work.

## CLASS REQUIREMENTS:

**Class Participation:** We will engage course ideas through diverse learning strategies. The course is centrally framed as a small, seminar-style class, in which we are all explorers, learning from each other as we search for understanding. This means keeping up with daily readings so that we may all actively participate through speech and writing. I will occasionally deliver "mini-lectures" on ME topics. Some mini-lectures will convey information; all are designed to provoke discussion. On some days you will read your "JOURNAL Critical Reflections" out loud to the class. Often we will do in-class writing in response to a question, which you will then read in class or exchange with each other. During some sessions class members will be appointed to lead discussion by selecting passages considered important, suggestive, controversial, problematic, interesting, provocative, etc.

We will regularly examine examples from contemporary media (TV, movies, radio, YouTube, etc.) that have media ecology implications, in order to generate critical discussion. For this requirement, each class member as part of the "participation" component of the course identify some media or technology to class and in 250-500 words reflect critically on what about your example reflects the media ecology theme. For this assignment identify **SIX** Media Ecology examples--from TV, movies, You Tube, the world-wide web or any online or other print sources, etc. that illustrate media ecology issues. Be prepared to discuss the ME implications of the materials you provide and make sure that you have a visual artifact to show the class.

**JOURNAL Critical Reflection:** For each class you will critically reflect upon the media ecology ideas through a daily journal entry, in response to questions about the daily reading assignments included below. For each journal response, include your name, date, and text page numbers from the daily reading you are reflecting upon, at the top of the page. Your critical responses may vary in forms. I will sometimes propose one or two focused questions that specifically explore the consequences of the media ecology ideas in the readings, but your own curiosity and interests ought to be the chief "trigger" for journal reflection. Each response should contain an average of 100-250 words per entry, although you are encouraged to respond at greater length, as the muse moves you, and such efforts alongside of your oral contribution during class "above and beyond" the requirements contributes to your "participation" grade. I'll periodically collect your journal and at mid-term and the end of the course will award a letter grade. Above all, as you respond in your journals keep these key questions in mind:

- What is media ecology?
- How does the material under consideration exemplify media ecology concerns?
- What are the social and psychological consequences of this media use?
- So what?
- Why should I, or anyone else, care?

I am not concerned that these JOURNAL Critical Reflection entries be letter perfect, or edited. Since their main purpose is to offer you an opportunity to record thoughtful reactions to the daily treat them

as “Free-Writes,” journalistic-style records that allow you the uninhibited ability to compose without worrying about grammatical perfection, spelling and editing.

**TEST—What is Media Ecology?:** This test provides an opportunity at the end of week three to show your understanding of Media Ecology. You should be able to refer to key media ecology figures discussed in class and should be able to explain the meaning and key purpose and tenets of Media Ecology.

**Your Chapter Addition to Understanding Media [A Two-Three Page McLuhanesque “Probe”]:**

Marshall McLuhan’s insightful explorations of media were often brief and theoretical rather than empirical or scientific. One element that made McLuhan’s writings on media interesting was the wide girth of liberal arts knowledge that he tapped into to support his speculations. Dubbed “probes,” they were not meant to “explain” but to “explore.” While one scholar accused McLuhan’s method of “murdering scholarly procedure” his exploratory method was a valid form of intellectual inquiry. His open-ended, unedited excursions into new ideas were valuable, affirming that fresh insights often begin as outrageous untested hypotheses. Ideas may be later tested for scientific validity and reliability, but initial “creativity” and uncritical, serendipitous exploring often generated fresh insights. Agree or disagree with McLuhan, his thoughtful reflection about the social and psychological consequences of new media make for rich intellectual reading and much of what he wrote on a theoretical level is still valuable and fresh. But, obviously, a book on media, more than forty years old, is bound to be out of date. In this assignment your task is to add an Updated chapter to McLuhan’s Understanding Media on some media/technology, which has been invented since McLuhan and write a three-five page “probe,” exploring its ecological dimensions. Here’s your opportunity to be speculative and creative as you test out ideas. Bring your own creativity and originality to the reflective thinking process.

**Five Minute Essay and Objective Quizzes:** During regular class sessions, at the beginning or end of class, I may handout quizzes. I will occasionally ask you to write five-minute “mini” essays that critically reflect upon daily readings. As a template for critical reading we will adopt Paul and Elder’s Miniature Guide to Critical Thinking. The purpose of these essays will be to check your understanding of course ideas, daily readings and class discussion. They will also allow us to check weekly learning of announced course goals and outcomes. I will repeatedly, during the semester, return to several key questions in the five-minute essays, the same questions you attended to while writing entries in your journal:

- What is media ecology?
- How does the material under consideration exemplify media ecology concerns?
- What are the social and psychological consequences of this media use?
- So what? & Why should I, or anyone else, care?

**Media Ecology Book Report:** You will select a book from the Media Ecology basic reading list, read the book, and then, on October 8, complete a book report during class. As you read your book, take notes, and work on, first, being able to summarize the central argument in the book, and, secondly, specific details to back up your summary. When you write the book report, during class, you should divide the book report into two parts. Part one should summarize the basic argument, support details and book premises. Part two records your critical reaction. Your goal will be to relate the argument and contents of your particular book to the fundamental ideas of media ecology and particularly to your own interests in media and technology. You are permitted to bring to class one 5 by 7 inch piece of paper with notes printed on both sides to aid you in the writing of your book report.

**Culminating Semester Project and Class Presentation:** For this project you will explore a topic of interests to you, which intersects with Media Ecology and your individual interests, research the topic and

complete a research essay on the topic by the end of the semester. Class readings for the course generate a myriad of ideas for this research project. The essay provides a stimulating opportunity to tap into the theoretical richness of Media Ecology thought, in order to think through the implications of media bias for contemporary settings. You will be expected to demonstrate sound academic methodology for this project as you research recent articles and other sources. All written projects in this course will be expected to follow the MLA Style Handbook. A rough draft of this project will be due for the **December 3** class session. During the last week you will present a formal oral report about your research project for the semester. In keeping with our goal of preparing communication majors who are not only educated in the liberal arts but competitive in the job market you will be expected to deliver a report of your findings following high standards of oral delivery. You are encouraged to use Power Point or any other presentational media to deliver your findings but should keep the power of your own personality central to delivery, cultivating good oral dynamics, having all media support your presentation, rather than turning media into the central “figure” in your report. I’ll provide more specifics later in the course. *Length: 6 to 8 pages.*

**FINAL EXAM--SYNTHESIS:** The final exam will be a take-home written synthesis allowing you to reflect upon your learning during the semester, cued by JOURNAL entries and other research.

## POLICIES

**Regarding Late or Missed Assignments:** Written assignments are due on the assigned date and may be handed in after this date only by prior permission. In the case of a *bona fide* sickness or emergency provide evidence excusing from these requirements. Late work is lowered one letter grade.

**Regarding Attendance:** Students are expected to attend class regularly and participate in class activities and discussions. More than three unexcused absences may result in lowering your final grade by one letter. Additional absences result in further grade reduction. Students who accrue six unexcused absences are automatically dropped from the course.

**Regarding Academic Honesty and Plagiarism:** It is important to identify sources of research information. **Plagiarism** is the act of promoting someone else's ideas, words, phrases--speeches, writings, etc.--as if they were yours. Plagiarism is a serious breach of ethics. Most educational institutions impose penalties that range from dismissal to course or project failure. In this course any plagiarism will receive an automatic "F" on the plagiarized unit. If you have questions about use of other sources ask your instructor.

## COMPUTATION OF FINAL COURSE GRADES:

<b>Assignment</b>	<b>Percentage of Final Grade</b>
Class Participation	15
Critical Reflection JOURNAL	15
TEST—What is Media Ecology?	10
A Two-Three Page McLuhanesque “Probe”	10
Five-Minute In-Class Essay “Quizzes”	10
Media Ecology Book Report	10
Semester Writing Project	15
Oral Report—5%	
Written Paper Final Draft—10%	
FINAL EXAM--SYNTHESIS	15

## TENTATIVE SCHEDULE

CLASS DATE	TOPIC	ASSIGNMENT
August 27	What is Media Ecology? Orientation & overview of course; Introduction to Media Ecology Website and Basic Reading List; Discuss Critical Reflection JOURNAL “Facebook”—what Media Ecology is ABout	<u>Phaedrus</u> 274b-277a; Levy “Facebook Grows Up” <u>Newsweek</u> 40-6.
August 29	The Roots of Media Ecology in Plato; What is Media Ecology?; <i>Introduce Basic Media Ecology Library</i> ; <a href="#">YouTube video—What is Media Ecology?</a>	“What is Media Ecology?”; Postman “The Judgment of Thamus” from <u>Technopoly</u> pp. 2-20; < <a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4KIRjvvAegw">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4KIRjvvAegw</a> > <b>REMEMBER TO Write in Critical Reflection JOURNAL [Hereafter CRJ]</b>
<b>September 1</b>	<b>LABOR DAY VACATION</b>	
September 3	Media & Communication as “Entertainment”; Technological Change and its Consequences; <i>Introduce Basic Media Ecology Library</i> ; “ <i>Thus Spoke the Spectacle</i> ”	Postman “The Medium is the Metaphor” in <u>Amusing</u> (3-15); <a href="http://thespectacle.net/">http://thespectacle.net/</a> <b>CRJ</b>
September 5	Introduction to Media Ecology as a Field of Study; <i>Intro. Basic Media Ecology Library</i>	<b>Lum</b> “Notes Toward an Intellectual History of Media Ecology” 1-38, 50-60 <b>On Reserve</b>  <i>Choose a Book for Book Report</i>
September 8	Formal Roots of Media Ecology; “Five Things We Need to Know about Technological Change”	<b>Strate</b> , pp. 79-90; <b>Postman</b> “Five Things”
September 10	Positive and Negative Consequences of Media”; <i>Introduce Basic Media Ecology Library</i>	Nicholas Carr “Is Google Making Us STOOPID?”
September 12	<b>What is Media Ecology?</b>	<b>Quiz</b>
September 15	Lewis Mumford and the Ecology of Technics; Mumford’s on Media Ecology & History; “The Monastery and the Clock”	Summary of Strate & <b>Lum</b> , 71-95; <u>Technics &amp; Civilization</u> RESERVE



September 17	Lewis Mumford's Formulations on Media Ecology; "New Sources of Energy"; "Neotechnic Materials"; "Paradox of Communication"; "Present Pseudomorph"	<u>Technics and Civilization</u> LIB. RESERVE
September 19	Pros and Cons of "Screen Culture"	Bauerlein "Screen Culture" from <u>The Dumbest Generation</u> , pp. 71-111; <u>Wired</u>
September 22 <b>Big READING Weekend</b> to gain understanding of the nature of the McLuhan's "Probes".	Marshall McLuhan Probes in <u>Understanding Media</u> "Movies"; "Radio"; "Television"; "Weapons"; "Automation"; Marshall McLuhan "I don't explain—I explore." – Media Ecology and the "Probe"; What is a Probe? [ <i>Introduce the "Probe" writing assignment</i> ]	Select McLuhan "Probes" from <u>UM</u> 382-96; 398-410; 412-45; 448-56; 458-73; Handouts on probe; Reagles "Poetics on the Warpath: Using McLuhan's 'Probe' as Critical Writing Heuristic"
September 24	<b>Documentary Movie: "McLuhan's Wake"</b> (Part I); "Editor's Introduction" to <u>Understanding Media</u>	Read Poe's "Descent into the Maelstrom"; LIBRARY RESERVE; <u>UM</u> xi-xxi; Handout "McLuhan's Wake"
September 26	<b>Documentary Movie: "McLuhan's Wake"</b>	(Part II)
September 29	Marshall McLuhan <u>Understanding Media</u> "Introductions to 1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> Edition; "The Medium is the Message"; "Net Content"	<u>UM</u> xi-xxi; 4-16; 18-35;
October 1	Brain Plasticity and the Vindication of McLuhan's "The Medium is the Message"	Excerpts—John Medina's <u>Brain Rules</u> ; Norman Doidge <u>Brain that Changes Itself</u>
October 3	Marshall McLuhan <u>Understanding Media</u> "Media Hot and Cold"; "Reversal of the Overheated Medium"; "The Gadget Lover"; "Media as Translators"; Provocation #2--	<u>UM</u> 38-50; 52-60; 62-70; 85-90 Media Ecology and Worship
October 6	Marshall McLuhan <u>Understanding Media</u> ; "Challenge and Collapse"; "The Spoken Word"; "The Written Word"; "Roads and Paper Routes"	<u>UM</u> 92-105; 110-14; 116-24; 126-44
October 8	<b>P. Conference—No Class</b>	<b>Catch up with Reading</b>
October 10	Marshall McLuhan <u>Understanding Media</u> ; "Clothing"; "Clocks"; "The Print"	<u>UM</u> 142-66; 198-211; 214-21

October 13	Marshall McLuhan <u>Understanding Media</u> ; “The Printed Word”; “Wheel, Bicycle, and Airplane”; “The Photograph”; “Ads”	<u>UM</u> 232-42; 244-53; 256-72; 304-12; 330-46
October 15	Introduce Semester Research Project	<b><i>Deadline--BOOK REPORT</i></b>
<b>October 16-19</b>	<b>MID-TERM BREAK</b>	
October 20	James Carey “Time, Space, The Telegraph & Railroad”	Carey “Technology and Ideology: The Case of the Telegraph” <b>RESERVE</b>
October 22	McLuhan <u>Understanding Media</u> “Typewriter”; “Telephone”; “Phonograph”	<u>UM</u> 346-54; 356-67; 370-80
October 24	Neil Postman; “The Humanism of Media Ecology”	Postman in Lum, pp. 61-69 <b>ON RESERVE; 150 Word SRP Proposal Due</b>
October 27	Neil Postman--“Media as Epistemology”;	Postman <u>Amusing</u> Chaps 2
October 29	Neil Postman--“Typographic America”; “Typographic Mind”	Postman <u>Amusing</u> Chaps 3-4
October 31	<b>REFORMATION LECTURES</b>	
November 3	Neil Postman--“The Peek-a-Boo World”	Postman <u>Amusing</u> Chap. 5
November 5	<b>ADVISING DAY—No Class</b> <i>Set up 15 min. Conference and Meet about SRP</i>	
November 7	Media Ecology—Neil Postman—“The Age of Show Business”; “Now . . . This	Postman <u>Amusing</u> Chap 6 & 7
November 10	Neil Postman—“Shuffle Off to Bethlehem” ; The New <i>E-lecturgy—ME and Worship</i>	Postman <u>Amusing</u> Chap 8
November 12	Postman—“Reach Out and Elect Someone”	Postman <u>Amusing</u> Chap 9; <i>E-mail election ad link [Prepare 150 word Critique]</i>
November 14	The Current Election Year: Political Ads, Media Promotion and Media Ecology	Further Instructions to be provided
November 17	On Being a Cultural Warrior	Bauerlein “No More Cultural Warriors” 205-36



November 19	Postman----“Teaching as an Amusing Activity” & “Huxleyan Warning”	Postman <u>Amusing</u> Chaps. 10 & 11
November 21	<b>Library Research Presentation</b>	
November 24	<b>Research Day for Semester Project</b>	
November 26	Walter Benjamin	“The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”
<b>November 27-30</b>	<b>THANKSGIVING BREAK</b>	
December 1	Susan Sontag—Media Ecology Takes On Photography; Digital Photography “Ethics”	Notes from Sontag’s <u>On Photography</u>
December 3	<i><b>Bring <u>THREE</u> copies of a 8-10 page written draft of your project to class</b></i>	
December 5	In Class Reflections from your <b>CJ</b> on the work of Benjamin, Sontag	
December 8	Susan Langer—Presentational Form	“Discursive & Presentational Forms”
December 10	<i><b>In Class Presentations on Semester Research Projects</b></i>	<i><b>Hand FINAL COPY of Semester Research Project</b></i>
December 12	<b>Course Wrap Up;</b> “The Flight of Minerva’s Owl” by Lance Strate	