Entertainment Media 019: 3185 (169): EXW

TTh, 3:30-4:45

Professor: Don McLeese

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Office hours (in Des Moines and/or online): Monday 4:30-5:30; Tues-Fri (online) 9-10 a.m.

Or by appointment (email is generally the most efficient way to reach me).

The above office hour information reflects my classroom teaching assignment in Des Moines. I’ll send you an APB any time my schedule has me in Iowa City, and I’ll be happy to meet with students then. (I’ll have to be there at least once a month for faculty meetings and will likely be there more often for other commitments.) I’ll also be happy to meet with any of you who happen to be in Des Moines, for whatever reason, at whatever time and day (other than when I’m teaching).

Or we can meet halfway—lunch in Grinnell?

THE COURSE

As resistant as I am to set-in-stone syllabi (preferring to keep you in a state of suspended animation and edgy anticipation that is the journalist’s natural habitat), I feel that it is even less appropriate for this course than others. Not only are we utilizing an emerging method of online instruction, one that fits the cyber-technology of the world in which we live (or at least you do; I’m a fossil preserved in amber), but we are focusing on a subject where revolution continues unabated and radical change appears to be the only constant.
Within the current flux of entertainment media, principles that hold true today—and have for decades, even centuries—might be anachronisms by the end of the semester. Or the end of next week. I can’t predict what might dominate next month’s discussion the way Spotify (and streaming) became such a dominant topic in music circles a couple of years ago. Because a month or two before that, I had never heard of Spotify (and now stream about 95% of my new music).

Last month, it appeared that Rupert Murdoch’s Fox empire was about to absorb all of Time/Warner, making for a gargantuan media monolith. More recently talks have fallen apart. For now. Meanwhile, Google appears to be partnering with Barnes and Noble to combat the dominance of Amazon, which now finds itself at war with many of the publishers and authors it has helped subsidized.

In every field of media, which seem to converge regularly, the identification of the major players changes constantly, as does the very nature of the games they are playing.

I have former students who have real jobs with “social networking” in their titles, and earn real paychecks in that field, who started their educations before that term was widespread. I have seen blogs go from introductory puzzlement (“short for web log,” as if that says anything) to near ubiquity to borderline anachronism—killed by Twitter and Tumblr, both of which arrived (and departed?) in an eye’s blink. I know that there’s been a rise of interest in Pinterest, but I have no idea why. (Women like it more than men, right? Let’s discuss.) You probably use Instagram; I don’t.

Believe it or not, I remember a world before YouTube. I remember when Facebook was the exclusive province of young people. Now it is dominated by old people (much to the embarrassment of their offspring who have yet to close their accounts). I still send emails when everybody else texts (though, for all I know, you all now communicate telepathically). I remember when phones were used not just primarily, but exclusively, for phone calls. Do any of you still make phone calls on your phones?

(And I remember when porn cost money, not that I expect this to become a dominant topic of conversation this semester.)

Enough. I don’t need to convince you that I am old. And I don’t need to convince you that things are changing—continually, rapidly, dramatically. For my generation and some codgers even a generation or two younger, such constant, dramatic change induces cultural whiplash. For many of you, constant change is the way of the world; it is all you’ve ever known. I may get nervous if the entire digital landscape seems to transform itself every couple of months; you may get nervous if it doesn’t. You’re already anticipating the next big thing, while I fear that it will make obsolete something that just cost me a few hundred bucks.
Together, we will analyze what has been and anticipate what is coming. There is no discrete body of knowledge that I expect you to master over the course of the semester. I will be pleased if we know less at the end than we think we do at the start, and if we leave this course with more questions than answers (as long as they are the right questions).

Yet, in my usual spirit of self-contradiction, let’s start with one postulate, which this course may well reaffirm (or refute as anachronistic): The emergence of new media always threatens old media, which then have two options—change or die. And as we scattershoot our way through the semester, we will see that every new medium has been widely perceived as the murderer of the old. Yet the old have generally adapted and survived. (Until now?)

Consider: Movies were supposed to kill live theater. Radio was supposed to kill commercial music, both live and recorded. TV was supposed to kill both radio and movies. And now digital technology is supposed to obliterate western culture as we know it, littering the media landscape with the corpses of the newspaper, music, film, publishing, cable TV and other industries. Will print on paper somehow adapt? Is there any value in paying for the cow of recorded music when you can get the milk of mp3 files for free? Is it better to possess (even digitally) than to stream?

Collectively, we will progress toward individual responses to such pressing issues of entertainment media.

**ATTENDANCE, ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADING**

Because of both the experimental nature of the course and the volatility of the subject matter, attendance within this virtual classroom at the appointed time is MANDATORY. Every course I offer is primarily interactive, though the form that interaction might best take will reveal itself over the course of the semester. We will plainly have plenty of audio discussion. You also have a chat function on the desktop, where you can type among each other, for the class at large or at me. IF YOU’RE TRYING TO GET MY ATTENTION BY SHOUTING AT ME WITH CAPITAL LETTERS, it won’t bother me. (I’ve been married for almost 30 years and have two semi-adult daughters, so I’m used to being yelled at.)

I’ll have all sorts of other tricks at my disposal to help hook and keep your attention—power points, polls, quizzes, videos, etc.—but discussion remains the lifeblood of my educational method (or madness?).

Assignments will often be given in class and occasionally completed in class. There is no assigned textbook, for reasons that this class should make clear (if this syllabus hasn’t already). As things change faster and faster, books are too slow to keep pace. I submitted my most recent book manuscript to a publisher that insisted production takes a full year—so if what I wrote
didn’t sound fresh and new a year or so later, it would be obsolete on the day of publication. (Good luck with that.)

I will be sharing articles (and would hope that you’ll do the same). And we’ll be monitoring websites, blogs, videos, social-networking chatter and anything else that has bearing on the topic at hand (which, in chicken-or-the-egg fashion, might be largely dependent on developments that we can’t predict and topics in the news).

So, if you’re not attending, you'll have trouble keeping pace and participating on the level that this course demands.

You’ll have shorter written responses assigned in class as well, with a longer one at midterm (expect 1000 or so words) and an even longer one (1500 or so) at the end. All writing assignments are due at the beginning of class on the due date. Those late will be docked a letter grade per day. (A paper due Monday that deserves an A will receive a B if I don’t get it until Tuesday, etc.)

**Final grades will be determined as follows:**

ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION 35%
SHORTER RESPONSES 25%
MIDTERM WRITTEN ASSIGNMENT: 15%
FINAL WRITTEN ASSIGNMENT: 25%

There will be no final exam.
Administrative Home

The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences is the administrative home of this course and governs matters such as the add/drop deadlines, the second-grade-only option, and other related issues. Different colleges may have different policies. Questions may be addressed to 120 Schaeffer Hall, or see the CLAS Academic Policies Handbook at http://clas.uiowa.edu/students/handbook.

Electronic Communication

University policy specifies that students are responsible for all official correspondences sent to their University of Iowa e-mail address (@uiowa.edu). Faculty and students should use this account for correspondences (Operations Manual, III.15.2, k.11).
Accommodations for Disabilities

A student seeking academic accommodations should first register with Student Disability Services and then meet privately with the course instructor to make particular arrangements. See www.uiowa.edu/~sds/ for more information.

Academic Honesty

All CLAS students have, in essence, agreed to the College's Code of Academic Honesty: "I pledge to do my own academic work and to excel to the best of my abilities, upholding the IOWA Challenge. I promise not to lie about my academic work, to cheat, or to steal the words or ideas of others; nor will I help fellow students to violate the Code of Academic Honesty." Any student committing academic misconduct is reported to the College and placed on disciplinary probation or may be suspended or expelled (CLAS Academic Policies Handbook).

CLAS Final Examination Policies

The final examination schedule for each class is announced around the fifth week of the semester by the Registrar. Final exams are offered only during the official final examination period. No exams of any kind are allowed during the last week of classes. All students should plan on being at the UI through the final examination period. Once the Registrar has announced the dates and times of each final exam, the complete schedule will be published on the Registrar's web site.

Making a Suggestion or a Complaint

Students with a suggestion or complaint should first visit with the instructor (and the course supervisor), and then with the departmental DEO. Complaints must be made within six months of the incident (CLAS Academic Policies Handbook).

Understanding Sexual Harassment
Sexual harassment subverts the mission of the University and threatens the well-being of students, faculty, and staff. All members of the UI community have a responsibility to uphold this mission and to contribute to a safe environment that enhances learning. Incidents of sexual harassment should be reported immediately. See the UI Comprehensive Guide on Sexual Harassment for assistance, definitions, and the full University policy.

Reacting Safely to Severe Weather

In severe weather, class members should seek appropriate shelter immediately, leaving the classroom if necessary. The class will continue if possible when the event is over. For more information on Hawk Alert and the siren warning system, visit the Department of Public Safety website.

*These CLAS policy and procedural statements have been summarized from the web pages of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and The University of Iowa Operations Manual.

CALENDAR

**Week one:**

Aug 26 and 28: Preparing for take-off: Fasten your seatbelts. Technological troubleshooting, syllabus, getting to know you, lay of the land. Where are we now and where are we going. What is a book? A record? What is the difference between a TV show and a movie? How do you consume media and how has this changed? And maybe we’ll talk about the Emmy awards, depending on what happens/happened.

**Week two:**

Sept 2 and 4: Course origins, media parallels and paradigm shifts. How have Google, Apple, Amazon and Netflix all found themselves in what used to be called “television.” Which of these is a phone company? Do you watch TV programs on a TV set? At the time they originally air? Do you pay for them? How?

**Week three:**

Sept 9 and 11: Television, time shifting, multi-platforms. How long until your TV screen is also your computer’s? And all programming is “on demand.” What is “bundling” and how long will it last? We’ll also work in some contextual history on what TV used to be like (three networks, rabbit ear antennas) and what has changed. And what hasn’t.
Week four:

Sept 16 and 18: More on Apple, Amazon on paradigm shifts. How did a computer maker and an online bookseller find themselves as chief competitors battling for world media domination? And where does Facebook fit in this battle? We’ll examine some business models and discuss different means to similar ends.

Start brainstorming midterm writing assignment.

Week five:

Sept 23 and 25: Movies (or films, for the higher-brow among you) and how a medium that threatened others has itself become threatened (or at least challenged). As movie becomes more of a larger-than-life spectacle—3-D, Imax—has subtler, more mature entertainment become the province of HBO and AMC?

Week six:

Sept 30 and Oct 2: Video games—art, entertainment, cultural menace. Or all of the above?

Week seven:

Oct 7 and 9: Video games continued, and the dissolving lines distinguishing video games and special-effects action movies.

Week eight:

Oct 14 and 16: Midterm writing assignments due (by midnight Monday, 10/13) and discussed.

Week nine:

Oct 21 and 23: Radio and network TV: How the latter failed to kill the former (as widely predicted), and how the former has continued to change with the times. Can this precedent apply to the digital age, or are we now in the midst of a brand new media ballgame? Will people really pay for satellite radio? (Why would they pay for TV? Or water?)

Week ten:

Oct 28 and 30: How HBO and premium cable figure into this. How one streaming source (Amazon, Netflix, Spotify, et al.) Continuing discussing the broadcast paradigm shift. Is Pandora radio?

Week eleven:
Nov 4 and 6: Popular music—Who is consuming what, where, why? The place of music is popular culture—the more pervasive, the increasingly irrelevant? What is the product, what is the promotion, where is the money? Start brainstorming final writing assignment.

**Week twelve:**

Nov 11 and 13: Read and discuss McLeese PMS pdf. We’ll decide how prescient (or how wrong) this article written eons ago might be, and what we can draw from how the parallels illuminated within the pop music industry and print journalism might extend to other entertainment media.

**Week thirteen:**

Nov 18 and 20: The publishing industry. Will books survive? (Has vinyl?) How has the digital age effected creation, consumption, distribution, promotion. Is the indie bookstore on the verge of becoming the blacksmith shop? Is book criticism less significant than ever or more significant? Does it pay? Should it?

**Week fourteen:**

Nov 25 and 27: Thanksgiving break!

**Week fifteen:**

Dec 2 and 4: Discussion and workshopping on final assignment.

**Week sixteen:**

Dec 9 and 11: Final writing assignments due (by midnight on Mon, 12/8) for discussion. Final words and questions as we face an uncertain future.

No final exam. Have a great break!