

DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL STUDIES  
TRENT UNIVERSITY

CUST 4535H: CONTEMPORARY TOPICS IN MEDIA STUDIES

2020 F  
Peterborough

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### Course Description

What a year to study contemporary culture! Global pandemics, police violence, and the precipitous decline of the West have all been amplified by communication technologies designed to reinforce inequities on a wide scale. Cyberwar and mass surveillance rule the day among legitimate global players and hackers alike. But for average people, the consequences have never been so dire. Communication technologies, particularly social media, have embedded in our collective psyche for at least a generation. They govern our interpersonal lives through algorithmic controls, and through their questionable, often hidden value systems. Increasingly, however, these technologies have branched out to mediate social policies, ignite political movements, affect public health and education, influence geopolitics, and inform major economic decisions. Their impact has magnified on a scale that we have never truly seen. By focusing on questions of race, cultural expression, and the lure of connectedness, our course aims to develop a media theory that critically examines the forces of pleasure, habit, control and empowerment “in these difficult times.”

### Course Format

Three-hour weekly seminar. These meetings will be scheduled in the Zoom Live Sessions tab on the course Blackboard.

### Texts and Materials

Required texts for purchase:

Benjamin, R. (2019) *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*. Cambridge: Polity.

Chun, W. H. K. (2016) *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Karppi, T. (2018) *Disconnect: Facebook's Affective Bonds*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

One required test can be downloaded for free:

Mirzoeff, N. (2017) *The Appearance of Black Lives Matter*. EBook.  
<https://namepublications.org/item/2017/the-appearance-of-black-lives-matter/>

Further required reading will appear for free as PDFs on Blackboard.

### **Learning Objectives**

From the student's point of view, the main purpose of this class is to become familiar with some prominent debates currently happening in Media Studies. Pedagogically, however, the aim is more specific. It is:

- To enhance your critical reading skills.
- To develop your oral presentation and communication skills.
- To engage in original research.

As a fourth-year seminar, both the topics explored, and the pedagogical aims identified here are intended to prepare you for graduation, regardless of whether you choose to continue with graduate school or to enter the workforce.

### **Evaluation**

Your grade for this course will come from the following:

Position Paper	15%	Oct. 8
Video Pecha Kucha (x2)	20%	First: Oct. 15-Nov. 5; Second: Nov. 12-26.
Research Proposal	5%	Nov. 5
Presentation of research	10%	Dec. 3
Research Paper	30%	Dec. 10
Participation	20%	Ongoing

### **Position Paper**

Due: Oct. 8, Blackboard, 11:59PM

A lot of the material that we deal with in the first month of this course addresses intersections between race, racialization and racial justice, together with questions surrounding communication technologies, agency, and the limits of social media for advancing political causes. In this assignment, you are required to find new, inventive and thought-provoking ways of taking a position on these questions. You will choose a topic or theme for your paper that is based on a close analysis of required readings through Weeks 1-3 (i.e. work by Benjamin and/or

Mirzoeff). Additionally, you will integrate a critical analysis of the media content that we explore during the same period (i.e. work by Curtis, Herzog, DuVernay, Buolamwini, and/or Hughes, Noble and Drinkwater). Success in this assignment will not be measured by your ability to summarize or quote these materials. Rather, this assignment encourages you: i) to situate your own arguments in relation to others, ii) to combine written material with “real world” examples, 3) to skillfully and simultaneously work through diverse (i.e. written and visual) content.

The assignment must be at least 2,000 words in length, not including bibliography or plot segmentation. It MUST abide to the MLA citation style as found here: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/01/>. Please note that MLA style includes in-text references, bibliography and formatting. Your assignment MUST be uploaded to Blackboard in .docx format.

### **Video Pecha Kucha (x2)**

Due: First one between Oct. 15-Nov. 5; Second one between Nov. 12-26.

Pecha Kucha is a highly structured voice-and-image presentation format that requires presenters to deliver 20 Powerpoint slides at a rate of 20 seconds per slide, for a presentation just over 6 minutes. In this assignment, you will create two such presentations and record them in a video file that you will share with the class on Blackboard’s Discussion Board. The content of your presentation must include a critical examination of the texts that have been assigned in this course: each student will present their first Pecha Kucha on Chun’s *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media*, and their second on Karppi’s *Disconnect: Facebook’s Affective Bonds*. Do not summarize the text more than is needed for an audience that has completed the reading on their own. Rather, try to find a theme, topic, or concept that you want to explore further, and aim to develop a unique perspective that will move the conversation into uncharted territory. Use the medium of voice-and-image to its best potential. For an example on how to prepare a Pecha Kucha, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wq1Jnx51pW0>

### **Research Proposal**

Due: Nov. 5

In this assignment, you are required to put forward a strong proposal for a year-end research project. The topic and theme of your proposed work should connect with some aspect of the material explored in the course, but you are also *strongly* encouraged to choose your own path. The purpose of this assignment is not to gain substantial points toward your final grade. Rather, it is to engage in a consultation with me to produce original – *actual* – research. In the document, you must include an abstract of 500 words. Carefully consider the scope of your work, and allow your questions to determine the kind of material that you need to complete your task. In addition to the abstract, include three (3) citations of scholarly material that you intend to include as part of your research, and provide annotations.

The document MUST abide to the MLA citation style as found here: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/01/>. Please note that MLA style includes in-text references, bibliography and formatting. Your assignment MUST be uploaded to Blackboard in .docx format.

You will also provide a short presentation based on your proposal to class on Nov. 5.

### **Presentation of Research**

Due: Dec. 3

On the last day of class, each student is expected to deliver a presentation on their research during a live seminar on Zoom. All other students are expected to provide feedback to the student, and generate a brief conversation. The purpose of this assignment is to encourage effective public speaking.

### **Research Paper**

Due: Dec. 10

The research paper is the most substantial assignment in the course, and should reflect any discussion that unfolded during the proposal phase. This paper must include citations from at least three original sources (i.e. material that has *not* been covered in seminar). The assignment must be at least 3,000 words in length, not including bibliography. It MUST abide to the MLA citation style as found here: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/01/>. Please note that MLA style includes in-text references, bibliography and formatting. Your assignment MUST be uploaded to Blackboard in .docx format.

### **Participation**

Due Date: Ongoing

Teaching remotely is not ideal, especially when it comes to evaluating a student's participation. For that reason, we have developed a number of different avenues where you can achieve a strong participation grade. Consider participating in one or more of the following:

- 1) Seminar discussion via weekly Zoom sessions. It is very important to attend these sessions. If you have concerns around access, please get in touch immediately. We can find ways to accommodate you. We aim to have fulsome conversations with all students in the class. Verbal communication is necessary, but you can also contribute using Zoom's "chat" function.
- 2) The Discussion Board. Here you will find forums dedicated to themes in the course. Each week of class, you may contribute to the appropriate forum by asking questions, sharing ideas, and participating in conversation. These conversations will help you make sense of the material, and build a sense of community. You are expected to make regular contributions.
- 3) Post messages on the course Discord page (invitations will be issued on Week 1). This platform is intended for students to have more informal conversations relating to the course. For this option, you must download the Discord app onto your computer.
- 4) Engage your professor during scheduled office hours or through email.

### **Academic Integrity**

Academic dishonesty, which includes plagiarism and cheating, is an extremely serious academic offence and carries penalties varying from failure on an assignment to expulsion from the University. Definitions, penalties, and procedures for dealing with plagiarism and cheating are set out in Trent University's *Academic Integrity Policy*. You have a responsibility to educate

yourself – unfamiliarity with the policy is not an excuse. You are strongly encouraged to visit Trent’s Academic Integrity website to learn more: [www.trentu.ca/academicintegrity](http://www.trentu.ca/academicintegrity).

## **Access to Instruction**

It is Trent University's intent to create an inclusive learning environment. If a student has a disability and documentation from a regulated health care practitioner and feels that he/she may need accommodations to succeed in a course, the student should contact the Student Accessibility Services Office (SAS) at the respective campus as soon as possible.

## **Devices**

No mobile devices or laptops during screenings. No talking or disruptive behaviour during screenings.

## **Late Penalties**

I will deduct marks at a rate of 5% per day (not including weekends) for late assignments, barring illness or family emergencies. *If you have circumstances that require my attention, please let me know as soon as possible.*

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## **Schedule and Readings**

### **Week 1: Introduction**

Sep. 10

Media: Curtis, A. (2016) *HyperNormalisation* (Excerpt).

Herzog, W. (2016) *Lo and Behold: Reveries of the Connected World* (Excerpt).

### **Week 2: The Appearance of Black Lives Matter / Race After Technology 1**

Sep. 17

Required: Benjamin, R. (2019) *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*. Cambridge: Polity. Read the Introduction.

Mirzoeff, N. (2017) *The Appearance of Black Lives Matter*. EBook, pp. 11-36, 85-132 & 175-181. (Open Source)

In class: DuVernay, A. (2016) *13TH* (Excerpt).

### **Week 3: Race After Technology 2**

Sep. 24

Required: Benjamin, R. (2019) *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*. Cambridge: Polity.

All students must read Ch. 5: Retooling Solidarity, Reimagining Justice.

In addition, you must sign-up to read ONE of the following:

Ch. 1: Engineered Inequity, Ch. 2: Default Discrimination, Ch. 3: Coded Exposure, Ch. 4: Technological Benevolence. Check the “Week 3 Sign-up” menu item on Blackboard.

Media: Buolamwini, J. (2019) “The Coded Gaze: Bias in Artificial Intelligence” (Excerpt)

Hughes, T., Noble, S. U., and Drinkwater, S. (2020) “What Does ‘Good’ Look Like in Technosociety?” (Excerpt)

In Class: Breakout rooms and group presentation on individual chapters.

#### **Week 4: Network Society vs. Attention Economy 1**

Oct. 1

Required: Wark, M. (2019) *Capital is Dead. Is This Something Worse?* London and New York: Verso, pp. 1-37. (Blackboard)

Media: Zuboff, S. (2019) “The Age of Surveillance Capitalism” (Excerpt)

#### **Week 5: Network Society vs. Attention Economy 2**

Oct. 8

Required: Lovink, G. (2019) *Sad by Design: On Platform Nihilism*. London: Pluto Press, pp. 98-137. (Library Online Resources)

Pettman, D. (2016) “I Know Why the Caged Bird Tweets,” *Infinite Distraction*, Cambridge: Polity, pp. 1-30. (Blackboard)

Media: Seymour, R. (2020) “The Twittering Machine I: We Are All Connected” (Excerpt)

#### **Week 6: Habitual New Media 1**

Oct. 15

Required: Chun, W. H. K. (2016) *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, pp. 1-62 (i.e. Introduction and Part I, Ch. 1).

#### **Week 7: Habitual New Media 2**

Oct. 22

Required: Chun, W. H. K. (2016) *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, pp. 63-128 (i.e. Part I, Ch. 2 and Part II, Ch. 3).

#### **Reading Break**

Oct. 29

**Week 8: Habitual New Media 3**

Nov. 5

Required: Chun, W. H. K. (2016) *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, pp. 129-174 (i.e. Part II, Ch. 4 and Conclusion).

In class: Presentation of research proposals.

**Week 9: Disconnect 1**

Nov. 12

Required: Karppi, T. (2018) *Disconnect: Facebook's Affective Bonds*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. "Login" and "Engage."

**Week 10: Disconnect 2**

Nov. 19

Required: Karppi, T. (2018) *Disconnect: Facebook's Affective Bonds*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. "Participate," "Deactivate" and "Die."

**Week 11: Disconnect 3**

Nov. 26

Required: Karppi, T. (2018) *Disconnect: Facebook's Affective Bonds*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. "Disconnect" and "Log Out."

**Week 12:**

Dec. 3

In class: Presentation of student research.