COURSE TITLE:

MEDIA, CULTURE AND TECHNOLOGY -

COMMUNICATION WORK IN THE "GIG" ECONOMY (3328, Advanced)

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

This ethnographic research-based course draws on interdisciplinary readings in communication, media studies, technology studies, sociology, marketing, and labor studies to offer a dynamic, critical view of the role of digital technology in transforming our economic lives. First, the class takes a historical look at how communication work has transformed in the modern era. We explore how the shift from an industrial to an information economy – and forces of globalization – have interacted to profoundly transform communication work. We will also analyze competing theories about digital labor and its social and cultural role in society, and we consider the unique role ethnographic research can play in capturing those social and cultural effects. Second, we analyze the rationales and economic pressures that motivate precarious digital workers, or "gig" workers who engage in work that is freelance, contracted, subcontracted or informalized, and does not provide formal benefits such as health insurance. Our focus will be on gig workers in the communication field, such as freelance journalists, fashion bloggers, Instagram "influencers", and semi-professional gamers. Finally, we will consider the ways in which globally dispersed digital communication technologies are contributing to a digital workforce divide, restructuring relations of power among communication workers and reshaping modern labor movements.

Course Key Words: communication work; media work; gig economy; sharing economy; digital labor; freelancers; immaterial labor; information economy; flexible work; passionate labor; aspirational labor; venture labor; playbor; social media influencers; digital workforce divide; digital divide

COURSE OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the course are to aid you in developing the intellectual tools to:

✓ Examine the economic, historical, and social context of evolving communication technologies

✓ Explore how media help to structure, maintain, and alter power relations in contemporary society

✓ Consider how subcultural or marginalized groups are uniquely impacted by media and technology

✓ Engage in the process of conducting original ethnographic research, including developing research

   questions, applying appropriate methodologies, collecting & analyzing data, and translating research

   into academic writing and research presentations

✓ Gain practical experience in team-based learning, problem-based learning, and experiential learning

✓ Talk, listen, write, read and reflect on the relationship between communication work and the gig

   economy through structured writing assignments, critical reflections, and in-class discussions

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READINGS:

COURSE PART I: Communication Work in [Digital] Transformation

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Stakes of the Course: Ethnography & Communication Work in the Gig Economy

Ballentine, C. (2018, Aug 31). The hot college gig: Online brand promoter. *The New York Times*, p. B1.

   Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/31/technology/college-students-online-

   influencers.html

Epstein, E. A. & Taylor, A. (2017, Feb 18.) Millennials in the gig economy Retrieved from

   https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2017/02/millenials-gig-economy/516750/

Guzman, R. A. (2018, Sep 27). Meet San Antonio's leading fashion Instagram star, Shear Bear. *San*

   Antonio Express News. Retrieved from https://www.expressnews.com/lifestyle/trends-

   style/article/Meet-San-Antonio-s-leading-fashion-Instagram-13264321.php

NJ Spark. (2019). A social justice media and journalism lab for students at Rutgers University. *Rutgers University.* Retrieved from https://medium.com/nj-spark

Walker, D. (2018, Oct 1). On the future of work(ers). *The Ford Foundation.* Retrieved from https://www.fordfoundation.org/ideas/equals-change-blog/posts/on-the-future-of-work-ers/\

Methodology: An Ethnographic View of Everyday Economic Life

Cintron, R. (1997). Angels' town: Chero ways, gang life, and rhetorics of everyday life. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 51 – 63.

Crowell, J.K. (2017). *Liquid labor, precarious lives: An urban ethnography of online work and digital inequality.* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, 1 – 3.

Emerson, R., Fretz, R. & Shaw, L. (2011). *Writing ethnographic fieldnotes.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1 – 23.

Murthy, D. (2008). Digital ethnography: An examination of the use of new technologies for social research. *Sociology*, 42(5), 837 – 855.

Rosenblat, A. (2018). *Uberland: How algorithms are rewriting the rules of work.* Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 84 – 91.

Context: Towards a Post-Industrial Economy

Bell, D. (1976). *The coming of post-industrial society.* New York, NY: Basic Books, 12 – 20.

Castells, M. (1996). *The rise of the network society.* Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 77 – 123.

Theory: A New, Flexible World of Global Work

Bauman, Z. (2000). *Liquid modernity.* Malden, MA: Polity Press, 130 – 140.

Beck, U. (2000). *The brave new world of work.* Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 92 – 109.

Frameworks: Media Work, Free Labor & the Sharing Economy

Deuze, M. (2007). *Media work.* Malden, MA: Polity Press, 45 – 83.

Sundararajan, A. (2016). The sharing economy: The end of employment and the rise of crowd-based

capitalism. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 47 – 67.

Terranova, T. (2000). Free labor: Producing culture for the digital economy. *Social Text*, 18(2), 33-58.

COURSE PART II: Convergence & Work in the Cultural Industries

Tech Culture: How Silicon Valley Shaped the Culture of Work

Fowler, S. (2018, Sep). Silicon Valley and the gig economy. *Vanity Fair*. Retrieved from

https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2018/08/silicon-valley-engineers-fear-they-created-a-

monster

Lyons, D. (2017, Aug 31). In Silicon Valley, working 9 to 5 is for losers. *The New York Times,* p. SR2.

Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/31/opinion/sunday/silicon-valley-work-life-

balance-.htmlfn

Neff, G. (2012). *Venture labor: Work and the burden of risk in innovative industries.* Cambridge, MA: MIT

Press, 1 – 35.

Social Media: Branding & Promoting the Digital Self

Banet-Weiser, S. & Lapsansky, C. (2008). RED is the new black: Brand culture, consumer citizenship and

political possibility. *International Journal of Communication* (2), 1248 – 1268.

Duffy, B. E. (2017). *(Not) getting paid to do what you love: Gender, social media and aspirational work*.

New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 185 – 217

Marwick, A. (2013). Status update: Celebrity, publicity, and self-branding in web 2.0. New Haven, CT:

Yale University Press, 163 – 204.

Identity Work Online: Gendered Labor in the New Economy

Duffy, B. E. (2015). The romance of work: Gender and aspirational labour in the digital culture industries.

International Journal of Cultural Studies, 1 – 17.

Oulette, L. (2017). Dream jobs: The glamorization of beauty service work in media culture. In A.S. Elias &

R. Gill & C. Scharff (Eds.), *Aesthetic Labor: Rethinking Beauty Politics in Neoliberalism (pp. 183 –*

198). London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Wissinger, Elizabeth. (2015). #NoFilter: Models, Glamour Labour, and the Age of the Blink. In J. Davis &

Nathan Jurgenson (Eds.) Theorizing the Web 2014 [Special Issue]. *Interface,* 1(1), 1 - 20. DOI:

http://dx.doi.org/10.7710/2373-4914.1010

The New Advertising: Changing Dynamics & Instagram Influencers

Abidin, C. (2015). Communicative intimacies: Influencers and perceived interconnectedness. *Ada: A*

Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology, 8. Retrieved from

https://adanewmedia.org/2015/11/issue8-abidin/

Kircher, M. M. (2016, Nov 4). Where are you, Essena O'Neill? *New York Magazine*. Retrieved from

http://nymag.com/selectall/2016/11/esenna-oneill-one-year-after-quitting-social-media.html

Lorenz, T. (2018, Jun 13). Instagram's wannabe-stars are driving luxury hotels crazy. *The Atlantic*,

Retrieved from https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2018/06/instagram-

influencers-are-driving-luxury-hotels-crazy/562679/

O'Neill, E. (2015, Nov 5). *Why I'm really quitting social media* [Video file]. Retrieved from

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gmAbwTQvWX8

Maheshwari, S. (2018, Nov 11). Are you ready for the nanoinfluencers? *The New York Times*, p. B1.

Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/11/business/media/nanoinfluencers-

instagram-influencers.html

Journalism in Transition: The Rise of Freelancing

Cohen, N. S. (2016). *Writer's rights: Freelance journalism in the digital age.* Montreal, CA: McGill-

Queen's University Press, 141 – 170.

Farhi, P. (2018, Dec 9). At NPR, an army of temps faces a workplace of anxiety and insecurity. *The*

Washington Post, Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/at-npr-an-

army-of-temps-resents-a-workplace-full-of-anxiety-and-insecurity/2018/12/07/32e49632-f35b-

11e8-80d0-f7e1948d55f4_story.html?utm_term=.daf59993b655

Hunter, A. (2015). Crowdfunding independent and freelance journalism: Negotiating journalistic norms

of autonomy and objectivity. *New Media & Society*, *17*(2), 272–288.

Global Gaming: "Playbor" and the Video Game Industry

Anonymous & Symon, E.V. (2016, Apr 16). I'm paid to play World of Warcraft all day (and it sucks).

Cracked. Retrieved from http://www.cracked.com/personal-experiences-2228-im-paid-to-play-

mmorpgs-its-nightmare-5-realities.html

Bulut, E. (2015). Playboring in the tester pit: The convergence of precarity and the degradation of fun in

video-game testing. *Television & New Media*, 16(3), 240–258.

Dyer-Witheford, N. & de Peuter, G. (2009). *Games of empire: Global capitalism and video games.*

Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 3 – 33.

Postigo, H. (2007). Of mods and modders: Chasing down the value of fan-based digital game

modifications. Games and Culture, 2(4), 300 – 313.

COURSE PART III: A Digital Workforce Divide

Social Class: A Digital [Workforce] Divide

Mateescu, A. (2017). Who cares in the gig economy? On demand models are changing domestic work.

Data & Society Points, Retrieved from https://points.datasociety.net/who-cares-in-the-gig-

economy-6d75a079a889

Rodino-Colocino, M. (2006). Laboring under the digital divide. *New Media & Society*, 8(3), 485 – 511.

Ticona, J. & Mateescu, A. (2018). Trusted strangers: Carework platforms' cultural entrepreneurship in

the on-demand economy, *New Media & Society*, 00(0), 1 – 21.

Wang, W. (2018). The differentially associated sharing economy. *New Media & Society*, 00(0), 1 – 18.

Technological Controls: Algorithms and Worker Surveillance

O'Donovan, C. (2018). This "Creepy" Time-Tracking Software Is Like Having Your Boss Watch You

   Every Second Buzzfeed News, Retrieved from

   https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/carolineodonovan/upwork-freelancers-work-diary-

   keystrokes-screenshot

Rosenblat, A. (2018). *Uberland: How algorithms are rewriting the rules of work.* Oakland, CA: University

   of California Press, 138 – 167.

Wood, A., Graham, M. Lehdonvirta, V. & Hjorth, I. (2018). Good gig, bad gig: Autonomy and algorithmic

   control in the global gig economy. *Work, Employment & Society*, 1 – 20.

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RELATED COURSE ASSIGNMENTS & GRADING PROCEDURES:

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GIG ECONOMY – 1 SLIDE ASSIGNMENT

This assignment is an opportunity for you to locate and share a facet of the "gig economy" that interests

you with the class. You can choose to share the story of a gig economy worker, quickly explain a current

news story about the gig economy, or even share with the class your experience in the gig economy. You

will need to submit a single slide to explain this idea. Please try your best to limit text, and try to

incorporate visual media (like pictures, etc). You should be able to explain your idea/slide in 1 minute.

Note: I will incorporate your slide in lecture at some point in the start of our semester!

DISCUSSION PARTNERSHIP ASSIGNMENT

In Unit II of the course, we examine convergence & the creative industries. You will sign-up in small

groups to help lead the discussion class and serve as the "reading experts" for one of the following units:

Tech Culture; Social Media; Identity Work; Advertising; Journalism; and, Gaming. Your goal will be to

work with me to help lead the class, and you will have the opportunity to structure the class activities

for the day and to help students engage with the readings for your assigned unit. You will be graded

based on: 1) the overall organization of the class activity you design for the day; 2) demonstration of

mastery of the unit's readings, including an understanding of key terms, ideas, and theories; 3)

utilization of innovative techniques to help lead discussion and reinforce key concepts; and, 4) fostering

critical engagement with the readings. I will meet with your group in advance and work with you to

implement your vision for the class. Students will evaluate your performance and you will evaluate the

class participation of the other students that day.

READING ASSESSMENT

Based on your votes as a class for how you would like your reading comprehension to be assessed, you

will submit 5 sets of reading notes for 5 course units, in addition to 5 sets of discussion questions for 5

different course units. Notes will be evaluated on overall understanding of main points/arguments,

inclusion of key terms, and level of detail. Discussion questions will be evaluated on their overall

understanding of key arguments in the assigned reading and connection to other course concepts.

RESEARCH PARTICIPANT ASSIGNMENT

In this short 2 – 3 page informal paper, you will identify 3 - 4 potential participants for your research

project. You will include: 1) A description of each participant and the gig work she/he does; 2) A

discussion of why she/he is a potentially interesting participant; 3) An update on where you are in

regards to contacting potential participants; and, 4) A discussion of which course unit you think would

be most relevant to each proposed participant.

ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELDWORK PORTFOLIO

As part of your major assignment for the course, you will conduct semi-structured interviews of 2 - 4 gig

economy workers based on the research questions we have formed as a class. You will also observe

them and write detailed notes about your interactions, i.e. "fieldnotes". You will collect other

documents or data related to their work. (For example, if you interviewed a beauty blogger, you might

consider collecting screenshots of their Instagram account.) You will organize this data into a "portfolio"

and write a short "cover letter" explaining your project and any challenges you have encountered. You

will be required to complete IRB training prior to the beginning of data collection.

ETHNOGRAPHIC DATA ANALYSIS

Following the construction of your ethnographic fieldwork portfolio, you will work to analyze your data.

First, you will "open code" your interviews, fieldnotes, and documents collected for common themes.

Next, you will "closed code" your interviews, fieldnotes, and documents collected for themes that relate

directly back to the initial research questions for your project. Finally, you will use these codes to write 1

– 3 research "memos" that summarize key findings, incorporating specific examples from your data to

help make your points. You should draw on course readings to develop this analysis.

FINAL DELIVERABLE

The final course deliverable will be an interactive website, as voted upon as a class. Here you will share

your research findings. More information will be updated after our class roundtable discussion.

EXAMPLE PROJECT:

Students determined the final course deliverable by vote at the start of the semester. As a class, we are

building a website to present the findings of our collective research. Students have assumed the roles

necessary to produce the website, including graphic design, marketing, editing, etc.