

**TECHNOLOGICAL UNDERWORLDS (EMERGING MEDIA)**  
COMS 647  
WINTER 2014  
Department of Art History and Communication Studies  
McGill University  
Professor Gabriella Coleman  
Thursday, 14:35-17:25, Arts W-5



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Professor: Dr. Gabriella Coleman  
Office hours: By appointment  
Phone: 514-398-8572  
E-mail: [gabriella.coleman@mcgill.ca](mailto:gabriella.coleman@mcgill.ca)

Today it is impossible to read a newspaper or magazine without stumbling upon at least one article featuring digital media as its primary subject. Whether it is the so-called Twitter Revolution during the Arab Spring or the promise of “big data” for curing social ills, digital media in various forms and capacities is heralded as either savior or demon, and has, in turn, captured and saturated the public imagination. Despite its inescapable presence in public, so many facets of digital technologies lay untouched, are grossly misunderstood, or barely pierce public consciousness. These include infrastructure and hardware, digital media in non-Western societies, and the seedy/transgressive cultures of digital media. This course attends to the contemporary politics of digital media through the angle of its unexplored and misunderstood underworlds: servers and spam, darknets and black code, invisible users, trolls and misfit activists. As we read various in-depth accounts, the class will interrogate the myopias that have grown in tandem with the the study of digital media, consider why and how digital phenomena are rendered invisible and discuss the methodological difficulties in accessing and addressing digital underworlds.

### **READINGS**

Articles are available on on our course website.

The following books are required and available for purchase at Paragraph Books (2220 Av McGill College) and are also on reserve at the McGill library:

Finn Brunton. *Spam: A Shadow History of the Internet*. MIT Press, 2013.  
 Ron Diebert. *Black Code*. Signal, 2013  
 Jenna Burrell. *Invisible Users*. MIT Press, 2012  
 Andy Greenburg. *This Machine Kills Secrets*. Dutton Adult, 2012  
 Natasha Schull. *Addiction by Design*. Princeton University Press, 2012  
 Laura Kurgan. *Close Up at a Distance: Mapping, Technology, and Politics*. MIT Press, 2013.  
 Lisa Gitleman. *Raw Data is an Oxymoron*. MIT Press, 2013.

**REQUIRMENTS, METHOD OF EVALUATION, AND ASSINGMENTS**  
 (see below)

**WORKING SCHEDULE**

The following is a “working schedule.” Class materials are subject to change based on the interests, understanding, and general pace of the class. It is your responsibility to keep on top of any schedule changes. If you have a concern about any of the materials, please speak to me.

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**January 9: Infrastructure and Exploit-ability**

Finn Brunton. *Spam: A Shadow History of the Internet*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013.  
 Markus Krajewski, “Ask Jeeves: Servants as Search Engines.” *Grey Room*, 2010.

**January 16: “Cyber” (Its so scary, it is now a noun)**

Ron Diebert. *Black Code*. Signal, 2013.  
 Dan Geer. Trends in Cybersecurity. 2013. <http://geer.tinho.net/geer.nro.6xi13.txt>

**January 23: Invisible Users**

Jenna Burrell. *Invisible Users*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012.

**January 30: Haxors**

Johan Soderberg, “Determining social change: The role of technological determinism in the collective action framing of hackers.” *New Media and Society*, 2013.  
 Andy Greenburg, *This Machine Kills Secrets*. Dutton Adult, 2012.

**February 7: Anonymous**

Marco Deseriis, “Is Anonymous a New Form of Luddism? A Comparative Analysis of Industrial Machine Breaking,

Computer Hacking, and Related Rhetorical Strategies.” *Radical History Review*, 2013.

Gabriella Coleman, *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy: From 4chan Lolcats to Anonymous Everywhere* [selections of manuscript]

### **February 13: Visualization and Mapping**

Laura Kurgan. *Close Up at a Distance: Mapping, Technology, and Politics*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013.

### **February 20: Evil**

Matthew Fuller. *Evil Media*. The MIT Press, 2012. [selections]

Scott Kushner, “The freelance translation machine: Algorithmic culture and the invisible industry.” *New Media & Society*, 2013

### **February 27: Getting Inside Big Data**

Lisa Gitleman. *Raw Data is an Oxymoron*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013.

Kate Crawford, “Think Again: Big Data.” *Foreign Policy*, 2013.  
[http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/05/09/think\\_again\\_big\\_data](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/05/09/think_again_big_data)

### **March 6: Spring Break**

No class

### **March 13: Piracy**

Patrick Bukhart. *Pirate Politics: The New Information Policy Contests*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014.

Ravi Sundaram. *Pirate Modernity*. Routledge, 2011.

### **March 20: Dick's Everywhere (lulz)**

Whitney Phillips. *Dick's Everywhere*. New York: NYU Press, 2014, Forthcoming.

Lee Knuitla. “User Unknown: 4chan, anonymity and contingency.” *First Monday*, 2011.  
<http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/3665/3055>

### **March 27: Hate Speech and Racism**

Lisa Nakamura, “‘It’s a Nigger in Here! Kill the Nigger!’ User-Generated Media Campaigns Against Racism, Sexism, and Homophobia.” *Media Studies Futures*, 2012.

Danielle Citron. *Hate Crimes in Cyberspace*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014, Forthcoming.

### **April 3: Digital Gambling and Currency**

Natasha Schull. *Addiction by Design*. Princeton University Press, 2014. [1/2]

Bill Maurer, Taylor C. Nelms & Lana Swartz, “When perhaps the real problem is money itself!”: the practical

materiality of Bitcoin.” *Social Semiotics*, 2013.

### April 10: Digital Gambling

Natasha Schull. *Addiction by Design*. Princeton University Press, 2014.

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### REQUIRMENTS, METHOD OF EVALUATION, AND ASSINGMENTS

This class will be run as a seminar and as indicated below, participation is not only required, but will count significantly toward your final grade. I expect students to come fully prepared to discuss all the readings critically but constructively and engage with fellow students in a respectful fashion.

To aid in our discussion, you will be required to post at least one (padded) question on our class website at least 3 hours prior to class, substantively engaging with the class readings. These need not be lengthy ruminations but should be well thought out queries and should likely be longer than a couple of sentences.

Seminars style classes provide an excellent opportunity to read the assigned texts thoroughly. For most weeks, we will be reading slightly less than a book a week in an attempt to ensure you can complete the class readings so we can spend most of the class collectively engaging in a close analysis and discussion of the texts. To facilitate our seminar, come prepared to discuss arguments and key passages in the texts. Since many of the topics we are discussing are timely or will be in the news, there will be an understandable gravitational pull toward discussing them. I have parceled out the last hour of class for student presentations and discussion of these more timely issues.

Every student will be required to give a 20 minute presentation on a contemporary (or few historical) examples of a technological underworld. The presentation will be given in the first 20 minutes during the last hour of class and should include a 3-5 page handout covering key issues. The remainder of the seminar will be spent collectively discussing the topic. On the first day of class, we will generate a list of presentation topics based on your suggestions and you will also sign up for a topic/date (some example I will bring to the table are malware, Internet porn, bitcoin, phone phreaking, cryptography, algorithms).

The final paper can consist of either a 12 page, double spaced review style essay synthesizing 60% of the class readings or a 12-15 page research paper of your own design. I will provide more details about each assignment and expectations for the class presentations in class.

#### Grade Breakdown:

- Class Participation and Questions: 25%
- Presentation and Handout: 25%
- Final Paper: 50%

Grade	Grade point	Percentages
A	4.0	85 -100
A-	3.7	80 – 84
B+	3.3	75 – 79
B	3.0	70 – 74
B-	2.7	65 – 69
C+	2.3	60 – 64

C	2.0	55 – 59
D (Conditional Pass)	1.0	50 – 54
F (Fail)	0	0 - 49

### OTHER INFORMATION AND MCGILL POLICIES

*Language:* In accordance with McGill University’s Charter of Students’ Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded. Please speak to me as soon as possible if you plan on submitting your work in French so I can make arrangements for additional help for grading. You are welcome to read course material in French if they are available.

*Accommodations:* Students requiring special accommodations or other classroom modifications should notify Prof. Coleman and the Office for Students with Disabilities as soon as possible. The OSD is located in Suite 3100, Brown Student Services Building, ph: 398-6009 (voice), 398-8198 (TDD), [www.mcgill.ca/osd/](http://www.mcgill.ca/osd/)

*Non Discrimination:* This class seeks to create a supportive and inclusive environment. In accordance with university policy, I will not tolerate discrimination or harassment on the basis of race, color, ethnic or national origin, civil status, religion, creed, political convictions, language, sex, sexual orientation, disability, social condition, and age.

*Academic Integrity:* 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/students/srr/honest/](http://www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/) for more information).  
L’université McGill attaché une haute importance à l’honnêteté académique. Il incombe par conséquent à tous les étudiants de comprendre ce que l’on entend par tricherie, plagiat et autres infractions académiques, ainsi que les conséquences que peuvent avoir de telles actions, selon le Code de conduite de l’étudiant et des procédures disciplinaires (pour les plus amples renseignements, veuillez consulter le site [www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/](http://www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/)).

*Illness:* Students are responsible for material covered in all classes, including anything missed due to illness.