It has become commonplace for theories of media to attribute massive psychocultural transformations to the influence of dominant forms of representation and communication. Homeric Greeks (like other "tribal" peoples) lacked an interior self because they lived in an “oral” world. The phonetic alphabet made philosophy possible. Print underlies bureaucracy and mechanization. TV creates a “global village.” Contemporary multimedia technologies undermine (or, in other circumstances, enhance) centralized attempts to control social meaning. And so on.

The primary aim of this course is to raise the underlying, and as yet unanswered, questions upon which all such media theory depends: to what extent does the emerging age, the age we live in now (Post-industrial, Post-philosophical, Post-modern, Post-western, Information Age, Late Capitalism), recover certain characteristics of Oral/Traditional culture? To what extent does it preserve or intensify or dilute characteristics of Print/Modern culture? To what extent is it constituting something new?

In order to address that question seriously, the course will pursue three more specific aims:

1) To make explicit the general characteristics proposed for defining each ideal type of media mindset and culture.
2) To suspend impulses to approve or condemn.
3) To undertake a detailed empirical study of specific phenomena so as to put the proposed characteristics to the test.

Books available at the NYU Book Store:

*Understanding Media*, Marshall McLuhan

*Orality and Literacy*, Walter Ong

*Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Neil Postman

*Alone Together*, Sherry Turkle

*Convergence Culture*, Henry Jenkins
A packet of selected readings is available at University Copy Shop, 11 Waverly Place.

**Course Requirements:** 2 informal reflection papers of 3 to 4 pages. One class presentation. A final paper (18 – 20 pages), focused on a specific media phenomenon, addressing the basic question of the course.

**Calendar**

**Class 1**

**INTRODUCTION**

A review of the issues as we will approach them. The problem of generalization in the humanities. Characterizing "ideal types" of culture, historical periods etc. Discussion of student interests and backgrounds. Discussion of expectations for the course.

For the next two classes readings from Plato, Havelock, Ong, Mcluhan, Rousseau, Levi-Strauss, Derrida.

**Classes 2 & 3**

**THE IMPACT OF THE PHONETIC ALPHABET**

Media theoreticians have different disciplinary backgrounds and different aims. They emphasize different aspects of the relationship between media and culture. They have different ways of evaluating social and political consequences. But they all agree on certain fundamentals; for example, they agree that oral traditions tend to minimize the critical distance between human beings and the world around them and between human beings and themselves. And they agree that a phonetic alphabet tends to enhance those distances. Media theory about "oral cultures" asks us to imagine, in effect, "what it would be like" to be non-literate. Can we do that? Can we answer questions like: What would your name mean to you if you had never seen it written down? What would your home mean to you if it had no address, no number? What would the days or the years be like if
there were no names or numbers for them? How would you live if you had no lists, no currency, no schedule? Lecture and discussion of these issues.

For the next two classes readings from Ong, McLuhan, Postman

Classes 4 & 5

THE IMPACT OF PRINT

Whatever the reliability of the generalizations we make about oral cultures that we cannot experience directly, we can certainly make good use of our ideas about them to inform our reflections on what we now take for granted in the contemporary context. It is only in the light of the provisional answers we gave to questions about oral cultures that we make ourselves aware of how we have lived with literacy—and, more especially, with print and everything it entails. Is the kind of logic that informs Newtonian mechanics and the Constitution of the United States best understood as an expression of "print culture?" How could we decide that question, and others like it? Contrasts like "linear" vs "holistic" are certainly suggestive, but what are we actually doing when we apply them to the entire fabric of modern experience? How can we decide how valid these characterizations are? Lectures and discussion on these issues.

For the next two classes readings from Postman, McLuhan, de Sola Pool, Sontag. First reflection paper due.

Class 6 & 7

TELEGRAPH, PHOTOGRAPH, TELEPHONE

The impact of these critical technologies is often overlooked because the more dramatic changes wrought by movies, radio, TV and digital communication systems tend to obscure them in hindsight. But their effects were profound. They shattered distance and stopped time. And they did so in relatively contained ways. That gave the reflections of thinkers and artists on those technologies a kind of purity. They were able to notice very simple and basic things about a phenomenon that what would eventually become so vast and variable as to defy comprehension. Lectures and discussion on these issues.

For the next class: prepare a description of final paper/project and be prepared to discuss
Class 8
Discussion of final projects and papers

For the next two class readings from McLuhan, Braudy, Gabler, Birkerts.

Classes 9 & 10
RADIO AND MOVIES
The issue of mass communications is fully joined—and a new division emerges in society. The "star" is born. Celebrity culture begins to take shape. Have new forms of mythic intimacy been created? Or simply new means of commercial and political manipulation? Why not both? Could there have been a Hitler without these media? Lectures and discussion on these issues.

For the next two classes readings from Boorstin, Postman, Horkheimer and Adorno, Frank,

Classes 10&11
THE RISE OF TV AND POP CULTURE
When historians look back on the 20th century, will the rise of rock and roll and “situation comedies” on television—pop culture generally—take on a significance comparable to the Renaissance and Reformation? Will the emergence of "teen/youth" seem as significant as the rise of the bourgeoisie in the 17th century and the proletariat in the 19th? Does this question seem frivolous? It was phrased so as to provoke that query. But think May, 1968, Paris or Tahrir Square, Cairo 2011 and further reflection seems called for. Because the very existence of media studies and cultural studies depends upon the possibility that culture as a whole just is pop culture—at least in the overdeveloped world. To the extent that this possibility is being realized, the question isn’t frivolous. Lectures and discussion on this issues.

For the next two classes readings from Turkle, Haraway, Nakamura
Classes 12 & 13

DIGITAL MEDIA

Multitasking, instant messaging, hacking, blogging, linking, Facebook, YouTube multiple identities, avatars, cyborgs—what is all this? What does it amount to as whole—if that word applies at all? What have the psycho-cultural effects of on-line living really been? Can we distinguish fantasy and hype from empirically verifiable conclusions here—or is the very object of this question blurring that line, as it has blurred so many others? Lecture and discussion of these questions.

For the next two classes readings from Baudrillard, de Zengotita, Jameson, Jenkins

Classes 14 & 15

CONCLUSION: ALL MEDIA, ALL THE TIME?

Do feel like you are living in a global village? Doesn't it depend on how we construe that expression? If it means that I know more about Libya, and know it sooner, than I do about the Bronx, or that I speak to my mother in California as often as I do to my sister in Scarsdale—that's one thing. But if it means I feel like everyone in the world is my neighbor, than no—I may not even feel like my neighbor is my neighbor (but that might say something too). On the other hand, I may feel like everyone famous in the world is somehow a part of a single community—call it Celebrityville. And it might be said that compartments in the print-based bureaucratic world are breaking down—that the differences between politics and entertainment, medicine and religion, art and commerce, psychology and morality are harder and harder to fix. Finally, whatever description of a totally mediated culture one might opt for—is it a good thing? Do we have a choice?

Readings for the course to be drawn from:

Barber, Benjamin. McWorld Vs Jihad, Times Books, 1995


*Phaedrus*, Penguin, 1973


Postman, Neil *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Penguin, 1985


