Syllabus:
Anthropology of Virtual Communication

ANTH 4701.018 ✒ University of North Texas
Dr. Christina Wasson
Spring 2016 ✒ TR 3:30-4:50 ✒ Wooten 219

Course Description

This is a class on the anthropology of virtual communication. "Virtual communication" refers to interactions that are mediated by *applications* such as Facebook or Skype, using *devices* such as mobile phones or laptops. The use of such applications and devices enables people to communicate across geographic distance. Since technology-mediated communication is becoming ever more common in today's world, examining it can provide insight into many social and cultural processes.

We will start by examining four key orientations that distinguish an anthropological approach to virtual communication:
1. Avoidance of technological determinism
    • Technologies have no agency; people have agency and they use technologies as tools to accomplish their goals and activities
    • Therefore research questions focus on human activities, not technologies per se
2. Holism, as seen in the use of concepts such as "media ecologies"
3. A cross-cultural perspective that enables us to distinguish between what is universal and what is culturally specific in the uses and meanings of technology
4. Ethnographic methods

We will then read ethnographic studies of virtual communication practices as they have emerged in various cultural contexts. The activities we will read about include:
  • Community-building: nation
  • Community-building: indigenous groups
  • Political activism
  • Hacking
  • Reproducing and contesting inequalities
  • Community-building: local groups
  • Youth culture activities
  • Gaming
  • Managing personal relationships

Each student will also conduct a semester-long research project on a group that regularly engages in virtual communication.

Office Hours and Communication with Instructor

My office is Chilton 330D. My office hours are Mo 3-5. To see me at other times, please make an appointment by calling 940 565 2752, or emailing christina.wasson@unt.edu.

The syllabus, research project instructions, and various other course materials are available on the WordPress class site at http://anthofvirtualcommunication.wordpress.com/.

We will create a method of virtual communication for the class. I will invite your input. For instance, it could be an email list or a Facebook page.

Required Texts

The readings are a group of articles that are available on the class WordPress site, http://anthofvirtualcommunication.wordpress.com/readings/. The password will be announced in class.

Readings are **not** optional. Students will be tested on them and asked to discuss them in class.

Course Requirements

1. Attendance and participation in classroom discussions (20%). This course combines lectures with class discussion, so participation is very important. Class participation makes up twenty percent of your final grade. Obviously, if you are absent you cannot contribute to discussions, so a high level of attendance is required for a good grade. If you have more than four unexcused absences, your attendance/participation grade will be reduced. In addition, students may be dropped from the course for any of the following reasons:
- Missing the whole first week of class
- Missing two consecutive weeks of class

Your attendance/participation grade will be based on the following elements:
- Do you demonstrate that you have completed the assigned readings?
- Do you offer thoughtful analyses, reflections, and critiques of the topics discussed in class?
- Do your comments build on the comments of other class members?
- Are you usually present in class?

Attendance will also affect your grades on written assignments, because a good deal of the information you need to get a good grade will only be presented in class. The lectures

are designed to supplement, rather than repeat, information contained in the readings. Students are responsible for all materials and announcements presented in class, whether or not they were there. If you miss a class, your first step should be to ask a classmate for their notes. If you still have questions afterwards, you may ask for further clarification during office hours.

2. Two quizzes (15% each). There will be two take-home essay quizzes. They will cover lectures, discussions in class, and reading assignments.

3. Research project (50%). Students will conduct a guided research project over the course of the quarter. See *Research Project Instructions* for more information.

Plagiarism Policy

The department of anthropology does not tolerate plagiarism or any other form of academic dishonesty. Students suspected of academic dishonesty will be given a hearing in which they are informed of the charges. If there is clear evidence in support of the charge, they will automatically fail the course. For more information on the university's policies regarding academic integrity and dishonesty, see the Center for Student Rights and Responsibilities at http://www.unt.edu/csrr/. Plagiarism is defined as misrepresenting the work of others (whether published or not) as your own. It may be inadvertent or intentional. You should always provide references for any facts, statistics, quotations, or paraphrasing of information that are not common knowledge. For more information on writing papers, including how to avoid plagiarism and how to use citations, see the department of anthropology's Writing Guide at http://anthropology.unt.edu/resources-writingpaper.php.

Non-Discrimination Policy

It is the policy of the University of North Texas not to discriminate on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, age, national origin, disability (where reasonable accommodations can be made), disabled veteran status or veteran of the Vietnam era status in its educational programs, activities, admissions or employment policies. In addition to complying with federal and state equal opportunity laws and regulations, the university through its diversity policy declares harassment based on individual differences (including sexual orientation) inconsistent with its mission and education goals. Direct questions and concerns to the Equal Opportunity Office, 940 565 2456, or the Dean of Students, 940 565 2648. TDD access is available through Relay Texas, 800 735 2989.

Anthropology does not discriminate on the basis of an individual's disability as required by the Americans with Disabilities Act. The program provides academic adjustments and aid to individuals with disabilities in its programs and activities. If you have a disability, you are strongly advised to contact the Office of Disability Accommodations (UU 318A)

or by telephone at 940 565 4323. **It is the responsibility of the student to make the necessary arrangements with the instructors.**

Course Schedule

Students are expected to complete each day's readings before class. Students are also expected to bring the readings for that day to class.

W	Date	Discussion Topics & Assignments	Readings
1	Tu Jan 19	Introductions and outline of course	N/A
	Th Jan 21	Theory: sociotechnical theory	Ling 2004
2	Tu Jan 26	Theory: holism	Horst et al. 2010:29-45
	Th Jan 28	Methods: virtual ethnography and connective ethnography *Training in participant observation*	Boellstorff 2008
3	Tu Feb 2	Methods: ethics **Description of Fieldsite Due**	Boellstorff et al. 2012
	Th Feb 4	Community-building: nation	Miller & Slater 2000 Ch 2
4	Tu Feb 9	Community-building: nation	Miller & Slater 2000 Ch 3
	Th Feb 11	Community-building: nation	Miller & Slater 2000 Ch 4
5	Tu Feb 16	Community-building: indigenous groups	Budka et al. 2009
	Th Feb 18	Political activism **Receive Quiz #1 Instructions**	Rinke & Röder 2011
6	Tu Feb 23	Hacking **Participant Observation Fieldnotes Due**	Coleman 2011
	Th Feb 25	NO CLASS	N/A
7	Tu Mar 1	Reproducing and contesting inequalities	Gray 2013
	Th Mar 3	Community-building: local groups **Quiz #1 Due**	Cool 2012
8	Tu Mar 8	Interview training	N/A
	Th Mar 10	American youth culture	Marwick and boyd 2014
		Spring break	
9	Tu Mar 22	Japanese youth culture	Ito 2005
	Th Mar 24	Gaming **Fieldnotes for Two Interviews Due**	Nardi 2010 Ch 1
10	Tu Mar 29	Gaming + transcript preparation	Nardi 2010 Ch 2
	Th Mar 31	Gaming	Nardi 2010 Ch 3
11	Tu Apr 5	Gaming	Nardi 2010 Ch 5
	Th Apr 7	Gaming + report preparation **Transcripts of Communication Patterns Due**	Nardi 2010 Ch 8

12	Tu Apr 12	Managing personal relationships	Archambault 2011
	Th Apr 14	Managing personal relationships	Nishitani 2014
		Receive Quiz #2 Instructions	
13	Tu Apr 19	Managing personal relationships	Madianou and Miller 2011
	Th Apr 21	Student present preliminary reports	N/A
14	Tu Apr 26	Students present preliminary reports	N/A
	Th Apr 28	Students present preliminary reports	N/A
		Quiz #2 Due	
15	Tu May 3	No class – work on reports	N/A
	Th May 5	No class – work on reports	N/A
	Tu May 10	**Research Report Due**	

Readings – Complete References

Archambault, Julie Soleil. 2011. "Breaking up 'Because of the Phone' and the Transformative Potential of Information in Southern Mozambique." *New Media & Society* 13(3):444-456.

Boellstorff, Tom. 2008. "Chapter 3: Method." In *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human*, 60-86. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Boellstorff, Tom, Bonnie Nardi, Celia Pearce and T.L. Taylor. 2012. "Chapter 8: Ethics." In *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method*, 129-150. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Budka, Philipp, Brandi L. Bell, and Adam Fiser. 2009. "MyKnet.org: How Northern Ontario's First Nations Communities Made Themselves at Home on the World Wide Web." *Community Informatics* 5(2). http://ci-journal.net/index.php/ciej/article/view/568/450.

Coleman, Gabriella. 2011. Anonymous: From the Lulz to Collective Action. *The New Everyday*. http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/tne/pieces/anonymous-lulz-collective-action.

Cool, Jennifer. 2012. "The Mutual Co-Construction of Online and Onground in Cyberorganic: Making an Ethnography of Networked Social Media Speak to Challenges of the Posthuman." In *Human No More: Digital Subjectivities, Unhuman Subjects, and the End of Anthropology*, edited by Neil L. Whitehead and Michael Wesch, 11-32. Boulder: University of Colorado.

Gray, Kishonna. 2013. "Collective Organizing, Individual Resistance, or Asshole Griefers? An Ethnographic Analysis of Women of Color in Xbox Live." *Ada: A*

Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology, No.2.
http://adanewmedia.org/2013/06/issue2-gray/.

Horst, Heather A., Becky Herr-Stephenson, and Laura Robinson. 2010. "Chapter 1: Media Ecologies." In *Hanging Out, Messing Around, and Geeking Out: Kids Living and Learning with New Media*, edited by M. Ito, S. Baumer, M. Bittanti, d. boyd, R. Cody, B. Herr-Stephenson, H.A. Horst, P.G. Lange, D. Mahendran, K.Z. Martinez, C.J. Pascoe, D. Perkely, L. Robinson, C. Sims, and L. Tripp, 29-78. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Ito, Mizuko. 2005. "Mobile Phones, Japanese Youth, and the Re-Placement of Social Contact." In *Mobile Communications: Re-Negotiation of the Social Sphere*, edited by R. Ling and P.E. Pedersen, 131-148. London: Springer.

Ling, Rich. 2004. Making Sense of Mobile Telephone Adoption. In *The Mobile Connection: The Cell Phone's Impact on Society*, 21-34. Amsterdam: Elsevier.

Nishitani, Makiko. 2014. "Kinship, Gender, and Communication Technologies: Family Dramas in the Tongan Diaspora." *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 25(2):207-222.

Madianou, Mirca, and Daniel Miller. 2011. "Mobile Phone Parenting: Reconfiguring Relationships between Filipina Migrant Mothers and Their Left-Behind Children." *New Media & Society* 13(3):457-470.

Marwick, Alice, and danah boyd. 2014. "Networked Privacy: How Teenagers Negotiate Context in Social Media." *New Media & Society* 16(7):1051-1067.

Miller, Daniel, and Don Slater. 2000. *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach*. Oxford: Berg.

Nardi, Bonnie. 2010. *My Life as a Night Elf Priest: An Anthropological Account of World of Warcraft.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.8008655.0001.001.

Rinke, Eike M., and Maria Roeder. 2011. "Media Ecologies, Communication Culture, and Temporal-Spatial Unfolding: Three Components in a Communication Model of the Egyptian Regime Change." *International Journal of Communication* 5:1273-1285.