The “Blogosphere” in/as Culture

Spring 2008
Section 0301, Thursdays 4:00pm- 4:50pm in 0108 Queen Anne’s Hall

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Course Description
This course is an introduction to the web log- or “blog”- as a technology and a cultural text. In recent years, blogs have gone from the nascent medium of a handful of “computer nerds” to one of the primary ways we gather and disperse information in the fields of politics, popular culture, and intrapersonal communication. In the transition from wacky neologism to legitimized text, blogs have proved their relative staying power and have changed the face of the internet and media technology generally. Throughout the course, we will examine a variety of blogs within the context of the intersecting fields of cultural studies, cyber culture studies, political science, and social history. In analyzing the various approaches to blogging, we will focus on how the medium has had and continues to have the potential to shape the cultural landscape.

Though these analytic exercises are a critical component to the course, the primary focus will be a practical application in the form of a blog created and maintained by students individually or in groups. The content and presentation of these blogs will be of the students’ choosing and are expected to mirror the overriding focus of this course: blogs as a medium for social/cultural critique and/or change. No previous experience with blog creation or analysis is required, as we will be learning all the necessary skills throughout the course.
Course Objectives

- Theorize how the technology of blogs have affected the social, cultural and political landscape
- Understand specific blogs’ potential rhetorical meanings through content and presentation analysis.
- Develop the technical and critical skills necessary to create and maintain a blog.

Evaluation

20% - Class Participation.
5% - Assignments.
20% - Analytic Essay.
35% - Final Blog Project.
20% - Annotated Bibliography for the Honors Humanities Keystone Project.

Class Participation
Because of our limited in-class meetings, participation is a vital component to the success of the course. Though attendance is not mandatory, coming to class is the only way to participate in our ongoing reading, analysis and blog building projects. Class participation refers to both sharing your ideas within class, but also demonstrating you’ve done the required reading.

NOTE: Each week you be required to complete a short multiple choice or short answer quiz. These quizzes will be posted on Blackboard (www.elms.umd.edu) and will be due in hardcopy at the start of class. No late assignments will be accepted.

Assignments
All written proposals and other assignments will be due at the start of class on the day they are due. No late assignments will be accepted.

Analytic Essay
During the semester, you will develop a 4-7 page essay analyzing a blog of your choosing. The blog can be something we’ve discussed in class, but you are more than
welcome to choose a blog you’ve come across on your own with the instructor’s approval. The essay should use the critical strategies outlined by the secondary reading and in our class discussions to examine the content of the blog and the cultural work it performs.

**Final Blog Project**
This course is primarily concerned with developing a practical application in the arts. The final blog project will require you to develop, create, and maintain a blog. Students will be expected to design the blog’s layout, provide its content and incorporate multimedia in at least some of their entries. Students can work individually or can individually contribute to a blog created by a small group. Though the content of the blog is of your choosing, these blogs will ideally reflect some of the social and cultural issues we’ve discussed through our examination of other blogs. Whether about celebrities, sports, politics, social justice, cooking, or fashion, these blogs will give you a chance to enter the blogosphere and let yourself be “heard.” This project provides the opportunity for you to contribute to the medium you’ve been analyzing. More details will be distributed a little later in the course.

Additionally, halfway through the semester you or your group will present a 2-3 page project proposal that provides the following information. Guidelines will be distributed.

**Annotated Bibliography for the Honors Humanities Keystone Project.**
Students are required to maintain satisfactory progress towards completion of their keystone project during the spring semester in ARHU106. This semester you will read the sources you identified in your bibliography during the fall semester, you will expand your bibliography from ten to at least 20 sources, and you will annotate all of your sources in the MLA style.

**Documented Disabilities**
Students who have documented disabilities and who wish to discuss academic accommodations within this course should contact the instructor as soon as possible after the beginning of the course.
**Incompletes**
In this course, the mark of "I" will be granted only to a student who meets both of the following criteria: (1) the student has satisfactorily completed a major portion of the work of the course and (2) the student has been unable to complete some small portion of the work of the course because of illness or other circumstances beyond the student's control. Examples of reasons for the inability to complete course work that will not qualify a student for an "I" mark include the following: employment or volunteer commitments, social responsibilities, travel plans, and unexpected difficulties in satisfying course requirements.

**Academic Integrity**
The University of Maryland, College Park has a nationally recognized Code of Academic Integrity, administered by the Student Honor Council. This Code sets standards for academic integrity at Maryland for all undergraduate and graduate students. As a student you are responsible for upholding these standards for this course. It is very important for you to be aware of the consequences of cheating, fabrication, facilitation, and plagiarism. For more information on the Code of Academic Integrity or the Student Honor Council, please visit [http://www.studenthonor council.umd.edu/whatis.html](http://www.studenthonor council.umd.edu/whatis.html)

**Required Texts**
*Rough Guide to Blogging* (Rough Guides, 2006)
ISBN: 184353682X

Alavi, Nasrin, ed. *We Are Iran: The Persian Blogs.* (Soft Skull, 2005)
ISBN: 1933368055

**These books can be purchased at the University Book Center or online at any bookselling site**

All other texts will either be blogs available on the internet or readings distributed in class or available on the course’s Blackboard site (at www.elms.umd.edu)
Course Schedule and Assignment Due Dates
*All readings and assignments are due the day they are listed, unless otherwise noted.*

January 31st
Week One- Diary, News and Social Change: An Introduction to Web Logs
  • Student and Instructor Introductions
  • Course Overview

February 7th
Week Two- Theories of Popular and Cyber Cultures
  • Read:
    o David Bell, “Identities in Cyberculture” in An Introduction to Cybercultures (New York: Routledge, 2001) pp.113-136

February 14th
Week Three- Blogging as the New Public Sphere? An Introduction to Blogs
  • Read:

February 20th
Week Four- Blogs and the Political Sphere I: Elections and the Internet
  • Read:
February 28th
Week Five- Blogs and the Political Sphere II:
Rhetorical Strategies, Current Approaches
• Read:
  o The Huffington Post (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/politics/the-blog)
  o The National Review- two blogs in “Blog Row”
    (http://www.nationalreview.com). “blog row” link is in the top left hand of the banner)
  o -Mother Jones (http://www.motherjones.com/mojoblog/)

March 6th
      • Week Six- Blogging for Change I: Youth and Rights at the Global Level
          o Read:
              ▪ Nasrin Alavi, ed. We Are Iran: The Persian Blogs. pp. 1-7, 219-246

March 13th
Week Seven- Blogging for Change II: Current Social Issues
• Read:
  o Nasrin Alavi, ed. We Are Iran: The Persian Blogs. pp. 159- 187
  o One of the following blogs:
    ▪ Black Agenda Blog (http://blackagendareport.net/)
    ▪ Feministing (http://www.feministing.com/)
    ▪ Big Queer Blog (http://www.bigqueer.com/)

March 20th
SPRING BREAK, NO CLASS
March 27th
Week Eight- Creating Blogs
- Blog Technology Workshop
- Read (Selectively Skimming):
  - Rough Guide to Blogging

*Final Blog Project Proposals Due*

April 3rd
Week Nine- Creating Blogs II
- Blog Technology Workshop

April 10th
Week Ten- Blogs and “Infotainment” I: Celebrity Images
- Read:
  - Graeme Turner, “Introduction” from Understanding Celebrity.
  - Rosie O’Donnell (http://www.rosie.com/blog/)
  - Another celebrity blog of your choice

April 17th
Week Eleven- Blogs and “Infotainment” II: Queer(y)ing Celebrities?
- Read:
  - Ellis Cashmore “On/Scandal” from Celebrity Culture (Key Ideas) (New
  - Perez Hilton (http://perezhilton.com/)
  - Pink is the New Blog (http://trent.blogspot.com/)

April 24th
Week Twelve- Blog Workshopping I
- Presentation, discussion and critique of class blogs
May 1st
Week Thirteen- Blog Workshopping II
  • Presentation, discussion and critique of class blogs

May 8th
Week Fourteen- Conclusions: Blogs as Cultural Texts
  • Course wrap-up and reflection

Exam Week
Turn in Analytic Essay to the Honors Humanities office in Wicomico Hall by 5:00pm on May 15th.
Turn in Annotated Bibliography for HonHum Keystone Project to the Honors Humanities office in Wicomico Hall by 5:00pm on May 21st
Final Blogs Projects must be posted and updated by 5:00pm on May 21st