America in the Age of the Network
March 9 – April 29, 2010 / 1.5 credits

Networks have reorganized and reshaped American culture, changing the ways we communicate, socialize, and do business. Our friendships, politics, money, and entertainment are all linked together in vast, overlapping webs. But what is a network? How have they been imagined? And how do they structure the ways we think, work, play, and live? Through a series of old and new media texts (novels, articles, films, TV programs, websites, mobile devices), this course explores the communications networks, social networks, entertainment networks, gossip networks, information networks, manufacturing networks, and transportation networks through which our products are produced, our thoughts are thought, and our lives are led. As we peel back the skin of the networked world, we’ll think about what “America” can mean in an age of globalization.

Students will learn the following: 1) Different theories of networks; 2) How technology and American culture interact; 3) How globalization transforms the very idea of the nation; 4) How social and electronic networks reinforce, complement, and compete with one another; 5) How work, play, and life are altered and not altered in a networked age; 6) What sorts of networks shape the world that they are transitioning into during their time as undergraduates at Rutgers; 7) How to ready a variety of cultural texts critically; 8) How to evaluate competing claims; and 9) How to construct an argument in a written or oral academic setting.

Required Readings

All students are expected to obtain a copy of Albert-László Barabási’s Linked (Plume, 2003; ISBN-13 978-0452284395). This book is available for purchase at the Rutgers bookstore and a wide range of other outlets.

The DVD version of the film Syriana (2005, dir. Stephen Gaghan) can be purchased from all the regular sources, rented from many video stores, borrowed from some libraries, and viewed through Amazon Video On Demand for a very reasonable price.

All other readings can be downloaded from the world wide web, the course’s Sakai site, or the Rutgers Library’s e-journals collection.
Course Policies

**Attendance:** Faithful attendance is mandatory. Students who miss more than two class sessions will see their grades reduced. Those who miss three classes will see their grades reduced by one half letter grade; those who miss five classes will see their grades reduced by one full letter grade; beyond five missed classes, students will see their grades further reduced by one half letter grade per missed class meeting. The University’s religious holiday policy can be consulted online at [http://scheduling.rutgers.edu/religious.shtml](http://scheduling.rutgers.edu/religious.shtml).

**Grading:** Final grades will be based on participation, one short writing assignments (2-4 page reflection on reading(s), due in class on 4/8), a prospectus for a final project (2-4 pages, due 4/20), a brief presentation of the project to classmates in the last week of class, and a final project (6-8 pages--or equivalent as agreed upon with the instructor--on a topic of student’s choice, due 5/11), and unannounced short quizzes based on class readings throughout the semester. The breakdown of the final grade is as follows:

- Preparation and Participation: 10%
- Short Writing Assignment: 20%
- Final Project Prospectus: 15%
- Final Project Presentation: 15%
- Final Project: 40%

All work must be turned in on the dates specified in this syllabus. Any late submissions will be penalized five points per day. There are no exceptions to this rule. You have fair warning of all due dates and will be able to plan accordingly.

**Short writing assignment:** This short paper is a critical reflection on at least one of the readings that have been discussed so far in class. Possible approaches: agree or disagree with the premises of the reading; provide observational or theoretical evidence in support of or opposition to the author’s arguments; if dealing with more than one text, discuss how they relate, differ, reinforce, or undermine one another. (Examples: Barabási misunderstands the networked nature of modern society because he forgets.... The computer networks that Galloway describes are like/unlike social network structures online/at Rutgers/in 17th-century England because....). While there is no need to do extensive research for this paper, feel free to draw on things you have learned in other places (classes, life experience, etc.) **but** be sure that you can back up anything that you say and cite ideas and information that you bring in from elsewhere. The point of this assignment is to demonstrate not only that you understand the text(s) you choose but also that you can engage with it/them and build an argument around it/them or in response to it/them.

**Final project:** This can take the form of a research paper, a critical essay, or a creative project (with the instructor’s permission) that explores some question related to networks and culture. You are free to draw on any materials that we discussed in class but please be sure to include substantial engagement with at least two other critical, empirical, or observational sources (and, of course, provide proper citation of these sources!). During the second half of the course, this project should be moving in the background. To help you get started, you will need to produce a prospectus for the project (a short document explaining what your question is, what sources you
will look at to explore the question, and some preliminary ideas about what you think you may find. In the last week of class, we will only have one shorter reading and a concluding session. During those two meetings, each student will briefly present his/her project as a work-in-progress and collect ideas, critiques, suggestions, and encouragement from classmates and the instructor. The point of this assignment is to demonstrate an engagement with the idea of the network and an assessment of networks’ cultural significance. In this assignment, I will be looking for students to show the ability to develop an intellectual question, deploy an argument in response to that question, marshal evidence in support of that argument, and demonstrate mastery of the course topic.

**Academic integrity:** All students are expected to adhere to the principles of Rutgers’s academic integrity policy ([http://academicintegrity.rutgers.edu](http://academicintegrity.rutgers.edu)). Any and all violations will be subject to the sanctions detailed in the policy. Violations include but are not limited to: cheating, fabrication, plagiarism, denying others access to information or material, and facilitating violations of academic integrity. Any act of plagiarism will result in a grade of “F” on the assignment as well as the strong possibility of a grade of “F” for the course and a referral to the Office of Student Conduct. If you have any question in your mind about whether you might be in a gray area, please simply consult with your instructor who will gladly do his best to guide you along the path of academic virtue and intellectual rectitude.

**Course Schedule**

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<th>Date</th>
<th>Reading(s)</th>
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<tr>
<td>3/9/10</td>
<td>COURSE INTRODUCTION</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>NO CLASS 3/16 or 3/18 - SPRING BREAK</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>3/23/10</td>
<td>Albert-László Barabási, [Linked](Link 1 through Link 8)</td>
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<td>3/25/10</td>
<td>Albert-László Barabási, [Linked](Link 9 through Afterlink)</td>
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<td>3/30/10</td>
<td>Alex Galloway, “Physical Media” from [Protocol](Link 1)</td>
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<td><strong>NO CLASS 4/1 - Watch Syriana</strong> (2005, dir. Stephen Gaghan), to be discussed 4/6</td>
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<td>4/6/10</td>
<td>Greg Conti, “Footprints, Fingerprints, and Connections” from Googling Security</td>
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<td>4/8/10</td>
<td>Nick Dyer-Witheford and Grieg de Peuter, “Biopower Play: World of Warcraft” in Games of Empire</td>
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<td><strong>Reflection on one or more class readings due today in class (2-4 pages)</strong></td>
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2. Marc Levinson, “Just in Time,” from The Box: How the Shipping Container Made the World Smaller and the World Economy Bigger

4/20/10  1. Charles Petersen, “In the World of Facebook” NYRB 57.3
   <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/23651>
2. danah boyd, “Why Youth ♥ Social Network Sites,” in Youth, Identity, and Digital Media

Prospectus for final project due today (2-4 pages)

   <http://chronicle.com/article/Faux-Friendship/49308/>


Brief final project work-in-progress presentations in class

4/29/10  COURSE CONCULSION
Brief final project work-in-progress presentations in class

5/11/10  Final project due by 5 pm (6-8 pages) in my mailbox in the American Studies Department Office, 024 Ruth Adams Building, Douglass Campus. If you would like the paper returned with comments, please include a self-addressed 9” x 12” manila envelope with $1.05 postage (for domestic delivery) in order to assure proper delivery.

For Further Reading

This is a very short course. There were many readings that could have been included in the program but were left out for one reason or another. The following is an incomplete list of other source materials that you might consider to enrich your understanding of the course topic. We may touch briefly on some of these in class, but they are absolutely not required reading. Many of these texts can be profitably consulted in preparing your final projects.

Highly accessible texts include John Guare’s Six Degrees of Separation; Neal Stephenson’s Snow Crash; Peter Ludlow and Mark Wallace’s The Second Life Herald; and Robert Putnam’s Bowling Alone. More complex texts include Saskia Sassen’s The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo; Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s Empire trilogy; and Alex Galloway and Eugene Thacker’s The Exploit. Films include The Matrix trilogy; Cloak and Dagger; Sneakers; and Tron. Television programs such as “The Wire” and “The L Word.” Music by artists including DJ Spooky, That Subliminal Kid; Radiohead (especially OK Computer and subsequent albums); Brian Eno (especially the Ambient sequence); Neil Young (particularly Trans and other albums from the early 1980s. And, of course, the wide range of texts that constitute the internet.

As you begin to look more closely, you’ll find networks exist just about everywhere and they leave impressions in all of the cultural and social matter with which they come in contact.