Digital Cultures & Storytelling: Theory and Practice

Instructor: Pawan Sharma

INTRODUCTION

This course explores how digital media shapes culture, creativity, and communication in today's interconnected world. From social media platforms and e-commerce ecosystems to virtual reality and artificial intelligence, students will investigate the diverse ways digital technologies transform everyday life, aesthetics, and modes of storytelling. Emphasizing both global and regional perspectives, the course situates contemporary digital practices within broader cultural, political, and historical contexts.

The course is designed for students across disciplines, including film and media studies, communication, computer science, journalism, literature, arts, and design, who wish to combine critical inquiry with creative practice. Alongside theoretical discussions, hands-on workshops will introduce digital storytelling techniques that integrate text, sound, and image.

Key themes include:

- How digital media shapes identity, community, and public discourse across global and regional contexts.
- The relationship between technology, aesthetics, and cultural politics in digital storytelling.
- Comparative insights into global digital practices, with a focus on Asia as a site of innovation and influence.
- The politics of gender, body, and representation in digital environments.

Practical skills to be acquired include:

- Narrative design and interactive structures in digital storytelling.
- Producing digital projects that integrate multimedia elements.
- Conceptualizing, designing, and executing creative digital initiatives.
- Constructive critique and peer review of digital media productions.

By blending critical scholarship with hands-on creative work, *Digital Cultures and Storytelling* provides students with tools to analyze digital environments and produce innovative media projects relevant across research, creative, and professional fields.

COURSE MATERIALS

Almost all required readings will be provided in a digital format. Some of the readings can be accessed through the library (online). To read them, you will need to log in using your university ID.

ASSIGNMENTS

Attendance and participation: 20%

Photo-series assignment: 20%

Workshop and discussion lead: 20%

Final Project: Media production/essay: 40%

COURSE SCHEDULE

Topic: Storytelling in the Digital Era : An Introduction

Week 1

Meeting 1

• Overview of the class syllabus, requirements, readings, assignments, class structure.

• Interactive, participatory, non-linear, and other characteristics of digital media.

• Narrative and storytelling: Communication with text, sound, images, moving images, etc

Meeting 2

Readings:

Kress, Leeuwen (2020). "Introduction, Reading Images, The Grammar of Visual Design." 1-18.

Lim, Fei. (2007). "The visual semantics stratum: making meaning in sequential images." New Directions in the Analysis of Multimodal Discourse. 195-214.

Week 2

Meeting 1

Tech workshop - Introduction to online learning tools (Google videos, Lynda.com)

Making photo-series and sequences using iPhotos/Photoshop

Topic : Digital and Mobile Photography: Seeing, Creating and Sharing

Meeting 2

Readings:

Hjorth, Larissa and Sarah Pink (2014), "New visualities and the digital wayfarer: Reconceptualizing camera phone photography and locative media." Mobile Media & Communication, Vol 2(1), 2014, pp. 40–57.

Tech workshop - Basic digital and mobile photography: aperture, depth of field, shutter speed, film speed, focus, shots, composition/the rule of thirds, camera angle, etc

Assignment:

Create a photo-story using iPhoto/Photoshop (due next week; please upload your file on canvas)

Week 3

Meeting 1

Readings:

Seta, Gabriel de and Michelle Proksell (2015), "The Aesthetics of Zipai: From Wechat Selfies to Self-Representation in Contemporary Chinese Art and Photography." Networking Knowledge, 8(6), pp. 1-27.

Watch for the next class - "The Technology of Storytelling," by Joe Sabia, online at https://www.ted.com/talks/joe_sabia_the_technology_of_storytelling,

Topic : Narration and Interactivity on Social Media

Meeting 2

Discussion - "The Technology of Storytelling," by Joe Sabia, online at https://www.ted.com/talks/joe_sabia_the_technology_of_storytelling

Readings:

Barthes (1978). "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative in Image Music Text" p. 114-124)

To watch for the next class - *Bidesia in Bambai* (dir. Surabhi Sharma, 2013): A Hindi documentary discussing music, migration and mobile phones.

Week 4

Meeting 1

Readings:

Tifentale, Alice (2015), "Art of the Masses: From Kodak Brownie to Instagram." Networking Knowledge, 8(6), pp. 1-16

Discussion - *Bidesia in Bambai* (2013)

Meeting 2

Tech workshop: Video editing for social media

Linear, non-linear editing (Ripple, Roll, Slip, Slide etc.)

Topic : Social Media from Personal to Public Sphere

Week 5

Meeting 1

Discussion on the first photo-story assignment (half students)

Meeting 2

Readings:

Rettberg, Walker, Jill (2017), "Self-Representation in Social Media," in Jean Burgess, Thomas Poell, & Alice Marwick (Eds.), The SAGE handbook of social media (pp. 233–253). London: SAGE. E-book, pp. 429-443

Week 6

Meeting 1

Discussion on the first photo-story assignment (half students)

Meeting 2

Readings:

Willnat, Lars and Annette Aw (2014), Social Media, Culture and Politics in Asia," in edited Peter Lang, New York 2014, pp. 1-29.

Instructions for the final project

Topic : Memes & Emojis : Multiplicity of Textuality and Imagery

Week 7

Meeting 1

Readings:

Reading memes and images through - Benjamin, Walter. “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, Second Version” (1936). In Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 3, translated by Edmund Jephcott, Howard Eiland, and Others, edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, 101-133.

Meeting 2

Davis, C.P. (2021), “Memes, Emojis, and Text: The Semiotics of Differentiation in Sri Lankan Tamil Digital Publics. J. Linguist”. Anthropol., 31: 429-445

Week 8

Meeting 1

Readings:

Baishya, A. K. (2021). The conquest of the world as meme: memetic visuality and political humor in critiques of the hindu right wing in India. *Media, Culture & Society*, *43*(6), 1113–1135.

Discussion through case studies - Popular political memes from Asia.

Meeting 2

Readings:

Harshavardhan, V., Wilson, D., & Kumar, M. V. (2019). Humour Discourse in Internet Memes. Asia Pacific Media Educator, 29(1), 41–53.

Exercise on making memes on contemporary political issues.

Week 9

Meeting 1

Artist Interaction (Memes, Graphics and Illustration)

Topic - Social media in the Age of Post Truth

Meeting 2

Readings:

Baldwin-Philippi, Jessica (2017), "Politics 2.0: Social Media Campaigning," in Jean Burgess, Thomas Poell, & Alice Marwick (Eds.), The SAGE handbook of social media. London: SAGE. E-book, pp. 527-545.

Week 10

Meeting 1

Readings:

Lee, Shin Haeng (2017), "Digital democracy in Asia: The impact of the Asian internet on political participation," Journal of Information Technology & Politics.

Topic : Trends & Hashtags: Body Politics, Gender and Activism

Meeting 2

Readings:

Li Jun (2020). "In the name of #RiceBunny: Legacy, strategy, and efficacy of the Chinese #MeToo movement" in *The Routledge Handbook of the Politics of the #MeToo Movement.*

Week 11

Meeting 1

Readings:

Losh (2014), "Hashtag Feminism and Twitter Activism in India", Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective, 2014 Vol. 3, No. 3, 11-22.

Discussion and queries related to the final project

Meeting 2

Film: Afwah (Rumour) 2023, dir. Sudhir Mishra

Film discussion.

Week 12

Meeting 1

Readings:

Film discussion continues with

Mukherjee R (2020), “Mobile witnessing on WhatsApp: Vigilante virality and the anatomy of mob lynching”. South Asian Popular Culture 18(1): 79–101.

Topic : Eco-media: Environment in the Age of Digital Media

Meeting 2

Readings:

Richard Maxwell and Toby Miller (2020). Introduction in *How Green is Your Smartphone*? Polity Press, Cambridge.

Week 13

Meeting 1

Tech Workshop:

Contextualizing the digital media in the contemporary discourses of climate change, global ethicalities and individual realities.

A home assignment to make a short reel based on how students interpret ‘Environment in the Age of Digital Media’.

Meeting 2

Continuation of previous module, screenings and discussions on the take home assignment.

Topic : Digital Archives in Research and Creative Endeavors

Week 14

Meeting 1 & 2

Workshop format (these exercises lead to the final project development) -

Digital Preservation Discussion: Students discuss the challenges and strategies of digital preservation. This will involve considering issues such as data degradation, technological obsolescence, and the costs of digital preservation.

Archival Research Project: Students conduct a research project using digital archives. This will involve identifying relevant sources, analyzing the sources, and presenting their findings in a written report or presentation.

Critical Analysis of Digital Archives: Students analyze a digital archive and discuss its strengths and weaknesses. This will involve considering the accessibility of the archive, the diversity of the materials in the archive, and the ways in which the archive is used in research and creative endeavors.

Group Archiving Project: Students work in groups to create a small digital archive/exhibition on a particular topic. This could involve collecting digital materials, creating metadata for the materials, and designing the interface of the archive/exhibition.

Week 15

Meeting 1 & 2

Final project presentation, discussion and Q/A session