

COMM 376 – Sidewalks and Screens

Fall 2025

Credits: 3

Tuesday/Thursday 2:30 PM- 3:45 PM

ILC N255

Instructor: Burcu Baykurt

bbaykurt@umass.edu

Office hours:

Tuesday and Thursday 1 PM- 2 PM

Course Description: This course offers a critical overview of how media technologies influence and transform the built environment. What does it mean to view the city as a form of media, shaped by symbols, ideologies, and values? How do technologies mediate urban life as cities evolve under the pressures of racial capitalism, migration, and climate change? Focusing on key U.S. cities and global examples, this course examines how emerging technologies such as autonomous vehicles, remote work, and smart infrastructure will impact the future of cities.

Student Learning Objectives: By the end of the class, you should be able to (1) demonstrate a historically informed understanding of the co-construction of media, communication technologies, and urban life, (2) examine how various media technologies, industries, and representations shape perceptions of urban problems and solidarities, (3) define the contribution of media technologies as material objects and infrastructures to the problems and solutions of urban inequalities, and (4) assess what is theoretically at stake in making the city central to studying communication.

Course Materials:

There is no required textbook for this course. All course materials and other critical course content will be on Canvas.

Attendance Policy: Students are required to attend each class and participate in class discussions. If you miss five or more classes, I'll advise you to withdraw. If personal challenges arise for you over the course of the semester, please bring them to my attention; we can work together to discuss alternative means of participation.

Late/ Make-Up Work Policy: Since the assignments and deadlines are given on the first day of class, late assignments should be easy to avoid. If you do hand something in after the deadline it will be marked down at a rate of one grade per day (e.g. if an A paper is one day late it will receive an A-). If there is a prior agreement between us or there is an emergency that disrupts your ability to get the work finished, please let me know and I will of course be willing to figure out a workable deadline with you.

Note on technology use in class: The use of tablets, laptops, and smartphones during class is not permitted. Please bring paper and pen for note-taking and any in-class exercises. If you have a documented accommodation that requires technology use, let me know so we can make arrangements that support your learning.

Grade Weight and Course Requirements:

- Attendance & Participation- 10%
 - You are expected to show up to class and participate in whatever we are doing. This means getting in on time and staying until class is over. We will also engage in small group work during class now and then. This will be an opportunity for those not comfortable speaking to the larger group to earn some participation points.
- Weekly readings & written responses- 15%
 - Each week will have required readings (academic articles and book chapters) as well as several supplementary materials such as press articles, blog posts, videos, etc., all of which will be available on the course Canvas site. At the start of each week, you are expected to: 1) complete the required readings and videos in time for classes and 2) write a short (~150-300 words) response to the readings, **by 5 pm on Monday.**
- Three In-Class Reading Checks - 30%
 - There will be three reading checks based on course readings and class discussions. These are in-class exams, and each will count 10% of your final grade.
- Research Paper Proposal - 15%
 - Throughout the semester groups of three will work on an original research project that addresses any of the themes we will cover in class. The first step of this research is a 500-700 word proposal that defines your shared research theme, explains why it is relevant to the course, and outlines possible directions or questions. At the end of the document, each member should add a short addendum (150–200 words) describing their personal angle within the group’s theme and how it will guide their later work. Each student uploads the same group proposal, but with their own addendum attached. In other words, the group portion will be identical across submissions, but the individual addenda will differ. Detailed instructions about this assignment are posted on Canvas.
- Annotated Bibliography & Thesis Statement – 15%
 - Working together, compile a single annotated bibliography of 9 sources. Each group member is responsible for contributing 3 annotated entries, with initials next to their entries. In addition to the group’s bibliography, each student must write a 250-word thesis statement that presents their individual research question or argument and explains how it draws on the shared bibliography. Each student uploads the same group bibliography, but with their own thesis statement

attached. In other words, the group portion will be identical across submissions, while the individual thesis statements will differ. Detailed instructions about this assignment are posted on Canvas.

- Final paper – 15%
 - Each group will co-author a final research paper of 8–10 pages (≈2500 words) based on your shared theme and bibliography. The paper should present a cohesive argument that reflects the group’s collaborative research and writing. In addition, each student must write a 2-page reflection describing their individual contribution to the project, what they learned from the collaborative process, and how their perspective complements or diverges from the group’s consensus. Each student uploads the same group paper, but with their own reflection attached. In other words, the group portion will be identical across submissions, while the individual reflections will differ. Detailed instructions about this assignment are posted on Canvas.

Grading Scale

Percentage Total	Grade
93-100%	A
90-92%	A-
87-89%	B+
83-86%	B
80-82%	B-
77-79%	C+
73-76%	C
70-72%	C-
67-69%	D+
60-66%	D
59% or below	F
Incomplete	INC

Academic Honesty Policy:

Since the integrity of the academic enterprise of any institution of higher education requires honesty in scholarship and research, academic honesty is required of all students at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Academic dishonesty is prohibited in all programs of the University. Academic dishonesty includes but is not limited to: cheating, fabrication, plagiarism, and facilitating dishonesty. Appropriate sanctions may be imposed on any student who has committed an act of academic dishonesty. Instructors should take reasonable steps to address academic misconduct. Any person who has reason to believe that a student has committed academic dishonesty should bring such information to the attention of the appropriate course instructor as soon as possible. Instances of academic dishonesty not related to a specific course should be brought to the attention of the appropriate department Head or Chair. Since students are expected to be familiar with this policy and the commonly accepted standards of academic integrity, ignorance of such standards is not normally sufficient evidence of lack of intent (http://www.umass.edu/dean_students/codeofconduct/acadhonesty/).

Accommodations Statement:

The University of Massachusetts Amherst is committed to providing an equal educational opportunity for all students. If you have a documented physical, psychological, or learning disability on file with Disability Services (DS), you may be eligible for reasonable academic accommodations to help you succeed in this course. If you have a documented disability that requires an accommodation, please notify me within the first two weeks of the semester so that we may make appropriate arrangements. For further information, please visit Disability Services (<https://www.umass.edu/disability/>)

Title IX Statement

In accordance with Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 that prohibits gender-based discrimination in educational settings that receive federal funds, the University of Massachusetts Amherst is committed to providing a safe learning environment for all students, free from all forms of discrimination, including sexual assault, sexual harassment, domestic violence, dating violence, stalking, and retaliation. This includes interactions in person or online through digital platforms and social media. Title IX also protects against discrimination on the basis of pregnancy, childbirth, false pregnancy, miscarriage, abortion, or related conditions, including recovery. There are resources here on campus to support you. A summary of the available Title IX resources (confidential and non-confidential) can be found at the following link: <https://www.umass.edu/titleix/resources>. You do not need to make a formal report to access them. If you need immediate support, you are not alone. Free and confidential support is available 24 hours a day / 7 days a week / 365 days a year at the SASA Hotline 413-545-0800.

For purposes of Title IX reporting, I am considered a “responsible employee” at UMass (<https://www.umass.edu/titleix/about>). **That means that if you tell me about a situation involving sexual assault, sexual harassment, domestic violence, dating violence, stalking, and retaliation, I must share that information with the Title IX Coordinator.** Making a report to the Title IX Coordinator is my legal obligation, meets the University's goal of providing members of our community with supportive resources they might need, and enables the University to obtain a more accurate picture of the extent of sexual violence in our community. **It will be completely up to you to determine if and how you want to work with the Title IX Coordinator's office. You will not be in trouble for reporting to me that you have experienced any of these situations, and the law prohibits retaliation against anyone who participates in a Title IX process.**

Course Schedule

Class Number and Date	Questions/themes we will explore this session:	How to prepare for this session:	Quick reminders
1. SEPT 2	#1 Get to know each other	Come excited; be open-minded & curious!	
2. SEPT 4			NO CLASS on SEPT 4
3. SEPT 9	#1 Why do we study media technologies and urban life?	Read James Carey. 1988. "A Cultural Approach to Communication."	Weekly response on Slack due Mon, Sept 8 at 5 pm
4. SEPT 11	#2 How do we study media technologies and urban life? #3 How/When did the contemporary city come about?	Read Georg Simmel. 1971. "The Metropolis and Mental Life."	
5. SEPT 16	#1 How do we figure out what spaces are public and private in the city?	Read Tali Hatuka and Eran Toch. 2013. "The Emergence of Portable Private-Personal Territory: Smartphones, Social Conduct, and Public Spaces."	Weekly response on Slack due Mon, Sept 15 at 5 pm
6. SEPT 18	#2 In what ways do our mobile phones help us control public/private spaces in the city? #3 How do existing inequalities shape the ways mobile phones spur sociality in the city?	Read Will Marler. 2018. "Accumulating phones: Aid and adaptation in phone access for the urban poor."	
7. SEPT 23	#1 What are public infrastructures?	Read Langdon Winner. 1980. "Do Artifacts Have Politics?"	Weekly response on Slack due Mon, Sept 22 at 5 pm

8.	SEPT 25	#2 Who are the most visible – and invisible – to public institutions in the city?	<i>Daedalus</i> . 109(1): 121-136. Read Simone Browne. "Torches, Torture, and Totau: Lantern Laws in New York City.	
9.	SEPT 30	#1 Can cities survive without commercial spaces?	Read Anne Cronin. "The Commercial Vernacular of Advertising: Public Space, Commercialization and Public Address	Weekly response on Slack due Mon, Sept 29 at 5 pm
10.	OCT 2	#2 What does it mean to brand the city?	Read 'Good for the Soul': Giant Murals Turn São Paulo Into Open Air Gallery https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/30/world/americas/brazil-sao-paulo-murals.html	Reading Check #1 in class on October 2nd
11.	OCT 7	#1 What do you understand from living in a "smart" city?	Read Shannon Mattern. 2017. "A City is not a Computer."	Weekly response on Slack due Mon, Oct 6 at 5 pm
12.	OCT 9	#2 Can cities become a better place if they are designed around new digital technologies and big data analytics?	Read Burcu Baykurt. 2025. "Google urbanism 2010–2020: From infrastructural control to growing bit by bit." Read "Who Wins When a City Gets Smart?" https://www.bloomber.com/news/articles/2017-11-01/will-columbus-smart-city-grant-serve-moms-in-need	"Final Project Proposal" due OCTOBER 10 by 5 pm on Canvas

13. OCT 14	#1 What does it mean to algorithmically segregate the city?	Read Sara Safransky. "Geographies of algorithmic violence: Redlining the smart city." <i>International Journal of Urban and Regional Research</i> 44, no. 2 (2020): 200-218.	Weekly response on Slack due Mon, Oct 13 at 5 pm
14. OCT 16			NO CLASS on OCT 16
15. OCT 21	#1 Does more technology make cities safer?	Read Sarah Brayne. <i>Predict and surveil: Data, discretion, and the future of policing.</i> Oxford University Press, 2021. (Excerpts)	Weekly response on Slack due Mon, Oct 20 at 5 pm
16. OCT 23			
17. OCT 28	#1 Where is the cloud?	Read Mel Hogan. "The Data Center Industrial Complex."	Weekly response on Slack due Mon, Oct 27 at 5 pm
18. OCT 30	#2 What does cloud do to cities?	Read Alix Johnson. "Down to earth: The situated materiality of digital media." <i>Journal of Environmental Media</i> 2, no. 2 (2021): 185-191.	
19. NOV 4			No Class on the 4 th (Election Day)
20. NOV 6			Reading Check #2 in class on November 6th

21. NOV 11		No Class on Nov 11 (Veterans' Day)	Weekly response on Slack due Mon, Nov 10 at 5 pm
22. NOV 13	#1 How do digital technologies extend the borders and immigration control into cities?	Read Petra Molnar. Technological Testing Grounds.pdf	Annotated Bibliography & Thesis Statement due NOVEMBER 14 by 5 pm on Canvas
23. NOV 18	#1 What is distinct about laboring in the digital city?	Read Veena Dubal. A Brief History of the Gig	Weekly response on Slack due Mon, Nov 17 at 5 pm
24. NOV 20		Read Aditya Ray. Coping with crisis and precarity in the gig economy Read Karen Hao and Nadine Freischladar. The gig workers fighting back against the algorithms	
25. DEC 2	#1 Can we change the city via digital technologies?	Read Deen Freelon, Charlton D. McIlwain, and Meredith Clark. 2016. "Beyond the Hashtags: #Ferguson, #Blacklivesmatter, and the Online Struggle for Offline Justice."	
26. DEC 4		Read Black Squares for Black Lives?	
27. DEC 9	#1 We will workshop your final papers.	Bring a draft of your final paper, ready to discuss it with your peers.	Final paper due DEC 11 th by 5 pm on Canvas