

Report on Mellon Grant, Spring 2017
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Class: COMM 3325 – History of Mass Media

History of Mass Media is an upper-division seminar in the Communication department. The course covers the history of American media, from the colonial period to the present day, with a strong emphasis on journalism, television, and film in the 20th Century.

Assignment: Working with Lantern, an Online Resource for Research in Film

My goal was to give students the opportunity to conduct historical research using primary materials. When I taught the class in 2013, I assigned a field trip to the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center in Austin. Although the students did good work, the logistical obstacles were considerable, and I decided to look for an alternative. My solution was to ask students to do research on Lantern, an online site that gives access to thousands of issues from decades-old film journals, such as *American Cinematographer*, *Photoplay*, and *Variety*.

The assignment called on students to make an argument about the 1939 film *Ninotchka*. I divided the class into seven groups of two. Each pair received a specific topic to study. For instance, one pair studied the film's star, Greta Garbo. Other topics included the studio, the director, the cinematographer, and the publicity campaign. Michael Hughes and I introduced the students to Lantern and guided them as they began their initial research. The following week, each pair submitted an annotated bibliography discussing some of the sources they had found. The week after that, students delivered their presentations, using PowerPoint to show their most interesting findings. But the assignment was more than just a show-and-tell; I insisted that each group make a historical argument, backing up their claims with evidence from Lantern.

Reflection:

The experience was mixed, but largely positive. Indeed, I would say that the research assignment was the highlight of what was otherwise an unsuccessful course. I had designed an upper-level seminar, but I realized by the end of the semester that I should have designed a lower-level lecture class. I had forgotten that we need to establish a base level of shared knowledge before we can get into the historical debates. Students had difficulty figuring out a relevant argument to make about Greta Garbo when they had never heard of Garbo in the first place.

That said, the assignment accomplished its core goal, getting students to do original work with primary historical documents. In our library session, Michael Hughes did a great job covering the different kinds of sources that film scholars use: trade papers, technical journals, and fan magazines. As the students refined their research questions, they quickly learned how to focus on the types of sources they needed. In their final presentations, many students showed a great eye for detail, selecting odd and eye-catching examples and using them to make their arguments more memorable.

Overall, the assignment was successful enough that I would do it again, though I would redesign the surrounding course to better prepare students for research into an unfamiliar topic.