

CUST-MDST 3530H: Social Media and Power

This course examines social media experiences with a focus on perspectives from critical theory. It covers a breadth of topics in the subject area, such as doom surfing, slacktivism, platform politics, and cyberwar, among others. It encourages students to adopt key methodologies and critical approaches in their treatment of these topics. Approaches may include ethnography, discursive and rhetorical analysis, semiotics, science and technology studies, and the critique of ideology.

Learning objectives

In this course you will have the opportunity to:

- Gain knowledge of the intersections between social media and critical thought.
- Learn about different methods and approaches in media theory.
- Develop perspectives on the role of technology in everyday life.
- Experiment with multiple formats of writing and argumentation.

Schedule

Lecture: Fridays 12:00PM-2:50PM
DRA A105

Readings

Most readings are available for free on Blackboard. The remaining materials are available for free online via link.

Contact

Dr. Joshua Synenko
Office: WH 104
Office hour: By appt.
Email: joshuasynenko@trentu.ca

Evaluation criteria

Journaling

Weight: 15%

Deadline: Week 3 (Sep 22)

The purpose of this assignment is for you (and us) to gain a stronger appreciation of the way data informs our approach to social media. To that end, you will deliver a short presentation featuring a journal with details of every social media interaction that you made over the course

of one week. How you define “interaction” is up to you, but consider focusing on habitual responses, posting frequency, timescales, and on developing content categories. Create a table with all the interactions timestamped and platforms identified.

Our discussion of everyone’s unique approach to completing this assignment will pave the way for a deeper conversation about research methodology explored later in the term.

Experimental paper

Weight: 20%

Deadline: Week 8 (Nov 3)

Leading up to our session on Week 4, we will prepare to engage in a collective experiment using Instagram’s “download my account” option, which includes surprisingly precise information about the user. Following our in-class exercise on Week 4 where we discuss and draw conclusions about the data collected, you will be asked to submit a paper that compares what you learned from this experiment versus the conclusions you drew from the journaling assignment earlier in the term.

Consider the following questions: What do these two data collection exercises have in common? What makes them different? What questions do they raise? How do they inform the work that needs to be done?

In addition to these comparisons, your paper should incorporate one of the readings that are assigned between Week 1-5. By “incorporate” I mean that you be mindful of the larger aims, arguments, or discursive position of the author(s) that you are borrowing from, and that you represent this larger perspective in a critical reflection on the experiment itself.

In other words, try to avoid a “drag and drop” approach where you may be tempted to pluck a concept or quote from the reading and “apply” it to your reflection.

This paper should be 1,500 words at the minimum. Longer texts will be accepted. Include the appropriate bibliographic details but do not include them in your word count. Use conventional citation formats (MLA, APA, Chicago, etc.). Consult the Owl at Purdue citation website for help if you need it.

Tests (3)

Weight: 30% (10% x 3)

Deadlines: Weeks 6 (Oct 13), Week 9 (Nov 10), Week 11 (Nov 24)

There will be three (3) short in-class tests throughout the term. These are intended to make sure that you have kept up with your reading and that you have understood the concepts, theories and subject matter introduced by them. Each week, I will provide a list of terms. A selection of these will appear in the test.

Note, however, that we are not looking for rote answers, so please don't memorize your descriptions of the term and expect to simply repeat them on the test. Rather, you will be asked questions that challenge you to bring the terms/concepts into play by evaluating real-life situations. Don't sweat it. This will be fun!

Pecha Kucha or Poster

Weight: 20%

Deadline: Dec 1

In this assignment, you may choose to deliver a Pecha Kucha presentation or Poster presentation on any subject, topic, concept, or idea that most interested you in the course. The only exclusion is that you must choose something different from the topics covered in your experimental paper.

1.

Pecha Kucha is a highly structured voice-and-image format that requires presenters to deliver 9 Powerpoint slides at a rate of 20 seconds per slide. A completed presentation will take 3 minutes. To deliver a Pecha Kucha presentation, take one concept, term, idea, or argument from the readings. Extrapolate on your choice by drawing connections to a subject, event, or phenomenon (no limits). Critically engage both the concept and the case study.

This approach should help you avoid summarizing the text. In other words, the aim here is to develop a unique perspective that will move the conversation into new territory. To that end, use the medium of voice-and-image to your best ability. For an example on how to prepare a Pecha Kucha, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wq1Jnx51pW0>

2.

Posters are not pecha kuchas. They are static visual representations of your academic labour. If you choose this option, take one concept, term, idea, or argument from required readings. Extrapolate by drawing connections to a subject, event, or phenomenon (no limits). Engage critically both with the concept and the case study. This limitation should help you avoid summarizing the text.

The poster itself must be printed and sized 18' x 24'. It may include blocks of text, images, data visualizations, infographics, and/or visual material. Use the medium of text-and-image to your best ability. This is a creative exercise that challenges you to communicate effectively.

On Pecha Kucha Day, you will deliver a short poster presentation that provides an outline of the major themes from your work. Please note: These presentations must be in person; and must not be pre-recorded.

Participation

Weight: 15%

Deadline: Ongoing

We expect you to be present in lectures, but we also expect you to join in conversations when you can. Obviously, people learn differently, have different levels of comfort in group settings, and have accessibility needs. Try to participate in the best way you see fit. If you have questions or concerns going forward, please let me know as soon as possible. After the reading break, you will receive a mid-term evaluation of your participation grade on request.

Policy on late assignments

Assignments may be turned in late. But I need to have sufficient warning *prior* to the deadline, please! I will not be able to guarantee that your late assignments will be graded and turned back after two weeks, as those who submitted in a timely fashion can expect. This may affect the ability to determine your grade before the course drop deadline, for example. Finally, work submitted after the course has ended may yield a grade of “incomplete” only when prior arrangements have been made. Please always consult the prof on late work.



K-pop fans at Trump rally, Tulsa OK, June 2020.

Weekly schedule:

Week 1: Sep 8: Introduction: Social stacks

Required reading:

Bratton, B. “The Black Stack,” *e-flux*, 2014, no. 53, n. pag. ([Link](#))

Seymour, R. "We Are All Trolls," *The Twittering Machine*. London: Verso, 2020, pp. n pag. (Blackboard)

Video (in class):

The Twittering Machine: Richard Seymour and Wendy Liu in Conversation. Video (Excerpt)

AFFECTS, IMAGES, and EXPERIENCES

Week 2: Sep 15: Affects

Required reading:

Pettmann, D. "Hypermulation (or the Digital Mood-Ring)," *Infinite Distraction*. London: Polity, 2015, pp. 31-49. (Blackboard)

Lovink, G. "Sad By Design" and "Narcissus Confirmed," *Sad By Design: On Platform Nihilism*. London: Pluto Books, 2018, pp. 45-61 and 98-108. (Bata Library Online)

Recommended reading:

Sedgwick, E. "Introduction," *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003, pp. 1-25. (Bata Library Online)

Class exercise: Journaling check-in/reminder

Week 3: Sep 22: Visual culture, photography, moving images

Required reading:

Bresnick, E. "Intensified Play: Cinematic Study of TikTok Mobile App," University of Southern California, 2019, n. pag. (Blackboard)

Manovich, L. *Instagram and the Contemporary Image*. Creative Commons eBook, 2017, excerpts. (Blackboard)

Mirzoeff, N. "The Space of Appearance," *The Appearance of Black Lives Matter*. [Name] eBook, 2017, pp. 85-132. ([Link](#))

Class exercise: Journaling presentations

HABITUAL CONNECTIONS, ACTIONS, and SUBJECTS

Week 4: Sep 29: Surveillance

Deleuze, G. "Postscript on the Societies of Control," *October*, vol. 59, Winter 1992, pp. 3-7. (Blackboard)

Karppi, T. "Deactivate" and "Die," *Disconnect: Facebook's Affective Bonds*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018, pp. 67-101. (Bata Library Online)

Jacobsen, B. and Beer, D. "The Computational Surfacing of Memories: Promoting the Memorable," *Social Media and the Automatic Production of Memory*. Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2021, pp. 43-57. (Blackboard)

Class exercise: Experiment time!

Week 5: Oct 6: Subcultures and audience studies

Required reading:

Gurley, L. K. "The Promise—and Risk—of a Career in TikTok," *Vice*. May 2020. ([Link](#))

Hall, S. "Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse," University of Birmingham, 1973, n. pag. (Blackboard)

Litt E, Hargittai E. "The Imagined Audience on Social Network Sites," *Social Media + Society*. January 2016. (Blackboard)

Week 6: Oct 13: Discrimination networks, black studies

Required reading:

Benjamin, R. "Technological Benevolence," *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*. London: Polity, 2019, pp. 137-160. (Blackboard)

Brock Jr., A. "'The Black Purposes of Space Travel': Black Twitter as Black Technoculture," *Distributed Blackness: African American Subcultures*. New York: NYU Press, 2020, pp. 79-124. (Blackboard)

Jeong, S. "On Harassment," *The Internet of Garbage*. Vox Media, 2018. n. pag. ([Link](#))

Class exercise: Test 1

Week 7: Oct 20: Critique of ideology, psychoanalysis

Required reading:

Chun, W. "Habitual Connections, or Network Maps: Belatedly Too Early," *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2016, pp. 39-63. (Bata Library Online)

Flisfeder, M. "Metaphor as Totality, or, Social Media as Our Metaphor," *Algorithmic Desire: Toward a New Structuralist Theory of Social Media*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2021, n. pag. (Bata Library Online)

Munson, I. (2021). "Mirror of Your Mind," *Social Media & the Self: An Open Reader* (1st ed.). ([Link](#))

READING BREAK Oct 23-27

SOCIAL MEDIA and PUBLIC CULTURE

Week 8: Nov 3: Work, labour, and time

Required reading:

Gillespie, T. "To Remove or to Filter," *Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, Content Moderation, and the Hidden Decisions That Shape Social Media*. New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2015, pp. 173-197. (Bata Library Online)

Fuchs, C. "Digital Prosumption Labour on Social Media in the Context of the Capitalist Regime of Time," *Time and Society*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2014, pp. 97-123. (Blackboard)

Recommended reading:

Crawford, K. "Labour," *Atlas of AI: Power, Politics, and the Planetary Costs of Artificial Intelligence*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021, pp. 53-89. (Blackboard)

In-class viewing:

The Cleaners, dirs.. Block and Rieseewieck, 2018. 90 minutes.

Experiment paper due

Week 9: Nov 10: Theory of assembly, collectivism, political actions

Required reading:

Butler, J. *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015, pp. 1-24. (Blackboard)

Kavada, A., and Poell, T. "From Counterpublics to Contentious Publicness: Tracing the Temporal, Spatial, and Material Articulations of Popular Protest Through Social Media," *Communication Theory*. 2021, vol. 31, no. 2, pp. 190–208. (Blackboard)

Recommended:

Margetts, H. Z., et al., "Leadership without Leaders? Starters and Followers in Online Collective Action," *Political Studies*. 2015, vol. 63, no. 2, pp. 278-299. (Blackboard)

Class exercise: Test 2

PLATFORMS and POWER

Week 10: Nov 17: Geopolitics, cyberwar, elections

Required reading:

Dyer-Witheford, N., and Matviyenko, S. "Cyberwar's Subjects," *Cyberwar and Revolution: Digital Subterfuge in Global Capitalism*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2019, pp. 73-106. (Blackboard)

Hu, M. "Cambridge Analytica's black box," *Big Data & Society*. July 2020. ([Link](#))

Tufekci, Z. "How social media took us from Tahrir Square to Donald Trump," *Technology Review*. 2018, n. pag. ([Link](#))

Week 11: Nov 24: Algorithmic culture

Required reading:

Amoore, L. "The Cloud Chambers," *Cloud Ethics: Algorithms and the Attributes of Ourselves and Others*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2020, n. pag (Bata Library Online)

Levant, Alex. "Book Review: Matteo Pasquinelli's The Eye of the Master." *Media Theory*. ([Link](#))

Striphas, T. "Algorithmic culture," *European Journal of Cultural Studies*. 2015, vol. 18, no. 4-5, pp. 395-412. (Blackboard)

Recommended:

Galloway, A. R., and Thacker, E. "Edges," *The Exploit: A Theory of Networks*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007, pp. 109-127. (Blackboard)

Video (in class):

Noble, S., *Just Google It: Algorithms of Oppression*. Video. [Excerpt]

Class exercise: Test 3

Week 12: Dec 1: Pecha Kucha Day

Today we hear everyone's presentations and celebrate the end of the school year!