

CMS.614 Critical Internet Studies



Time: Fall 2022
Location: MIT
Instructor: Dr. Sulafa Zidani (she/her)

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Course Description

This course focuses on the power dynamics in internet-related technologies (including social networking platforms, surveillance technology, entertainment technologies, and emerging media forms). Theories and readings focus on the cultural, social, economic, and political aspects of internet use and design, with a special attention to gender and race. Topics include: online communication and communities, algorithms and search engines, activism and online resistance, surveillance and privacy, content moderation and platform governance, and the spread of dis- and misinformation. This class offers an opportunity to discuss digital media in a fundamental way, to engage with complex ideas, and to develop and refine critical thinking, verbal, and writing skills. We will explore timely topics (e.g., memes, misinformation, social media and power, algorithmic bias, tech and social justice, and more) across media and from historical, transnational, and multiple methodological perspectives. We will examine the framing of these issues, their ethical and policy implications, and strategies for engaging in critical discussions and debate. Students taking the graduate version complete additional readings and assignments.

Student Learning Outcomes

In this course, students will:

- Develop critical thinking on internet and media-related issues;
- Propose ways for participating in internet culture that promote their desired values;
- Demonstrate, through oral presentations, discussions, and written work, an understanding of current debates in critical internet studies;
- Practice research skills research like collecting information, analysis, and writing;
- Listen, engage, and participate in collective learning.

Assignments and Assessments

Presence and Participation (10%)

This class demands participation from all of us. Students are strongly encouraged to attend all the sessions if possible. This is the best way to engage with the course and keep up to date with class activities and assignments. Your participation grade is based on: attendance, communicating ahead of time if unable to attend, contribution and engagement in discussions and class activities, reading the required material, setting up one office-hour meeting with the instructor, checking emails regularly, not using your technology for distraction from the class. Moreover, being present and engaged means being just as willing to listen to others as you are to speak. We will discuss how to give feedback and have generative discussions. Differences and disagreements are embraced in this classroom, but disrespect, hostility, discrimination, and other forms of violence will not be tolerated.

Weekly Reading Response (15%)

By Sunday 9PM each week, you will post on Canvas a response to the readings. This will include: (1) 1-3 sentence summary of each reading (2) 2-5 discussion questions (3) keywords

regarding the larger debates/issues that these readings relate to. The total length of the reading response will be around 150-300 words (that's about one page).

If you are a grad student, I would advise adding a few more sentences about how the readings speak to each other or to prior readings to help trace concepts and arguments across the field.

Reading Opening/Facilitation x 2 (10% x 2 = 20%)

You will sign up for two reading openings for the semester. This will include opening the reading and facilitating a discussion with the class and bringing an example. A successful opening: (-) presents the author briefly (-) explains clearly the arguments of the reading (-) and how they can be better understood through examples. It can be in any format (meme, video, GIF, tweet, etc). Please note, videos must not exceed 7 minutes. (-) bonus, especially if you are a grad student: connect the reading to other readings from class/from the field.

Research Paper/Project (50%)

The final paper is an original analytical essay that is open topic but engages with the texts, ideas, and concepts presented in class. Your final paper should include a clear thesis statement, supporting evidence, original ideas, and a critical, content or design analysis of class material or other related texts. You should use proper citation as well (refer to policy on plagiarism below). The final paper is due two weeks before the end of class, for this purpose it is divided into smaller goals:

Due session 3 - Topic (or two): a few sentences description

Due session 5 - Research Proposal (1-2 page, incl. RQs, thesis, and bibliography)

Due session 5 - Paper outline (bullet points with 2-3 sentence elaboration)

Due before Nov 24 - Paper Draft + Peer Review

Due session 12 - Final paper due (10 pages double spaced)

For a project, you will create or design a project of your choosing and submit a five page *context paper* (1200-1450 words) that includes the intellectual and research impulses that are driving your project and the decisions you had to make along the way. In this context paper, you will also tell us about the project, what you did, why it matters, what you are trying to communicate or interpret from a case or idea in network cultures, and what you learned from it. Note that the options for what a project can be are broad. It can be a design proposal for an app, it can be an artistic performance, a musical piece, a series of tweets or videos, an online activism campaign (or outline for one),... The options are endless, so you can think of a medium you like to use or one that you are eager to experiment with.

Presentation (15%)

A 10-minute presentation about your final project on the last day of class. Sensory aid (such as slides, props, sounds) are encouraged but not mandatory.

Policies & FAQs

Syllabus Change Policy

This syllabus may be subject to change based on news events, guest speaker availability, or to adapt to the ongoing multilayered pandemic.

Note: If you are a **graduate student**, the “recommended” readings are required, and assignment requirements may differ slightly in order to fulfill the graduate level.

Mask Policy

Please wear one. (unless you have a health issue that makes wearing a mask more dangerous for you than not wearing it).

Tech Policy

Please feel free (but not obliged) to use your laptop in class. Laptops will be used in this class for engagement, participation, note-taking, research, or other purposes related to class activities. This class requires students' participation and presence, therefore please refrain from using technology as a distraction during class time. Same goes for phones!

Tl;dr: use devices for class engagement, but keep them silenced.

Grading Policy

Each assignment, other than the reading responses, is graded out of 100 points and will be converted to a percentage score, depending upon the weight assigned to it above. All graded assignments will be returned to you individually in a timely manner (usually within 14 days of the assignment). You will receive detailed and **thoughtful** feedback on each assignment, please **read it thoroughly** and incorporate it into your next assignments (I keep track of that too!).

If you have concerns regarding a grade on a specific assignment, you can **appeal the grade in writing within one (1) week** of receiving your grade. Your appeal must state why/how you feel your grade is inaccurate, providing specific examples. No appeals will be accepted for assignments submitted late, or after the one-week appeal deadline.

Assignment Submission Policy

All assignments are due on the deadlines specified in the corresponding prompt (all will be discussed in class, and will also be posted on Canvas under “Assignments”). Extensions on assignments must be approved by the instructor **in advance** of the assignment deadline. Lacking prior discussion and agreement with the instructor, **late assignments** will receive a one-third (1/3) grade reduction for each day late (including weekends), and any missing assignments will automatically be given a grade of 0%.

Assignments must be submitted via Canvas unless otherwise stated by the instructor. All written assignments must be typed in 12-point font, double-spaced, and have 1-inch margins. Please make sure to spell-check and proofread all papers for spelling and grammar. If you are using/citing someone else's work, please include a “works cited” section

and follow a consistent style guide (APA is recommended). Please save and submit all assignments in .doc or .docx format, so that I may return your graded papers to you with feedback and comments in "Track Changes."

Plagiarism

Plagiarism is the use of someone else's ideas or language without acknowledging that we did not create them. This is considered a form of fraud. Policy of the CMS/W faculty requires that students who plagiarize receive an F in the subject, and that the instructor forward the case to the MIT Committee on Discipline. You can read more here: <https://cmsw.mit.edu/writing-and-communication-center/avoiding-plagiarism/>

tl;dr: Don't do it, it's not worth it.

What if I can't attend class?

First of all, email me to let me know. Missing 1-2 sessions will not impact your grade. Get in touch with your classmates and instructor to figure out how to stay on track. If you have to miss more than 2 sessions, please let me know so we can figure out what the best course of action is.

tl;dr: communicate!

What if I need help with writing? #ResourceAlert

MIT Writing and Communication Center offers free one-on-one professional advice from communication specialists with advanced degrees and publishing experience. The WCC can help you learn about all types of academic and professional writing and further develop your oral communication skills. You can learn more about WCC consultations at <http://cmsw.mit.edu/writing-and-communication-center> and schedule appointments online through <https://mit.mywconline.com>.

Hours: Monday-Friday, 9:00 a.m.- 6:00 p.m., and fill up fast.

Course Schedule

This course has 13 sessions, each of which will focus on a current debate in the field of Critical Internet Studies. The schedule of classes below includes session numbers and a preliminary reading list.

Session 1 -

Introduction | Pedagogy | What is the Internet?

Reading:

- Miriam Sweeney "How to read for grad school"
<https://miriamsweeney.net/2012/06/20/readforgradschool/>
- hooks, b. (2010). Engaged Pedagogy. In *Teaching Critical Thinking* (pp. 19-23). Routledge.

- Sample, I. (2018, Oct 22). What is the internet? 13 key questions answered. The Guardian.
<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/oct/22/what-is-the-internet-13-key-questions-answered>
- Maddie Stone (Aug 14, 2020). Facebook Abandoned Drilling Equipment Beneath the Ocean Floor. Vice.
<https://www.vice.com/en/article/4ay5mj/facebook-abandoned-drilling-equipment-beneath-the-ocean-floor>

Visit:

- See where you are! <https://native-land.ca/>

Session 2 -

The Intersectional Internet: How Does this Concept Help Us Understand the Internet?

Reading:

- Intersectional Internet Book chapter 4 by Molly Niesen

Watch:

- Kimberlé Crenshaw, The Urgency of Intersectionality TED Talk
https://www.ted.com/talks/kimberle_crenshaw_the_urgency_of_intersectionality?language=en

Recommended

- Intersectional Internet book intro
- Crenshaw, K. W. (2006). Intersectionality, identity politics and violence against women of color. *Kvinder, kön & forskning*, (2-3).

Session 3 -

Internet & Gaming in the Panda-Express

Reading:

- De Leon, A. (2022, Jun 22). 'Final Fantasy XIV' Taught Me About Care and Connection During the Pandemic. Catapult.
<https://catapult.co/stories/adrian-de-leon-final-fantasy-xiv-ffxiv-mmorpg-community-connection-pandemic-video-games>
- Apperley, T. H., & Gray, K. L. (2020). Digital divides and structural inequalities: Exploring the technomasculture of gaming. In *The Video Game Debate 2* (pp. 41-52). Routledge.

If you want more:

- Gray, K. L. (2012). Intersecting oppressions and online communities: Examining the experiences of women of color in Xbox Live. *Information, Communication & Society*, 15(3), 411-428.
- Chang, E. Y., Gray, K. L., & Bird, A. (2022). Playing difference: Towards a games of colour pedagogy. In *Critical Pedagogy, Race, and Media* (pp. 111-128). Routledge.

Session 4 -

Memes & History

Reading:

- Wald, G. (2020). "A queer black woman invented rock-and-roll": Rosetta Tharpe, memes, and memory practices in the digital age. *Feminist Media Studies*, 1-17.
- Frazer, R., & Carlson, B. (2017). Indigenous memes and the invention of a people. *Social Media+ Society*, 3(4),.
- A Meme is a Terrible Thing to Waste: An Interview with Limor Shifman
<http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2014/02/a-meme-is-a-terrible-thing-to-waste-an-interview-with-limor-shifman-part-one.html>

Recommended:

- Shifman, L. (2014). Introduction. In *Memes in Digital Culture*. MIT Press.
- Kate Miltner. Internet Memes (book chapter).
<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/593b1c3a03596e06e97407b7/t/5daf401ba50ae018ef6f6b99/1571766305082/Miltner+-+Internet+Memes.pdf>

Session 5 -

Governance of Platforms/Governance by Platforms/What are platforms?

- Gillespie, T. (2010). The politics of 'platforms'. *New media & society*, 12(3), 347-364.
- Gillespie, T. (2022). Do Not Recommend? Reduction as a Form of Content Moderation. *Social Media + Society*, 8(3).
- Intersectional internet chapter 10 - The Nation State in Intersectional Internet

Recommended

- Roberts, S. T. (2019). *Behind the screen*. Yale University Press. (Introduction or pick a chapter of your choice)
- Amre Metwally (2022). After/Lives: Rethinking Moment of Death Content on Social Media Platforms. Harvard Human Rights Journal.
<https://harvardhrj.com/2022/02/after-lives-rethinking-moment-of-death-content-on-social-media-platforms/>
- Amal Nazzal in *Al Shabaka*. Youtube's Violation of Palestinian Digital Rights.
<https://al-shabaka.org/briefs/youtubes-violation-of-palestinian-digital-rights-what-needs-to-be-done/>

Session 6 -

Why is Internet Culture?! Participatory Culture & Counter-Power Frameworks

Reading:

- Jenkins, H., Ford, S., & Green, J. (2018). Introduction. In *Spreadable media: Creating value and meaning in a networked culture*. NYU press.
- Castells, Manuel (2007). Communication, Power and Counter-Power in the Network Society. *International Journal of Communication*, 1(1): 238- 266.

Session 7 -

Algorithms of Oppression: Was Equity Ever Part of the Design?

Reading:

- Safiya Noble (2018) Algorithms of Oppression (Introduction & conclusion)
- Vaidyanathan, S. (2018). *Antisocial media: How Facebook disconnects us and undermines democracy*. Oxford University Press. (Introduction)

Recommended::

- Chapter 2 from Safiya Noble's book (available online through MIT Lib)

Session 8 -

Workshop day around the final projects and papers

Session 9 -

„~“{The Internet of Joy}“~.~ How Joy is Critical to the Internet (and Life)

Reading:

- Persaud, C. J., & Crawley, A. (2022). On Black Queer Joy and the Digital. *Social Media+ Society*, 8(2), 20563051221107629.
- Martinez, W. (2022) TikTok for Us by Us: Black Girlhood, Joy, and Self-care. In *TikTok Cultures in the United States* (pp. 39-46). Routledge.

Recommended

- Brock Jr., A. (2020). Distributed Blackness. New York University Press. (Introduction, especially page 30-34).
- Miltner, K. M. (2014). “There's no place for lulz on LOLCats”: The role of genre, gender, and group identity in the interpretation and enjoyment of an Internet meme. *First Monday*..

Session 10 -

How Do We Research the Internet? Examples in Qualitative Research Methods

Reading:

- Pick two articles from this semester and review their method for conducting research
- Prepare 2-5 sentences about your own research method if you're writing a paper
- Brock, A. (2018). Critical technocultural discourse analysis. *New Media & Society*, 20(3), 1012-1030.
- Case Study as Method
<https://libguides.usc.edu/writingguide/assignments/casestudy>
- Zidani, S. (2022) How to Conduct Internet Meme Research. SAGE.

Session 11 -

Mis/Dis/Information/Disorder: Can We Make It Make Sense?

Readings - pick one:

- Moran, R. E. (2022). The So-Called "Crisis" of Trust in Journalism. The Routledge Companion to News and Journalism.
- Nguyễn, S., Kuo, R., Reddi, M., Li, L., & Moran, R. E. (2022). Studying mis-and disinformation in Asian diasporic communities: The need for critical transnational research beyond Anglocentrism. *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review*.
- Brock Jr., A. (Dec 25, 2021). (dis)Info Studies: André Brock, Jr. on Why People Do What They Do On the Internet. *Logic Magazine*.
<https://logicmag.io/beacons/dis-info-studies-andre-brock-jr/>

Session 12 -

Final Presentations

Session 13 -

Emerging Questions in Critical Internet Studies: Is the Internet Getting Uglier?

Reading:

- Review your notes and outline core questions and keywords from the class
- Douglas, N. (2014). It's supposed to look like shit: The Internet ugly aesthetic. *Journal of visual culture*, 13(3), 314-339.
- Makalintal, B. (2022, Sep 29). The Great Food Instagram Vibe Shift. *Eater*.
<https://www.eater.com/23365775/instagram-aesthetic-shift-food-blogger-laissez-faire>

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