

SE221 Digital Politics

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Office Hours: -

Course Description

The seminar “Digital Politics” is an introduction to the field of critical Internet studies and it will provide a tool box for students to maneuver more securely through the vast digital networks of our times. We will learn how to verify news online, how to communicate safely with each other and how to build stories that attract attention. We will try to shed light on the buzz words that form our digital landscape: big data, algorithms, artificial intelligence, leaks, post privacy and post truth. The course will focus on recent case studies and draw out their lessons both for individuals and for larger social and political forces. We will address cases of alleged hacking and their potentially far-reaching consequences, as well as the social media strategies of political parties and social movements, from those described as “populist,” to others that have long been a part of the establishment landscape. Our aim will be to arrive at a clear grasp of the reach of the impact of digital technology on politics and society; to develop a practical, personal ethic of response to this transformation; and to discover ways of influencing it in a positive direction. Several experts in the field of digital activism, surveillance and citizen media will join this course live or via video call and introduce their projects to the class. They will engage in Q&A session with the students and give first-hand insights into their work. Furthermore there will be field trips to the actual spaces of digital activism in Berlin. While there will be reading requirements to acquaint the students with the theoretical basics of Internet studies, there will also be a strong focus on using digital tools in a practical way. In the theoretical segment of the seminar, we will focus on a selection of texts by scholars whose contributions have substantially shaped the discourse on critical net culture, including Louise Amoore, Mike Ananny, Kate Crawford and more. The practical segment of the seminar will give the students a chance to get acquainted with several digital tools that focus on secure communication, data visualization, digital storytelling and critical use of social media.

Schedule

1/30/19 Session #1: Introduction

In the first session we will give an overview of the course and the requirements and we will take time to get to know each other.

2/6/2019 Session #2: Politics of Possibility

Since September 11, 2001, the imagination of “low probability, high consequence” events has become a distinctive feature of contemporary politics. Uncertain futures—devastation by terrorist attack, cyber crime, flood, financial market collapse—must be discerned and responded to as possibilities, however improbable they may be. In *The Politics of Possibility*, Louise Amoore examines this development, tracing its genealogy through the diverse worlds of risk management consulting, computer science, commercial logistics, and data visualization. She focuses on the increasingly symbiotic relationship between commercial opportunities and state security threats, a relation that turns the trusted, iris-scanned traveler into “a person of national security interest,” and the designer of risk algorithms for casino and insurance fraud into a homeland security resource. Juxtaposing new readings of

Agamben, Foucault, Derrida, Massumi, and Connolly with interpretations of post-9/11 novels and artworks, Amoore analyzes the "politics of possibility" and its far-reaching implications for society, associative life, and political accountability.

Required Reading

Louise Amoore: *The Politics of Possibility: Risk and Security Beyond Probability*. Duke University Press, 2013. (PDF Chapter will be provided by instructors)

2/13/2019 Session #3: Digital Storytelling with Open Source Tools

Longform Storytelling has seen a renaissance since the publication of "Snow Fall" by the New York Times in 2012. Its promise: Tell a multimedia story by creating a cognitive container for the reader. In this session we will have a look at four recent cases of longform storytelling and critically analyze them. In the practical part you will have the chance to create "the worst longform" ever using all the different media formats you can get your hands on.

Student Presentation:

Introduction to Wordpress as a Storytelling tool

Required Reading:

Jon Branch: Snow Fall, February 2012, New York Times. URL:
<http://www.nytimes.com/projects/2012/snow-fall/index.html#/?part=tunnel-creek>

2/20/2019: Session #4: Politics of the Cloud

The architecture of cloud computing is becoming ever more closely intertwined with geopolitics – from the sharing of intelligence data, to border controls, immigration decisions, and drone strikes. Developing an analogy with the cloud chamber of early twentieth century particle physics, this paper explores the geography of the cloud in cloud computing. It addresses the geographical character of cloud computing across two distinct paradigms. The first, 'Cloud I' or a geography of cloud forms, is concerned with the identification and spatial location of data centres where the cloud is thought to materialize. Here the cloud is understood within a particular history of observation, one where the apparently abstract and obscure world can be brought into vision and rendered intelligible. In the second variant, 'Cloud II' or the geography of a cloud analytic, the cloud is a bundle of experimental algorithmic techniques acting upon the threshold of perception itself. Like the cloud chamber of the twentieth century, contemporary cloud computing is concerned with rendering perceptible and actionable that which would otherwise be beyond the threshold of human observation. The paper proposes three elements of correlative cloud reasoning, suggesting their significance for our geopolitical present: condensing traces; discovering patterns; and archiving the future.

Required reading:

Louise Amoore: *Cloud Geographies: Computing, Data, Sovereignty*
Progress in human geography, 2018, 42 (1). pp. 4-24.
URL: <http://dro.dur.ac.uk/19468/1/19468.pdf?DDD14+dgg4lp+d700tmt>

2/27/2019 Session #5: Data Visualization with Open Source Tools

Data driven journalism is one of the fastest growing section in digital journalism. We will have an in-depth look at recent examples of Data Storytelling and try to create our own visualizations using free tools such as DataWrapper, Infogram, and Timeline JS.

Student presentation:

Introduction to data driven journalism

3/6/2019 Session #6 Session The Limits of the Transparency Ideal

Models for understanding and holding systems accountable have long rested upon ideals and logics of transparency. Being able to see a system is sometimes equated with being able to know how it works and govern it—a pattern that recurs in recent work about transparency and computational systems. But can “black boxes’ ever be opened, and if so, would that ever be sufficient? In this article, we critically interrogate the ideal of transparency, trace some of its roots in scientific and sociotechnical epistemological cultures, and present 10 limitations to its application. We specifically focus on the inadequacy of transparency for understanding and governing algorithmic systems and sketch an alternative typology of algorithmic accountability grounded in constructive engagements with the limitations of transparency ideals.

Required reading:

Mike Ananny, Kate Crawford: Seeing without knowing: Limitations of the transparency ideal and its application to algorithmic accountability

[New Media & Society, 2016, 1–17 DOI: 10.1177/1461444816676645. URL:](#)

http://mike.ananny.org/papers/anannyCrawford_seeingWithoutKnowing_2016.pdf

3/13/2019 Session #7: The Politics of Social Media

The current political landscape is unthinkable without Social Media. Think of Trumps excessive use of Twitter, political campaigning under Obama and the exploitation of social media of right wing populists like AfD in Germany. In this session we will critically analyze the role of Facebook and Twitter in the new public sphere.

Guest expert:

Abiol Lual Deng, human rights activist from US/South Sudan and Social Media Expert

Student presentation:

Critical introduction to Politics of Social Media

Additional material (audio):

Radio feature and interview about Trump, Twitter, authoritarianism & Cambridge Analytica with Christian Fuchs: KPFA Letters and Politics, March 27, 2018 [MP3](#)

3/15/2019: Deadline for submitting midterm papers!

3/20/2019 Session #8: Organized Networks

Organized networks are an alternative to the social media logic of weak links and their secretive economy of data mining. They put an end to freestyle friends, seeking forms of empowerment beyond the brief moment of joyful networking. This speculative manual calls for nothing less than social technologies based on enduring time. Analyzing contemporary practices of organization through networks as new institutional forms, organized networks provide an alternative to political parties, trade unions, NGOs, and traditional social movements. Dominant social media deliver remarkably little to advance decision-making within digital communication infrastructures. The world cries for action, not likes. Organization after Social Media explores a range of social settings from arts and design, cultural politics, visual culture and creative industries, disorientated education and the crisis

of pedagogy to media theory and activism. Lovink and Rossiter devise strategies of commitment to help claw ourselves out of the toxic morass of platform suffocation.

Required Reading:

Geert Lovink and Ned Rossiter: Organization after Social Media. Minor Compositions 2018. pp 3-32.
URL: <https://de.scribd.com/document/381615409/Organization-after-Social-Media>

3/27/2019 Session #9 : Fake News Detection on Social Media:

Social media for news consumption is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, its low cost, easy access, and rapid dissemination of information lead people to seek out and consume news from social media. On the other hand, it enables the wide spread of “fake news”, i.e., low quality news with intentionally false information. Therefore, fake news detection on social media has recently become an emerging research that is attracting tremendous attention. Fake news detection on social media presents unique characteristics and challenges that make existing detection algorithms from traditional news media ineffective or not applicable. Based on the research of Shu et. al we will have a look at existing tools for fake news detection and find out how they work.

Student presentation:

Introduction to fact checking tools

Required reading:

Kai Shu Et al.: Fake News Detection on Social Media: A Data Mining Perspective. URL:
https://www.kdd.org/exploration_files/19-1-Article2.pdf

4/3/2019 Session #10: The Politics of Artificial Artificial Intelligence

Politicizing the rise of Artificial Intelligence while autocrats are gaining momentum, the Ambient Revolts conference moved onto new ground: ‘Logistical AI’. It is new ground insofar as it has hardly been covered by academic or journalistic knowledge production. Of course, there is a lot about AI in general and there is also a lot about logistics in general, but there is hardly any literature about the intersection of these terms that I propose calling Logistical AI. So, out of urgent necessity, in my view there is a need to invent a critical discourse on Logistical AI. In order to do this I first sketch the emergence of Logistical AI as a field of politics, then introduce the seemingly unrelated work of Sandi Hilal and Evelina Gambino within this emerging field. Finally, I reflect on the struggle within and against Logistical AI as a politics of Artificial Artificial Intelligence (AAI), raising critical issues of agency and labour.

Required reading 1:

Krystian Woznicki: Challenging Logistical AI. The Politics of Artificial Artificial Intelligence. OPEN!, December 2018. URL: <https://onlineopen.org/challenging-logistical-ai>

Required reading 2:

Brett Neilson: Five theses on understanding logistics as power. December 2012.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/271992184_Five_theses_on_understanding_logistics_as_power

4/10/19 Session #11: Field Trip

A FIELD GUIDE TO THE SNOWDEN FILES is the first book to critically engage with artists responding to the NSA-files leaked by whistleblower Edward Snowden. Considering the most relevant contexts in

which the files have 'surfaced' (including media and archives), it reflects on how artists are deploying the files as raw material. The book looks at the various civil society actors who have been appropriating the historic leak and orders their responses according to contexts in which the Snowden documents have been published: media, art and archives. The different approaches share the common goal of rendering the documents accessible – to both present and future audiences. Reaching out to the general public, they have also tasked themselves with reflecting on the complex political, social and technological realities that the Snowden documents have helped to uncover. In this field trip, we will introduce our book project “A Field Guide to the Snowden Files” on site at the Berliner Gazette office.

Required reading:

<https://projekte.berlingazette.de/signals>

4/24/19 Session #12: Project work

This session is dedicated to crafting the abstracts for your term papers.

5/8/19 Session #13: Conclusion

Conclusion of the seminar.

*Please note that the schedule and reading requirements may be subject to changes.

Requirements

Attendance

Attendance at all classes is expected. More than two absences (that is absences from two sessions of 90 minutes) in a semester will significantly affect the participation grade for the course. Students should consult the Student Handbook for regulations governing periods of illness or leaves of absence.

Writing Assignments

Students are required to submit a mid-term essay of 2500 words on a subject of the class. At the end of the term students will turn in their term paper consisting of 5000 words.

Other Assignments

Students will give short presentations introducing digital tools that will be used within the course. It's possible to form groups of up to 4 students to hold these presentations. The presentation should be 15 minutes long and should contain a digital handout. The specifics of each presentation will be clarified once the course has started.

Grade Breakdown

classroom participation: 30 %

midterm paper: 20 %

term paper : 30 %

presentation: 20 %