

# SE221 DIGITAL POLITICS

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## 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 better informed and politically more consciously 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, post privacy, smart city and digital work. The course will explore up-to-date literature and discourse in the field. We will address the promises of so-called Big Tech and its potentially far-reaching consequences, as well as the strategies of political parties and social movements to respond to the challenges arising from within the private IT sector. Our aim will be to arrive at a clear grasp of the reach of the impact of digital technology on politics, society, and the future of work; to discover ways of changing our position from spectator to actor in the ongoing transformation; and to develop a practical, personal ethic of political participation. While there will be reading requirements to acquaint the students with the theoretical basics of critical 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. The practical segment of the seminar will give the students a chance to get acquainted with several digital tools that focus on data visualization, digital storytelling and critical use of social media.

## Schedule

### 1/29/20 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.

### 2/5/2020 Session #2: 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. It’s 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>

### 2/12/2020 Session #3: 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

### 2/19/2020: Session #4: Platform Capitalism

Both in and out of the tech sector firms have been adopting a new type of business model, premised upon bringing different groups together. Facebook and Google connect advertisers, businesses, and everyday users; Uber connects riders and drivers; and Amazon and Siemens are building and renting the platform infrastructures that underlie the contemporary economy. Essential to all of these platform businesses – and indicative of a wider shift in capitalism – is the centrality of data. It is data which is the basic resource that drives these firms, and it is data which gives them their advantage over competitors. But their nature as intermediaries and the centrality of data both install new tendencies within capitalism. Their appetite for data – driven ever more by the demands of the emerging competition over low-level AI – means that these businesses are constantly expanding. The surge in mergers and acquisitions by companies like Google, Facebook, and Amazon attests to the ways in which data extraction forms a novel set of structural imperatives for these companies. They cannot remain content with their core businesses; rather they must continually extend their data extraction apparatus into new areas. The challenge facing us today is to grapple with these intrinsic tendencies of the data-centric platform model, and to strategise ways to counter their power. An underestimation of their dominance serves only to enshrine their position, but as they become ever more central to the global economy, it becomes even more important to understand their functioning.

Required reading:

Introduction section to “Platform Capitalism” by Nick Srnicek

URL: <http://pombo.free.fr/srnicek17.pdf>

Additional reading:

“The challenges of platform capitalism” by Nick Srnicek

URL: <https://rampages.us/goldstein2017capitalism/wp-content/uploads/sites/24780/2017/08/Srnicek-2017-Juncture.pdf>

### 2/26/2020 Session #5: The Politics of Big Data

Today the importance of “big data” cannot be understated, nor can the power relation that circulate through it be ignored or downplayed. Data processing is becoming a key means by which our society, economy and social lives are being shaped. However, mass collection, storage and analysis of private data sets is organized by companies, governments and secret service agencies in intransparent, unregulated ways, without democratic control. This is undermining fundamental individual and common rights and the power of the people in general. Therefore we need to put things into perspective: We, the users, produce more than 75% of the data that make up our digital universe. However, we do not think of those data as the product of our collective labor and therefore as something we should own. Instead large corporations and powerful states own ‘our’ big data. So we need to ask: Is there a way to turn big data into our digital commons? This session will take the

position paper "Big Data In Our Hands?" as a starting point: <https://projekte.berlingazette.de/big-data-in-our-hands/>

Required Reading

"Big Data In Our Hands?"

URL: <https://projekte.berlingazette.de/big-data-in-our-hands>

### **3/4/2020 Session #6: 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.

*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

### **3/11/2020 Session #7: 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](https://www.kdd.org/exploration_files/19-1-Article2.pdf)

### **3/18/2020 Session #8: The Politics of the Smart City**

A Smart city is an urban area that uses different types of electronic Internet of Things (IoT) sensors to collect data and then use insights gained from that data to manage assets, resources and services efficiently. This includes data collected from citizens, devices, and assets that is processed and analyzed to monitor and manage traffic and transportation systems, power plants, utilities, water supply networks, waste management, crime detection, information systems, schools, libraries, hospitals, and other community services. Examples of Smart city technologies and programs have been implemented in Singapore, Smart cities in India, Dubai, Milton Keynes, Southampton, Amsterdam, Barcelona, Madrid, Stockholm, Copenhagen, China, and New York. In this session we will explore the digital politics of this global trend.

Required Reading:

“Rethinking the Smart City” by Evgeny Morozov and Francesca Bria

URL: [http://www.rosalux-nyc.org/wp-content/files\\_mf/morozovandbria\\_eng\\_final55.pdf](http://www.rosalux-nyc.org/wp-content/files_mf/morozovandbria_eng_final55.pdf)

### **3/25/2019 Session #9: The Politics of Digital Work**

There are now over seven million digital platform workers that live all over the world, doing work that is outsourced via platforms or apps. Platform work provides essential income and opportunities to many. However, lacking protection from employment law or collective bodies, many platform workers face low pay, precarity, and poor and dangerous working conditions. The research initiative "Fairwork" is committed to highlighting best and worst practices in the emerging platform economy. In a partnership with the International Labour Organisation (ILO), we have brought together platforms, workers, trade unions, regulators, and academics to set global principles for fair work in the platform economy. Those principles have been revised in a series of tripartite workshops in South Africa, India, and Germany. Using those principles, we give every platform a ‘fairness’ score. "Fairwork" draws on the expertise and experience of staff at the Universities of Oxford, Cape Town, Manchester, and the Western Cape in work practices and working conditions on digital labour platforms. Project staff work to translate our principles into measurable thresholds, conduct rigorous research to evaluate platforms against those thresholds, and publish our results in a transparent manner.

Required Reading:

Fairwork. 2019. The Five Pillars of Fairwork: Labour Standards in the Platform Economy. Oxford, UK; Manchester, UK; Cape Town, South Africa; Bangalore, India.

URL: <https://fair.work/wp-content/uploads/sites/97/2019/10/Fairwork-Y1-Report.pdf>

Additional Reading 1:

"Work in the platform economy" by Jan Drahekoupil and Agnieszka Piasna

URL: <https://berlinergazette.de/wp-content/uploads/WP-2019-01-deliveroo-WEB-2.pdf>

Additional Reading 2:

“Freedom and Flexibility”

<https://www.publicfirst.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/DeliverooReport.pdf>

### **4/1/2020 Session #10: Audio Storytelling with Open Source Tools**

Podcasts are becoming more and more important. They provide a platform not only for journalists to broadcast audio stories on the web to a large audience. What are successful examples of podcasts? How can academics use podcasts in their teaching practice? This session will introduce the free software Audacity as a tool for creating your own podcasts. He will explain what makes a good podcast and what are the do’s and don’t’s when it comes to creating audios for the web.

Student presentation: Open Source Tools for Audio Storytelling.

### **4/15/2020 Session #11: Project work**

Collaboration on final projects.

### **4/22/2020 Session #12: The Politics of Artificial Intelligence**

Before artificial intelligence (AI) was invented as a technology, capitalism at large was driven by what could be called a fantasy of AI. This means that the most important economic processes – from decision making to production – have gradually been delegated to some higher, magically autonomous intelligence imagined as, for instance, the ‘self-regulated market.’ And this has paved the way for the rise of actual AI technologies. Hence, unsurprisingly, AI as a self-optimizing and self-generating intelligence is nowadays becoming the driving factor in processes of privatization transforming an increasing number of social fields: medicine, education, warfare, etc. This far-reaching commingling of AI as fantasy and AI as technology is confronting us with an urgent question: what happens to humans in general and human labor in particular under these conditions?

*Required reading 1:*

“The Hidden Human Dimension In AI-Driven Capitalism” by Krystian Woznicki

URL: forthcoming

#### **4/29/2020 Session #13: 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.berlinergazette.de/signals>

#### **5/6/2020 Session #14: Final Presentation**

Final presentation + 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 work collectively on a digital project.

### **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 %