Digital Culture

COURSE OVERVIEW

This course is aimed at providing students with the tools to decode the digitally-infused worlds that we live in. We will proceed along three main axes: decoding, coding and exploring. The first axis will be a cross-disciplinary approach to the digital, spanning history, sociology, anthropology, media studies, science and technology studies and software studies. This theoretical approach will be supported by a second axis, through which students will be exposed to the practicalities of working with, and creating, digital objects (websites, videos, podcasts, visualizations). The third and last axis will stand on the two previous and take the form of a digital exploration: a sociological investigation on the social, economic and/or political impact of digital technologies on human behaviors and practices. This investigation will be designed, developed and presented on a digital platform (a website, a YouTube channel, an Instagram account, a SoundCloud playlist, etc), taking into account the specifics of working with new media.

GRADING

1. Participation (10%)
- You are expected to participate during class, through (1) completing and reflecting upon any assigned weekly videos or readings, (2) initiating and contributing to discussions during each session and (3) paying attention to lectures and discussions if not actively participating in those discussions.
- You will also be able to contribute outside of class, by posting relevant material on the class mailing list, be it articles, videos, websites, etc. Details about this mailing list will be shared in class.

2. Exploration Summary (20%) - Due on October 12th
By session #3, each group will have to submit a 4 page summary outlining their digital exploration. This summary will include:
- A structured presentation of the topic you will be working on
- A clearly-defined central question
- Your working research hypotheses
- Your proposed methodology (how) and field of study (who/where/when)
- Your proposed format through which you will present your exploration
- Possible obstacles that you anticipate in the realization of that study
- An indicative bibliography

3. Digital exploration (70%) - Due on November 16th

- In groups of 3 or 4, you will undertake a <u>study</u> about a practice, a service, a platform, etc. in the digital space.
- The submission of this exploration will have to be done <u>as a digital-first format</u>. (website, video series, podcast, but also possibly Facebook, Instagram, are.na, etc.)
- This work will include (1) a significant bibliographical and webographical research, (2) a presentation of your core question(s), (3) an overview of your methodology (e.g. interviews, online questionnaires, experimental protocols, online ethnographies), (4) analyses and interpretations and (5) summary of findings.
- Try to be creative and give a personal tone to your exploration, both by tying it to your personal experiences and interests, and by taking into account your potential audience and publishing platform.

WORKLOAD

- You are expected to spend between 2 and 3 hours each week on coursework, including preparing any readings, watching assigned videos, and making progress on your exploration with your group.

Session 1 - 21/09/2019 - Introduction

Session overview

This session will focus on covering why this course exists, what are the specific topics it will cover, how these topics will be approached. This will include a discussion of the main course assignment—your digital exploration—, as well as the presentation of possible examples and inspirations. The last part of the session will be dedicated to forming groups based on shared areas of interest.

Homework
- Prepare a list of themes and stakes related to living in a digital world that you are interested in.

Session breakdown
- Course presentation
- Instructor and student introductions
- Breakdown of subjects and areas of interest, group formation
- Overview of possibilities in digital explorations.

Session 2 - 28/09/2019 - Structure

Session overview

The Internet as most of us know it is a complex entanglements of ideals, agendas, fundings, technologies and organizations. The first part of this session will address the multiple influences which shaped the Internet into the global telecommunications platform that we use today, and will serve as the foundation for the rest of the course topics. The second part of the session will introduce students to the practicalities of working with web technologies, such as HTML documents and the client-server architecture.

Homework
- **Watch** Moodle S1E1 - S1E2 - S1E4 - S1E6
- **Read** John Perry Barlow, *A Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace* (https://www.eff.org/cyberspace-independence)
- **Read** Lawrence Lessing, *Code is Law* (https://www.harvardmagazine.com/2000/01/code-is-law-html)
- **Download** Atom (https://atom.io)

Session breakdown
- A Brief history of the Internet: from ARPAnet to the Web 2.0
- Internet infrastructure: protocols, backbones and regulators
- **[Practical]** Introduction to HTML and CSS

Session 3 - 12/10/2019 - Society

Session overview
The Internet has enabled new forms of communications that infused different kinds of social activities, from knowledge exchange on bulletin boards to online communities in virtual worlds, as well as mass-participation (and sometimes mass-revolutions) through social networks. This session will focus on how the concepts of living-together, such as the public sphere, the commons or the performance of the self have gained new dimensions in the digital realm.

Homework
- **Finish** and hand in your exploration summary. Be ready to briefly discuss it in class.
- **Watch** Moodle S1E3 - S3E1 - S3E2 - S4E3 - S4E4 - S6E6
- **Read** Arne Hintz, *Restricting Digital Sites of Dissent: Commercial Social Media and Free Expression* (link on class website)
- **Install** Audacity (https://www.audacityteam.org/)
- **Install** Open Shot (https://www.openshot.org/download/)

Session breakdown
- Roundtable presentation of exploration summaries
- The Free Software movement
- Remixing, hacking, glitching
- The revolution will be live(-streamed)
- **[Practical]** Remixing content with audio and video editing software

Session 4 - 19/10/2019 - Economy

Session overview
New means of communication have also allowed the development of new means of value production. From knowledge creation to on-demand services, this economic production relies both on old and new forms of labor, now digitally mediated. This session will look at what role platforms have in the global economic system, particularly focusing on the place of the API (Application Programming Interface) as a means to interface workers, consumers and managers, both on a conceptual and practical level. We will conclude with an introduction to the Python programming language, and a demonstration on how to write a simple surveillance tool for Twitter users.

Homework

- **Watch** Moodle S2E5 - S2E6 - S5E2 - S5E3 - S5E4 - S5E6
- **Read** Shawn Wen, *The Ladies Vanish* (https://thenewinquiry.com/the-ladies-vanish/)
- **Read** Sarah Mason, *Chasing The Pink* (https://logicmag.io/play/chasing-the-pink/)
- **Install** Python

Session breakdown

- Platform Capitalism
- Working below the API
- Commons-based peer production
- **[Practical]** HTTP and API

Session 5 - 9/11/2019 - Software

Session overview

This session will take a closer look at what software is. Code as a sociotechnical object presents interesting characteristics, both by what it is, what it does, and who writes it. The history of software development as a technical practice and an economic field will allow us to switch perspectives from the end-user to the producer, and touch on recent developments in the field of software studies and platform studies.

Homework

- **Read** Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, chap. 1 (link on class website)
- **Watch** Moodle S6E3 - S6E4 - S6E5
- **Prepare** an update on your digital exploration (things you've done, things you've yet to do, things you're struggling with). Come prepare to discuss it in class.

Session breakdown

- The history of software
- The nature of algorithms
- Interfacing information
- **[Practical]** Writing a simple surveillance tool

Session 6 - 16/11/2019 - Final

Session overview
This session will be dedicated to the presentation of the digital explorations. Each group will have 10 minutes to present their project, and 10 minutes to answer questions for classmates and instructor. This will be an opportunity to gather formal feedback on your project, and make adjustments before the final deadline, 08/12/2019.

Homework
- Prepare your presentation materials, and make sure that your exploration is available online.

Session breakdown
- Final presentations
- Course evaluation

EXTRA CREDIT

Extra credit can be earned up to 10% of the total grade by accomplished some or all of the following:
- Contribute to the class mailing list by posting content either relevant to the class sessions or to your digital exploration.
- Develop and deploy your own webpage, even if you are linking to another platform (YouTube, Instagram) on which your digital exploration is published.
- Include some original data by using scraping and crawling tools (see class website for a list of resources)