summary

housekeeping

introductions

digital inquiry

inspiration

next week

housekeeping

all the course info is on the website.

digital culture 2019

welcome!

hello, everyone.

plan for today

introduction (me)

introductions (you)

introduction (this class)

introduction (digital inquiry)

choosing topics

examples of digital inquiries

introductions

me

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you

name, origin

and an aspect of digital culture which personally affects you

this class

digital culture

what is digital?

everything

cyberspace

information

the digital, in this course, is not going to refer exclusively to the discipline of computer science, or to software engineering. the digital is the interweaving of technical apparatuses, such as code, with the complexity of social, economical, and cultural influences. the digital becomes culture when it becomes enters into a dialogue with human choices and preferences

as the science-fiction writer philip k. dick put it very elegantly, "science-fiction is not about inventing cars, it's about inventing traffic jams". the digital is not just about numbers, then, but about how we use numbers in our society today, and how those numbers affect human behaviour.

alan m. turing wrote a seminal paper in the early 1950s, in which he proved that "all that could be calculated could be calculated with a particular machine". that machine he goes on to describe is known as a Turing machine, and computers are particular versions of turing machines. the main question is then to define "what are the limits of that which we can represent with numbers, and then compute it?". it turns out, quite a lot. we can represent images, sounds, weather, physical objects, single individuals and groups of people as numbers. each of these can then become the subject of computation.

three axes

decoding

coding

investigating

decoding is going to be about understanding what goes on behind the scenes. what is "the cloud"? what is "artificial intelligence"? what is "user experience"? what is "a platform"? these are all different metaphors that we have started to use in order to refer to layers, or stacks, of technologies that end up being presented and communicated to the broader audience in a simplified manner.
it is about understanding what are all the different dynamics, actors and agendas at play during the creation of technologies, and of services based on these technologies. through this understanding, it becomes easier to see how these technologies affect societies, and how societies can affect these technologies in return (e.g. the NSA has a very keen understanding of internet technologies in order to have a very efficient monitoring program, or the GDPR in the E.U. has been deployed as a response to data breaches that no privacy policy had ever had to take into account before)

coding is going to be the practical component. while code isn't the only thing that makes up "the digital", it is a strange enough artefact that we think it's necessary for you to get a glimpse of what it entails to write code, how easy or how unfamiliar it can be.
beyond this introduction, it is also a way to familiarize yourselves with the specifics of new forms of publishing on the web, in order to understand and use in a relevant way what makes the web such a unique space for creating and distributing knowledge (multimedia, hyperlinks, dynamic content, data processing, etc.)

finally, the investigation is going to allow you to design and implement a sociological inquiry built both on the theoretical foundations of decoding digital culture, and on the the practical foundations of coding digital content. we'll talk more about the specifics of that inquiry later on, but this is essentially the part of the class were you show that you've understood what it means to create and publish knowledge in the 21st century, specifically around the issues of living in a digital world.

two questions

how do digital systems shape us?

how do we shape digital systems?

relying on machines
(hard drives)

cultural norms

instant gratification

u.s. military

governments

digital systems shape us in several ways.

the first one is that information-processing technologies are all essentially extensions of man (mcluhan). they influence the things we can do as humans, and particularly what we can remember. they allow us to externalize knowledge, codify it and therefore transmit it better. because in a post-enlightenment civilization externalized knowledge is the grounds upon which we build the truths of the world we live in.

the second one is that technology, and particularly the practical manifestation of technology known as tools are already in themselves the embodiment of a know-how (weizenbaum). a hammer is a physical embodiment of the act of hitting something into something else. a keyboard is the physical embodiment of an alphabetical script. a certain type of programming language is going to be the (somewhat) physical embodiment of a certain representation of the world.

the last one, which is particular relevant to digital technologies, is the use of psychological techniques in order to trigger dopamine releases in the brains of the consumers (pretty icons, satisfying interactions, endless distribution of addictive content).

on the opposite, the way that we shape digital systems is both concrete and elusive.

concretely, the market economy dictates design and development decisions based on what makes the consumer consume the most. the government bodies issues rules and regulations allowing or banning certain features (google in china, or uber in berlin, for a little bit) and the military funds fundamental research in areas relevant to them.

in a more diffuse way, we shape digital systems through the complex interactions that happen in human societies, and through the myths, practices and manners of doing that we project onto new systems. urban planning regulations can reflect racial biases in a given society (robert moses). the male gaze as a patriarchal social practice was reflected in the design of facebook (kate losse). the political scandals of surveillance lead to new government regulations (again, the GDPR). the need for military reconnaissance leads to the development of computer vision rather than computer speech.

there is no clear-cut boundary between these two dynamics, and understanding digital

culture means understanding how and when each of them are at play.

class website

github.com/periode/digital-culture-2019

this is where you will find all information about the course

this website will be updated every week with class notes, links and any code that we might have written during class.

go to the wiki section (at the top) to find the syllabus, weekly assignments and any resources we've mentioned in class.

break

10'

start thinking about topics related to digital culture that you're interested in

digital inquiry

what?

a question about the consequences of having lives intertwined with digital aparatuses

some original research

a final submission as a website

your digital inquiry should start with a question about how digital technology affects the ways of being and the ways of acting of social groups or how social groups use and influence the development of digital technology.

from that question, you should gather both a bibliography of secondary sources (texts that talk about the issues that you will be working with) as well as primary sources (information that you've gathered on your own, through online forms, interviews, data scraping, etc.).

you will then build up a nuanced and well-fleshed-out argument in order to answer the original question (this is the most sciences po part of it).

finally, you will synthesize all of the above and present it in a digital format, starting from a website and including possible videos, podcasts, graphs, visualizations, etc.

why?

to solidify the knowledge acquired during this class

to practice methods of inquiry (interviews, forms, data science)

to learn the tools of digital publications

this inquiry will allow you to combine both your skills at decoding digital culture and coding digital products in order to produce original and widely-accessible research. on top of the classical methods of inquiry of sociological studies, you are expected to organize and display those results in a digital-first format.

as marshall mcluhan, founder of media studies, famously put it, "the medium is the message"; that is, each means of communication both constrains and enables particular messages. through this inquiry, you will understand and practice the multimedia possibilities

inherent to the web, and not be restricted by static print formats.

how?

web design

audio/video production

programming

web design is the skill and art of the form and content of websites, which we will do in HTML and CSS (see next week). each of you will have to do at least a small amount of those languages for the final exploration, through the fonio platform (fonio.medialab.sciencespo.fr).

your exploration can also include audio and/or video through platforms such as instagram, youtube, soundcloud, are.na, etc.

finally, some programming might be useful for some of your explorations, but the main point of this class is going to be to familiarize you with the basics of programming.

topics

give one or two topics you would be interested in

while you might start with broad topics (data processing, privacy, communities), it is very important to narrow them down to specific issues in identifiable social groups and locations.

from data processing, one could inquire about the profile of data scientists in french startups. from privacy, one could ask questions about the privacy awareness and practices of university students in the campus of menton. from communities, one could look into the whatsapp groups set up by filipino service workers abroad.

groups

groups of 4 maximum

timeline

october 12 - inquiry summary

november 9 - update on your exploration

november 16 - present your inquiry in class

december 8 - submit your final version

the presentation on november 16th will allow you to share the work you've done so far, and to gather feedback from yout peers and your instructor. you will then have until december 8th to implement that feedback -if you wish to do so- and hand in a final version which will then be graded.

inspiration

multimedia

arte - crackopolis

mturk poems

youtube channel - plastic chairs

these are examples of how commercial platforms can be used to broadcast research and highlight topics in non-traditional ways.

the arte podcast is interesting in its form, through the sound design (additional music in the background at the opening and ending) and the editing (just right length of pauses), but also in the organization of content. the episodes are short and thematic, exploring an individual perspective between social needs and phenomena (love, friendship, housing, etc.) and the recurring subject of drug abuse.

the mturk poems uses the instagram platforms in order to highlight in a somewhat more artistic way the labor that goes on unrecognized behind the scenes of the systems we use. for another example, see http://crowdworkersoftheworldunite.com

data visualizations

brian foo - two trains

lev manovich - selfie city

brett victor - ten brighter ideas

nicky case and vi hart - parable of the polygons

data visualizations allow for a more instinctive approach to data, rather than the dry presentation of spreadsheets and tables. while it does not replace rigorous academic methodology and practice, it is a good way to provide your reader with an immediate understanding of what is at stake in the topic which you're about to discuss.

interactive pieces are also becoming more and more popular, since they allow the reader to experiment themselves with the data that is presented to them and to come to their own conclusions with regards to the different situations presented to them. this sort of design

builds from the constructivist learning theory of jean piaget (i.e. learning by doing).

programming

dictator alert

herbicidal warfare in gaza

(lack of) representation of non western world in process of creation of web standards

dictator alert and herbicidal warfare are two projects of how original data can be gathered in order to form evidence with regards to a particular question (for dictator alert) or event (for herbicidal warfare). the point here is to access data streams and correlate them in a way that allows a question to be asked: why are azerbaidjiani government planes landing so often in geneva? why is pesticide being spread out at the border in gaza, seemingly coming from the israeli side of the border?

the third example, while a classic paper, is a very concise exploration into an issue of digital culture. through simple programming, the author gathered email addresses and names of W3C members publicly discussing web standards, and charted their geographical location and gender. spoilers: the internet is made by men from europe and the us.

past semesters

emojis as communication

fashion houses on instagram

these are examples from past semesters, including videos, charts and instagram accounts. other groups worked with podcasts, wordpress websites and twitter accounts.

next week

homework

watch - s1e1, s1e2, s1e4, s1e6

read - a declaration of independence of cyberspace

read - code is law

download - atom

next week we'll discuss the origin of the internet and the different philosophies that have shaped it over three decades. to start the conversation, there are two readings:

- john perry barlow, founding member of activist group "electronic frontier foundation" writes an open letter to the nation-states of the world, stating that cyberspace is off-limits to their jurisdiction.

- lawrence lessing, law professor and creator of creative commons, writes about the two kinds of code that rule the world: east coast code (legal code) and west coast code (machine code), and how both of those enforce and enframe human behavior.