

Gender, Race, and Labor in the Digital World

Design | Cultures & Creativity 106-0301. Honors College. University of Maryland College Park. Spring 2015.
Professor Alexis Lothian.

Unit 2 Project: Detailed Expectations

Basic prompt:

Find a creative way to feel out the limits of your own social networks. What structures your experience in ways you don't usually see? Create an experiment for yourself, carry it out, and report the results. Your report must include text and screenshots; if you like, you can use video or audio recording (include a transcript) as well. This might mean experimenting with what happens to the algorithms that control your feeds when you change your behavior; it might mean tracing the history and origin of a meme; it might mean spending time on a site that you don't typically use; it might mean researching the way your devices, software, or social networks are constructed.

This may be a good project to do in pairs or small groups – discuss this among yourselves and let me know by Friday February 27 if you are planning to collaborate.

Project goals:

1. For you to think critically about the aspects of digital life that rarely get much of our attention, especially the human and machine labor that makes social sharing seem so easy.
2. For you to connect your own everyday digital life with the larger social structures that shape it.
3. For you to develop your skills in asking specific research questions, figuring out creative and ethical ways to answer them.

Project requirements:

Your project should be structured by the following questions:

- **Question.** What is your experiment going to find out?
- **Method.** What are you going to do and how are you going to do it?
- **Hypothesis.** What do you think is going to happen?
- **Documentation.** How will you explain and describe your process and results?
- **Ethics.** How will you make sure that no one is harmed and everyone's privacy is maintained?

Practicalities

This project is very different from your last one in that the methods and tools you will be using are not predetermined. The most challenging part of the project will be determining a research question that will be both interesting and manageable in the time available. Therefore, we will work in stages:

- **Preliminary research topics.** By Wednesday March 3, email me a draft of the research question you are hoping to answer.
- **Preliminary methods.** In class on Wednesday March 3, we will brainstorm as many possible approaches as we can, so that you can develop a sense of how to approach the projects.
- As with your first project, we will have **a workshop in class on Wednesday March 11, then you will post your final version to the blog by Friday March 13.** We will most likely use our workshop day to discuss each project individually with the whole class. Be prepared to explain what you are doing and to have some images of your work in progress to show. Further details on what to bring to workshop day will be given in class on Wednesday March 11.

- **Expectations for final version:** The explanation and documentation of your project and process should be at least 800-1000 words (3 pages) long. Make sure you explain each of the categories above. I also expect you to include visual documentation of what you have done in the form of screenshots or videos. Include at least 4 images.
- Group projects have more creators and should therefore be larger and more complex in scope. You will need to show me why this idea requires the expertise of more than one person, and what each person's role is going to be. For example, perhaps you wish to draw on the programming knowledge, artistic skills, or writerly talent of particular group members. My expectations for group projects in terms of the grading criteria listed below will accordingly be higher for group projects.
- If you choose to work as a group, each collaborator must write their own account of the project, explaining what their particular role was. You may divide the labor of the project report, however. For example, if you are exploring a complex issue, one group member may wish to write their 800-1000 words on the question and hypothesis, while another might focus on the process by which you explored it. Grades for group projects will be partly based on the overall project and partly based on your individual contribution.

Privacy and ethical concerns

Doing a class project on social media brings up a special set of issues. If you carry out your experiment on your own social network, you will be interacting with real people who have feelings and concerns of their own. You must take these seriously! Scholars who carry out social science research must go through Institutional Research Boards for approval of any work with human subjects. You will not be doing that, so it's your responsibility to think carefully about ethical and privacy concerns on your own. Use the following guidelines to help think this through:

- Think ahead of time about whether anything you do for class is likely to impact the people you interact with on social media. Will that impact be mitigated if people know ahead of time that you are doing an exercise for class and your behavior might change? Remember that you can use your final submission to write about an idea you thought of but decided not to do because you thought it might be harmful.
- If you want to include any images of or direct quotations from others' accounts in your post or presentation for class, get permission. Ask the person you are going to quote whether they would like to use their name, a pseudonym, or be anonymous. If

they say no, you can reference what they did or said in very general terms – including their preference not to be included – but you cannot name them or use their words or images directly.

- Consider your own privacy too. While you can make your final submission blog post private, you will have to share the basis of your project with the class on workshop day. If you choose a more personal topic, think about what you can do to make sure you don't share more than you are comfortable with.

- Class input: What other ethical and privacy concerns might come up?

General project grading guidelines (always the same): what I am looking for, in rough order of importance.

1. Thoughtful engagement with course concepts and assignment. Are you following the assignment directions? How vividly can I see the influence of readings and discussions in your work?
2. Nuance and complexity of ideas explored. How deeply are you reckoning with the challenges and contradictions that surround race, gender, and labor in the digital world? Are you pushing beyond what we have covered in class and engaging with these ideas on your own terms?
3. Evidence of effort exerted. Have you put substantial time and energy into this work, researching beyond class material and seeking help with conceptual and technical difficulties as they arose?
4. Originality and imagination. How fresh and exciting are the concept and execution? Is there scope for further development beyond this class?
5. Technical proficiency. How effectively are you making use of the methods you have chosen? This doesn't necessarily mean that your project will be technically elaborate, but that you understand the affordances of the method you are using and are taking advantage of them.

Proudly powered by WordPress