

DIGITAL CULTURE

Fall 2023

COURSE OVERVIEW

What

This course is an introduction to the theory and practice of digital media, of how they affect the formation of human groups, and how are themselves affected by human groups.

Why

Changes in means of communication imply changes in the nature of communication itself, and therefore in the nature of the societies which communicate through these means. The near-ubiquitous presence of computer-mediated communications thus affects the way that humans organize, relate and imagine. As computers are changing us, this class provides the tools to approach and understand the nature of these changes.

How

To do so, this course will proceed along three axes: *decoding*, *coding* and *exploring*. *Decoding* will be a cross-disciplinary approach to the digital, spanning history, sociology, anthropology, media studies, science/technology studies and software studies.

Coding will involve students the practicalities of working with, and creating, digital objects (websites, videos, podcasts, visualizations).

Exploring 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 harnessing the specific affordances of digital media.

GRADING

1. Participation (additional 10 %)

- You are expected to participate during class, through (1) completing and reflecting upon any recommended 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.

2. Individual commentary (30%) - Due on 10/01

By session #4, each member of a group will have to submit a 500-1,000 words web commentary outlining the relationship between the topic of their digital exploration and an article of their choosing. This commentary will be evaluated both on content, with extra points for form, and should include:

- A short presentation of the topic you will, as a group, be working on, including a clearly-defined central question, along with your working research hypotheses and proposed methodologies.
- An analysis of the chosen article, including field, angle, methods and position.
- A review of some of the current debates on the main topic of the article.
- A commentary on what kind of light this article sheds on your proposed exploration.
- Multimedia material (images, sounds, videos) to support and illustrate your point.
- This commentary will have to be presented as a web page, including proper HTML and CSS markup, and possibly JS interactivity.

The submission of the commentary will be done by email, with the subject "Individual Commentary", and including the URL of the webpage where the commentary lives. Any late submission (10/01, by the beginning of class time) will automatically result in a 0.

3. Digital exploration (70%) - Due on 11/26

By the end of the class, you will have produced, in groups from 2 to 4, a study about a practice, a service, a platform, etc. in the digital space. The submission of this exploration will have to be done as a digital-first format. (website, video series, podcast, but also possibly Facebook, Instagram, etc.). This work will include:

- A significant bibliographical and webographical research.
- A presentation of your core question(s) (*problématique*).
- An overview of your methodology (e.g. online interviews, online questionnaires, experimental protocols, online ethnographies).
- Analyses and interpretations.
- 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. The written component of the website should not exceed 4000 words.

WORKLOAD

You are expected to spend between 1 and 2 hours each week on coursework, including preparing any readings, making your website, and making progress on your exploration with your group.

A typical weekly workload will include: one or two readings, and a short response to that reading, and some work on your individual commentary, or group exploration.

CONTACT

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Course website - <https://github.com/periode/digital-culture>

Session 1 - 30/08/2023 – Introduction

In-person

Session overview

This session will focus on covering why this course exists, what are the specific topics it will touch upon, and 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.
 - Hacking the web with the JavaScript console.
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Session 2 - 22/09/2023 - Structure

In-person

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

- **Read** John Perry Barlow, *A Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace* (<https://www.eff.org/cyberspace-independence>)
- **Setup** an account on glitch following the instruction here: <https://github.com/periode/digital-culture/wiki/Setting-up-Glitch.com>

Reading Responses Prompt

- To what extent do you agree with Barlow's? To what extent do you think it is still relevant today?
- How does the Internet bypass (or not) state authority? What about other authorities?

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
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Session 3 - 29/09/2023 - Society

In-person

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-revolution) 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

- **Read** Zeynep Tufekci, *Engineering the Public: Big data, Surveillance and computational politics*
(<https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/4901/4097>)
- **Create** a webpage for your individual commentary on Glitch, including:
 - your research question
 - your research field
 - your research methodology
 - your indicative bibliography

Reading Responses Prompt

- How do you think fake news existed before the Internet? And how did the Internet affect them?
- How have pre-existing systems of public manipulation been affected by networked digital media?

Session breakdown

- Quick roundtable presentation of exploration summaries
 - The Free Software movement
 - Remixing, hacking, glitching
 - The revolution will be live(-streamed)
 - **[Practical]** JS
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Session 4 - 06/10/2023 - Economy

In-person

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.

Homework

- **Read** Shawn Wen, *The Ladies Vanish* (<https://thenewinquiry.com/the-ladies-vanish/>)
- **Read** Alex Rosenblat, *The Truth About How Uber's App Manages Drivers* (<https://hbr.org/2016/04/the-truth-about-how-ubers-app-manages-drivers>)

Reading Responses Prompt

- What are some of the unique features of platform economies?
- Where should the responsibility of a platform stop with respect to the economic activities they enable?

Session breakdown

- Platform capitalism
 - Working below the API
 - Commons-based peer production
 - **[DUE]** Individual commentary
 - **[Practical]** More HTML & CSS, a bit of JS
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Session 5 - 13/10/2023 – Exploration check-in

Online

Session overview

This session will be dedicated to ensuring that all groups have a correct framework, methodology, research questions and methodologies in order to successfully complete their final project.

Homework

- **Prepare** a rough outline of your main research questions, your methodology and selected references. We will discuss those in individual groups.

Session breakdown

- Exercise regarding methodology, hypothesis and research for the final project
 - **[DUE]** Outline of your digital exploration
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Session 6 - 27/10/2023 - Software

In-person

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** Rob Kitchin and Martin Dodge, *Code/Space: Software and the Everyday Life*, (<https://github.com/periode/politics-of-code/blob/master/assets/readings/02-space/CodeSpace.pdf>)
- **Prepare** an update on your digital exploration (things you've done, things you've yet to do, things you're struggling with). Come prepared to discuss it in class.

Reading Responses Prompt

- How is software different from other economic activities? How is it not?

- To what extent do you think that software affects its social/economical/cultural environment? Or the other way around?

Session breakdown

- The history of software
 - The nature of algorithms
 - Interfacing information
 - **[Check-in]** About your digital explorations
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Session 7 - 10/11/2023 - AI

In-person

Session overview

This session will conclude the course by looking at the broad direction in which digital culture is headed due to the recent developments of machine learning techniques, a subset of artificial intelligence research. As machine learning systems open up questions about agency, decision and epistemology in fields as varied as justice, medicine, finance and taste, we will explore its implications for societal organization. The session will conclude with an introduction to the Python programming language, and a demonstration on how to write a simple chatbot.

Homework

- **Read** Julia Angwin et. al., *Machine Bias: Risk Assessment in Criminal Sentencing*, (<https://www.propublica.org/article/machine-bias-risk-assessments-in-criminal-sentencing>)
- **Read** Will Knight, *AI's Language problem* (<https://www.technologyreview.com/s/602094/ais-language-problem/>)

Reading Responses Prompt

- What some of the things we should be concerned about regarding AI?
- What are some of the things we could be looking forward to regarding AI?

Session breakdown

- The history of artificial intelligence
- History of artificial intelligence
- The machine learning breakthrough
- A new kind of decision-making, and decision-vetting
- **[Practical]** Analyzing a simple chat bot

Further references

- **Read** Joseph Weizenbaum, *Computer Power and Human Reason*, W.H. Freeman, 1971.
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Session 8 - 24/11/2023 - Finals

In-person

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.

Homework

- **Prepare** Your final presentation materials, and make sure that your exploration is available online.

Session breakdown

- Final presentations
- Course wrap-up