Digital media and society syllabus: Covering social media, technology and a networked world

This course is organized around the broad question of what journalists should know about the way digital media are reshaping society. To answer this question, it provides a series of foundational readings on the effects of new media on a number of domains of social life, including culture, the economy, privacy, law, politics, social movements and journalism. It is designed to provide journalists covering any of these domains with the knowledge to analyze the development of technology and its continuing impact. Many journalism courses emphasize the craft of new media — the tools and tactics for effective newsgathering, storytelling, engagement, presentation and dissemination — but here we step back and seek to illuminate its social-science dimensions.

Learning objectives
This course introduces journalists to a diverse set of readings about digital media’s impact on social life, and provides a set of exercises designed to help journalists apply the conceptual frameworks and empirical findings discussed in the course to real world events and contexts.

At the end of this course, students will:
- Understand how research data, theory and academic frameworks can inform richer, deeper reporting on issues of technology and society.
- Know the relevant literature in several domains of study relating to new media and society.
- Have a detailed understanding of several research streams.
- Understand how to read research journal articles and books.
- Know how to find relevant academic literature on topics related to new media and society.
- Have a set of skills for writing short, theoretically informed pieces that apply the research literature to real world events and concerns.

Design
To acquaint students with the many domains of digital-media research, this course is broken into 13 sections: media, culture and society; the public sphere; legal contexts of new media and Internet governance; privacy; collective action; activism and social movements; United States institutional politics; journalism; information; youth culture; networked social structure; digital economics; and finally Big Data and the future of computation. There are also weekly writing assignments and a final class assignment.

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Assignments

Readings
This syllabus has a number of article-length texts relating to class topics; these are required readings. To keep minimize costs, we provide open-access links when possible, and nearly all the articles can be obtained through university libraries. For greater depth, there are recommended book-length works listed with each week’s units. One comprehensive, free ebook that can help guide course discussion and activities around these topics is *Searchlights and Sunglasses: Field Notes from the Digital Age of Journalism*, by Eric Newton of the Knight Foundation. Finally, at the back of this syllabus is a list of essential books as well as a larger list of foundational books and articles.

Weekly writing assignments
Throughout the course you are responsible for writing a regular blog post related to each week’s theme. There are specific topics posted, but students can modify them pending approval of the instructor. Posts should provide theoretically informed analysis, interpretation, or original reporting/research about the issues discussed. Your task is to go beyond descriptive daily journalism (what happened) to become more analytical (why and with what consequence). The strongest posts will connect with the readings in the class and academic literature, and have some topical angle that frames the post.

For example, if you decide to write about how conversations on social media took shape around the Boston Marathon bombings during the unit on journalism, you should search for and summarize the academic literature that addresses what we know analytically and empirically about social media and the interactions between professionals and non-professionals in the public sphere. Your work is expected to be part of the wider discussion taking place online and should link to and engage with writings on other blogs. You are free to write using your own voice (i.e., write in the style of an editorial columnist or news analyst), but you should maintain the rigor expected of professional journalistic analysis.

Final project
Students will produce a short five- to eight-page final paper and deliver a five- to ten-minute presentation on a topic related to digital media and society. The paper and presentation should be organized as a more in-depth literature review of scholarly work on your topic. For example, if you choose “Big Data and reporting,” your task is to summarize research on the topic, its politics and how it has been used, as well as the norms, practices and values of the press. The strongest papers and presentations will advance an original argument. In the example above, what have scholars not asked about the relationship between Big Data and journalism? Why should we value journalists making more routine use of data in their reporting and what are the institutional, training, or practice barriers to them doing so?

Weekly schedule and exercises (13-week course)
The assumption of this syllabus is that the course will meet twice a week. It is also assumed that students will have completed at least one basic reporting class before taking this course.
Week 1: Media, culture and society

The effects of the Internet and digital media on society have been debated over the last 20 years. This week takes as its starting point new media defined broadly as networked computing and digital technologies, and considers the relationship between technology and society and the origins of the contemporary information age.

Class 1: New media, culture and society

Readings:

Class 2: Origins and structures of the networked age

Readings:

Assignment:
Write a substantial blog post about the origins and transformation of digital culture. Pick several contemporary topics/areas where the tensions between old and new are evident — where you can see friction between the logic of traditional pre-Web cultural conventions and that of the current digital realm.
Week 2: The public sphere

One of the most studied areas of the effects of digital media on society comes in the context of the public sphere, where debates about its nature and changing shape have been ongoing for almost 30 years. This week focuses on works that provide a set of theoretical and empirical arguments about the consequences of changing technologies on public life and democratic expression more broadly.

Class 1: Framing the debate about the public sphere

Readings:


Class 2: Networked media, information and democratic discussion

Readings:


Assignment:

Review two studies posted at Journalist’s Resource: “Ideological Segregation Online and Offline” and “Political Polarization on Twitter.” In a blog post, analyze discourse around a particular news topic, area or forum on the Web where you see the dynamics of online polarization playing out.
Week 3: Legal contexts of digital media and Internet governance

Digital media are shaped not only by organizing bodies, legal codes and government regulations, but also social norms. This week explores the different aspects of Internet governance and how they impact its shape and structure.

Class 1: Legal Codes, intellectual property and challenges to the system

Readings:


Class 2: Internet Governance

Readings:


Assignment:

Review a study on Journalist's Resource, “Quantifying Global Transfers of Copyrighted Content Using BitTorrent.” Use this study to help inform a blog post analyzing the emerging problems around copyright and larger questions of regulating the Web.

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Week 4: Privacy

Privacy is an important aspect of new media, and it offers a compelling case to explore the contours of the debate over the evolution of social practices, media use, technological capabilities, Internet infrastructures, and the politics of platforms.

Class 1: The law and privacy in a networked age

Readings:


Class 2: The social and technical contexts of privacy

Readings:

- Selections from “What They Know,” series by the Wall Street Journal.

Assignment:


In a blog post, analyze the relevant policy background and, given the social science data presented, the shortcomings of the current law and the merits of proposed solutions.
Week 5: Collective action online

The loss of privacy online — or at the very least the de facto making public of more of our behaviors — has important consequences for how we take action collectively in the networked era. This week we will explore a series of readings on the new face of collective action and changes in the types of organizations that mobilize and coordinate individuals in pursuit of shared ends.

Class 1: Organization-less organizing and the rise of new intermediaries

Readings:

Class 2: Old organizations, new information environments

Readings:

Assignment:
After reading “Online Political Mobilization from the Advocacy Group's Perspective,” interview several digital media specialists at activist/advocacy groups and analyze those organizations’ online strategies. Your analysis should speak to larger themes about the transformation of organizing.
Week 6: Activism and social movements

The lowered cost of collective action, the new social formations this makes possible, and the implications for formal organizations have had tremendous consequences in the domain of social movements. This week looks at the new face of social movements across different institutional and national contexts.

Class 1: Networked media and social movements

Readings:


Class 2: Organizing activism

Readings:


Assignment:
Broaden the previous week's analysis of a few specific advocacy organizations and offer a look at activist media around an entire issue area — for example, human rights or climate change.
Week 7: U.S. institutional politics

From Howard Dean's groundbreaking presidential run in 2004 to Barack Obama's victory in 2008, digital media is transforming political engagement in both expected and unexpected ways.

Class 1: Campaigns in the Digital Age

Readings:

Class 2: From campaigning to governance

Readings:

Assignment:
Choose one of the studies highlighted on the Journalist's Resource article, "Effects of the Internet on politics." In a blog post, use the study as a framework for evaluating the dynamics around an issue currently in the news spotlight, or a particular political campaign or cause.
Week 8: Journalism

While campaign organizations and political offices have undergone significant changes over the past 20 years, they've persisted institutionally. Journalism, however, has undergone rapid and profound shifts. This week looks at some of the shifts in new media and journalism from a host of different cultural, organizational, social and economic perspectives.

Class 1: News and its problems

Readings:

Class 2: The digital dynamics of the news media

Readings:

Assignment:
Review the findings of the study “That’s Not the Way It Is: How User-Generated Comments on the News Affect Perceived Media Bias,” posted at Journalist’s Resource. Write a blog post about the tension between promoting audience engagement and participation and some of the traditional practices and goals of institutional journalism.
Week 9: The politics of information

The politics of information is broader than journalism and extends to governmental information and the platforms for producing, consuming and disseminating information. This week we consider the politics of information historically, and focus on the case of Wikileaks.

Class 1: A history of information

Readings:

Class 2: A case study of WikiLeaks

Readings:

Assignment:
Choose a current controversy that involves the leaking of information to the public through digital means. In a blog post, analyze the issue and link it to the broader discussion about how our “information society” has evolved and the challenges we are likely to face in the future.
Week 10: Digital youth culture

Nowhere is the debate about the effects of new media on society richer than around consideration of the youth who are shaping social movements, civic and political participation and how information and cultural products are produced and consumed. This week explores demographic shifts and changes in media practice in greater detail.

Class 1: Networked social life

Readings:

Class 2: Digital natives

Readings:

Assignment:
Interview a dozen young people about their digital lives. Choose a theme for your questions such as bullying, distractedness, digital divides, information seeking or credibility. In a blog post, review your findings and put them into conversation with the wider research literature.
Week 11: Networked sociality and the research world

The digital generation is driving many changes in society, but a number of scholars see a much broader process of social and cultural change. This week’s readings explore more general shifts in social media and social life. We also examine related findings of social scientists.

Class 1: Structures of Social Life

Readings:


Class 2: Facebook, Twitter and Social Media - Research Findings

Readings:


Assignment:

After reading "Twitter Reaction to Events Often at Odds with Overall Public Opinion," find a thread, topic or hashtag on Twitter in which there appears to be dominant opinions or trends. In a blog post, analyze those trends, look at broader public opinions on the issue, and analyze the differences between the two based on what research has found.

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**Week 12: Digital economics**

A central set of questions relates to the political economies of digital media and the attendant practices individuals craft around them. We consider here the economic value(s) of the key infrastructure providers of networked technologies, the commercial models of emerging platforms from video games to search, and the impact that new media has had on other industries such as the financial sector.

**Class 1: Framing the Debate**

Readings:


**Class 2: Economic models of platforms**

Readings:


**Assignment:**

Review the study “Mobile News: A Review and Model of Journalism in an Age of Mobile Media,” posted at Journalist’s Resource. In a blog post, evaluate the digital business strategy of a particular news organization. Touch on some of the broader theoretical questions about digital commerce.
Week 13: Big Data and the future of computation

This week concludes the course more speculatively with consideration of the emergence of Big Data and the future of computation more broadly. We will discuss the possibilities, and limits, of data, as well as its inherent political aspects.

Class 1: Big data and its politics

Readings:

Class 2: Big Data in political contexts

Readings:

Assignment:
Review “A 61-Million-Person Experiment in Social Influence and Political Mobilization” posted at Journalist’s Resource. In a blog post, analyze the study's results and discuss how the intersection of social media and Big Data could shape the future of society. What are the potential problems? What are the benefits? What might the future look like?
Readings

Essential books

The following are book-length works that speak to core issues touched on in this syllabus. Many are recent works that take the latest digital dynamics into account.

Supplemental reading list

Books


Articles


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• “Open Data Seminar” posts on the Crooked Timber blog.

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