Course Description

This course is an introduction to critical studies of digital culture. Students will learn to analyze the philosophical, political, social and cultural forces that contextualize and are catalyzed by and through the technologies and techniques of digital forms. Throughout the semester we will consider how digital technologies reshape aspects of our daily lives, society and selfhood. Digital media, like all forms of technology, does not exist separate from social life, but emerges through contingent histories, material realities and social networks made up of unequal power distribution. In the first part of this class we will interrogate what is “new” about new digital media forms and how meaning is produced through interactivity. We will unpack how navigation structures, interfaces, algorithms and multiple forms of digital media interact to produce meaning and give truth validity to what circulates online. What are the new ways through which we “read” and interpret digital forms? What are the politics of “the digital”? How can we become critical consumers and producers of digital content and technologies? In the second part of the course we will delve into the material and social reality of digital technologies. We will pay special attention to the ways in which digital media forms reify and/or challenge existing structures of power. To delve into the digital is to realize that form and content, hardware and software, frontend and backend, the offline and the online cannot be easily disentangled. We are not only consuming content but we simultaneously also produce and reproduce it. In order to understand the social, technical and cultural politics of our cellphone use -for example- we need to also make sense of the wave of suicides in Apple factories in China, or the child slave labor used in mining the coltan needed for our iPhones, tablets and laptops. We need to consider how the algorithms that filter everything from our Google and YouTube searches to our shopping preferences
operate by reproducing exclusions and experiences of violence faced by marginalized communities offline and online. How do technologies work, how are they produced, by whom, and under what conditions (Harvey 2014:7)? How does our use of innovative technology elide and contribute to injustices and violences of extractive economies? How can we reconcile these realities with our own user practices and how we both consume and produce meaning through digital media?

While the majority of readings done in class will pay special attention to how ethnography contributes to understanding our relationship to technology, we will also engage with texts from a variety of theoretical perspectives (such as media studies, feminism, STS) that have helped define current understandings of digital cultures. To explore digital cultures and media we need to work with and through digital, technical and technological forms. Each class will be comprised of a lecture, a screening or in-class workshops, and student presentations. Class assignments are designed to merge theory with practice, to help students explore, analyze and apply course concepts through their own participation in digital media forms. The goal of this course is to help us become critical observers and participants in our digital cultures.

Required Readings

-All Readings will be in LATTE

Course Requirements

-Attendance & Participation (Live Class Tweeting): 10%
-Interactive Media Analysis: Bandersnatch: 20%
-Digital Infrastructure Analysis: 25%
-Group Blog: 30%
-Blog Presentations: 15%

Course Schedule

Week 1: Introduction: New Media/Old Media

Thursday, January 17

Discussion of Syllabus

Readings:
Week 2: Analyzing Digital Media

Thursday, January 24

-Digital Media, Selections from Practices of Looking - Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright

-Media Theory - Mark Hansen

-Print is Flat, Code is Deep: The Importance of Media-Specific Analysis - N. Katherine Hayles

-On Software, or the Persistence of Visual Knowledge - Wendy Chun

Screen:

-William Gibson, “Agrippa (a book of the dead)”; The Agrippa Files;
  http://agrippa.english.ucsb.edu/images/video/emulation/agrippa-emulation.mov
  http://agrippa.english.ucsb.edu

-Web 2.0… The Machine is Us/ing Us:
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6gmP4nk0EOE

-Narrating Bits - Katherine Hayles

-Workshop:
  -As We May Think - Vannevar Bush
  https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1945/07/as-we-may-think/303881/

Week 3: The Politics of Interactivity: Non-Linearity

Thursday, January 31

-Soft Cinema - Lev Manovich

-Database as a Symbolic Form - Lev Manovich
- On Politics and Aesthetics: A Case Study of Public Secrets and Blood Sugar - Sharon Daniels
- Network Aesthetics - Warren Sack
- Seeing Revolution Non-Linearly: www.filmingrevolution.org – Alisa Lebow

Screen:
- Blood Sugar - Sharon Daniels
- Public Secrets - Sharon Daniels
- Warren Sack’s work
- Filming the Revolution - Alissa Lebow

****Discuss Bandersnatch Essay

**Week 4: Digital Ethnography/Ethnographies of the Digital**

Thursday, February 7

**Hand-in Bandersnatch Essay

Readings:
- Ethnography Is/Ethnography Ain’t - John L. Jackson
- For Whom the Ontology Turns: Theorizing the Digital Real - Tom Boellstroff
- Experimental Ethnography Online: The Asthma Files - Kim Fortun, Mike Fortun et al
- Unconsented Sterilization, Participatory Story-Telling, and Digital Counter-Memory in Peru - Matthew Brown and Karen Tucker

Screening:
- The Virtual Body: Coming of Age in Second Life https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mmqhgOAY01al
- The Asthma Files
- The Quipu Project

**Week 5: Cyborg Selves: Man/Machine—Becoming User**

Thursday, February 14

- Cyborg Manifesto - Donna Haraway
- Making Kin with the Machines - Jason Edward Lewis, Noelani Arista, Archer Pechawis and Suzanne Kite
User Agency in the Middle Range: Rumors and the Reinvention of the Internet in Accra, Ghana - Jenna Burrell

On “Sorcery”, or Code as Fetish - Wendy Chun

Screening and Discussion:
-Kate’s Project - Sq’ewelets

Workshop: My User Identity

**Week 6: Midterm recess – No CLASS**

Thursday, February 21

**Week 7: The Digital Image**

Thursday, February 28

-Bootlegged: Unauthorized Circulation and the Dilemmas of Collaboration in the Digital Age - Noelle Stout
-What does the photoblog want? - Kris R. Cohen
-In Defense of the Poor Image - Hito Steyerl
-Overcoming Internet Disillusionment: On the Principles of Meme Design - Geert Lovnik
-“La Bola de Cristal”: Puerto Rican Meme Production in Times of Austerity and Crisis - Caroline Gil

Workshop: Memes and GIFs

**Week 8: Social Media: Image and Ideology**

Thursday, March 7

-Social Networking Sites - Daniel Miller
-What is the Social in Social Media? - Geert Lovnik
-Art at Arm’s Length: A history of the Selfie - Jerry Saltz
-I Tweet honestly, I tweet passionately: Twitter users, context collapse, and the imagined audience - Alice E. Marwick and Danah Boyd
-Writing Subjects: Social Media-Inspired Self-Portraits as Gallery Exhibition in Delhi, India - Ethiraj Gabriel Dattatreyan
Recommended:
- Method Without Methodology: Data and the Digital Humanities - Lindsay Caplan
  (On Selfiecity)

Screening:
- Selfiecity: http://selfiecity.net/#theory
- Lauren Greenfield - Selfie

Workshop: Selfie

Additional Resource:
- The Selfie Research Project: http://www.selfieresearchers.com

**Week 9: Ethnographies of Infrastructure**

Thursday, March 14

- The Ethnography of Infrastructure - Susan Leigh Star
- The Black Stack - Benjamin H. Bratton
- Anatomy of an AI: The Amazon Echo as an anatomical map of human labor, data and planetary resources - Kate Crawford and Vladan Joler
- Techniques of the Observer - Hito Steyerl and Laura Poitras (Artforum)
- Hidden Levers of Internet Control: An infrastructure-based theory of Internet Governance - Laura DeNardis

Screening:
Project X – Laura Poitras and Henrik Moltke
https://fieldofvision.org/project-x
Hito Steyerl - How Not to be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File

Workshop: Information System diagram

**Week 10: Technofutures of Capitalism: Race and Technology**

Thursday, March 21

- Racial Capitalism - Cedric Robinson
- Race as Technology - Beth Coleman
Digital Epidermalization: Race, Identity and Biometrics - Simone Browne
- Interfaces of Identity: Oriental Traitors and Telematic Profiling in 24 - Lisa Nakamura
- Google Search: Hyper-visibility as a Means of Rendering Black Women and Girls Invisible - Safiya Umoja Noble

Screening:
- The River Runs Red - Isabelle Carbonelle
- Programmed Visions - Wendy Chun and Reagan Kelly
http://vectors.usc.edu/projects/index.php?project=85

**Week 11: Technofutures of Capitalism: Case Study: Mobile Technology**

Thursday, March 28

- Touched from Below: On Drones, Screens and Navigation - Anjali Nath
- Material Epistemologies of the (Mobile) Telephone - Matthew Hockenberry
- From Digital Divides to Creative Destruction: Epistemological Encounters in the Regulation of the “Blood Mineral” Trade in Congo - Jeffrey W. Mantz

Screen:
Metadata+
Bear 71

Group Blog Presentations

**Week 12: Technofutures of Capitalism: Case Study - Amazon Mechanical Turk**

Thursday, April 4

**** DUE Digital Infrastructure Analysis

- Turkopticon: Interrupting Worker Invisibility in Amazon Mechanical Turk - Lilly C Irani and M. Six Silberman
- Who are the Crowdworkers? Shifting Demographics in Amazon Mechanical Turk - Joel Ross, Lilly Irani, M. Six Silberman, Adrew Zaldivar, Bill Tomlinson
- The Internet is Enabling a New Kind of Poorly Paid Hell - Alana Semuels
- Your Job is About to get Taskified
- Working for the Robocracy: Critical Ethnography of Robot Futures – Samuel Gerard Collins

Screen: https://turkopticon.ucsd.edu (and the short Video)

Group Blog Presentations

**Week 13: Algorithms of Inequality**

Thursday, April 11

- Introduction: The Power of Algorithms – Safiya Noble
- Algorithms and Automation: An Introduction – Ian Lowrie
- From Form to Content – Hamid R. Ekbia and Bonnie A. Nardi
- Exploration or Algorithms? The Undone Science Before the Algorithms – Dawn Nafus
- What Should an Anthropology of Algorithms do? – Nick Seaver

Screen:
We’re Building a Dystopia Just to Make People Click on Ads – Zyne Tufecki

Group Blog Presentations

**Week 14: The Messiness of Software: The Commons and Intellectual Property**

Thursday, April 18

- South Asian Digital Diasporas and Cyberfeminist Webs: Negotiating Globalization, Nation, Gender and Information Technology Design – Radhika Gajjala
- Retiring the Network Spokesman: The Poly-Vocality of Free Software Networks in Peru – Anita Say Chan
- Code is Speech: Legal Tinkering, Expertise, and Protest among Free and Open Source Software Developers – Gabriella Coleman
- Rhetorical Virtues: Property, Speech, and the Commons on the World Wide Web – Rosemary J. Coombe and Andrew Herman
- What is a technological author? The Pirate Function and Intellectual Property – Kavita Philip

Group Blog Presentations
Week 15: PASSOVER AND SPRING RECESS – NO CLASS

Thursday, April 25

Week 16: Social Justice Online: Hacktivism and Social Media Movements

Thursday, May 2 – LAST DAY OF CLASSES

-Our Weirdness is Free: The Logic of Anonymous – Online Army, Agent of Chaos, and Seeker of Justice – Gabriela Coleman
-Nicholas Mirzoeff on What Protest Looks Like
-The Immigrant Rights Movement on the Net: Between “Web 2.0” and Comunicación Popular – Sasha Constanza-Chock
-Reflections on #Occupy Everywhere: Social Media, Public Space and Emerging Logics of Aggregation – Jeffrey S. Juris

Group Blog Presentations

Assignments: Descriptions

Group Blogs:

Students will form 10 groups of five students. Each group is tasked with sustaining a weekly blog for class. You may select whichever platform you are familiar with. Each group will select a theme or concept for the blog, including providing it with a title and visual identity/style. Members of the group will take turns preparing a post. Only one member a week will be in charge of the post (unless there is a class workshop where everyone must post what we worked on), this means that each member will have a total of 3 posts this semester. All posts should respond critically to the concepts, theories, ethnographies, interactive work etc. discussed in class that week. Rather than just handing in a written response, you will divide the weeks and respond to the readings and class discussion through a blog post. Each blog must have a post in each one of these formats:

1. 700 word blog post
2. Critical Meme/GIF response
3. Critical Selfie response
4. Twitter response (300 word)
5- Found video response – or Instastory response
6- 500 word hypertext response: where every sentence needs to link to a source or digital space that speaks to what is being discussed
7- In addition to each one of these, there should be a post sharing whatever was done during a class workshop time by every group member

**Interactive Media Analysis: Bandersnacht:**

Taking into account the methods of digital media analysis discussed in class you will watch Bandersnatch and follow at least three endings. After doing so, you will select two interactive scene sequences to analyze. The analysis will discuss the visual media (mise-en-scene, plot, sound, editing) as well as the narrative pathways, choices and interactive options.

**Digital Infrastructure Analysis**

You will select a digital object of your choice. This assignment builds off the in-class workshop done in week 9. The essay will be 5 pages. This assignment requires you to do some additional research on the production, mechanics and use of the object. This assignment asks you to consider how do we make sense of the selected information/technological system. You may explore this in terms of ecologies, nets, rhizomes or clouds. The essay should provide a sense of the human, institutional, and non-human actors, hardware, software, protocols, and other entangled infrastructures that compose this information system, and the cultures and ecologies that supply and sustain it.