Digital Media and Culture

Dr. Laura DeNardis
Associate Professor of Communication Studies

COURSE OVERVIEW

This course critically examines the central role digital media technologies play in culture and society. Digital media provide the structures in which individual identity is formed, social relations manifest, political discourse occurs, and economic power flows. These technologies are such a pervasive and integral part of society it can be difficult to even distinguish social structure from forms of digital communication.

Section I of the course – Introduction to the History and Theory of Digital Media – introduces historical scholarship about the rise of the digital era and core theoretical concepts explaining linkages between cultural and technological constructs. Section II – Identity, Culture, and Community – addresses individual identity formation in digital media, community and audience construction online, visual culture and the digitization of race, and issues of gender and gendered identities in new media. Section III – The Digital Political Sphere – introduces theoretical readings about the networked public sphere, the relationship between media and democracy, and the political effects of various forms of civic media. Section IV – Digital Knowledge Economies – examines theories of digital knowledge production, the changing nature of media industries, and the culture and politics of online reputation economies. The final section – Digital Media, Power, and Social Control – examines how the same digital technologies that provide opportunities for cultural and economic liberty also constrain culture and innovation. Topics include restrictions on media freedom online, digital infrastructure and barriers to equality, and privacy and surveillance.

You will be encouraged to think critically about each of these conceptual areas, challenging prevailing theories and research about the nature of digital media and formulating your own theoretical beliefs about the reciprocal relationship between digital media and culture.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

- Gain exposure to theories of digital media.
- Examine the historical events that led to the rise and expansion of digital media.
- Deconstruct the role new digital technologies play in shaping, and being shaped by, culture, new business models, and society.
- Examine contemporary public policy debates shaping the global digital media system in the 21st century.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

You will succeed in mastering this course if you thoughtfully read all required material prior to each class meeting and are fully engaged in class discussions. You will be expected to submit two brief analysis
pieces and participate in a group project. Mid-term and final exams will be given and will be based on discussion questions posted on Blackboard throughout the semester. Grades will be calculated as follows:

**Two Brief Analysis Pieces (20%)**
You will have the opportunity to write two short analysis pieces reacting to a question about a contemporary issue in digital media and culture. Each post should be 500 words and must be submitted by midnight on the day they are due.

**Reading Quizzes (10%)**
At various times throughout the semester, unannounced quizzes will be given to assess your comprehension of the readings for that day. Quizzes will focus on the main points of the reading. No make-up quizzes will be possible, so unexcused absences and late arrivals will result in a zero if a quiz falls on that day.

**Participation in Class Discussions (10%)**
Please come to class prepared to discuss the week’s reading assignments. Grades will reflect attendance and active participation in every class discussion. You will lose one letter grade in this area for every unexcused class absence.

**Group Presentation (10%)**
As part of this course, teams of students will take respective field trips to selected Washington, D.C. exhibits that address the role of digital media processes in society. Each team of students will give in-class group presentations about the topic. Exhibit options will vary by semester but will include options such as:
- “Weapons of Mass Disruption” at the Spy Museum
- “News and Press Freedom around the Globe” and “Chronicling an Attack on America” in the 9/11 Gallery at the Newseum

**Mid-Term Exam (15%); Final Exam (25%)**
Mid-term and final exams will be based on discussion questions posted throughout the semester. Each exam will include short essay questions and each exam will count toward 25% of final grades. Study guides for the mid-term and final exams will be available on Blackboard.

**Social Media Content Creation (10%)**
You will be expected to contribute to the class Twitter hashtag before and during each class.

**Grading Scale**
Letter grades will be distributed on the following scale:

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<th>Score Range</th>
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<tr>
<td>94-100</td>
<td>A</td>
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<td>90-93</td>
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<td>87-89</td>
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<td>84-86</td>
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<td>80-83</td>
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Academic Integrity
Standards of academic conduct are set forth in the University's Academic Integrity Code. By registering, you have acknowledged your awareness of the Academic Integrity Code, and are obliged to become familiar with your rights and responsibilities as defined by the Code. Violations of the Academic Integrity Code will not be treated lightly, and disciplinary action will be taken should such violations occur. Please see me if you have any questions about the academic violations described in the Code in general or as they relate to particular requirements for this course.

ABOUT THE INSTRUCTOR

Dr. Laura DeNardis is a professor of Communication Studies at American University in Washington, DC. Dr. DeNardis is a globally recognized Internet governance scholar whose research addresses Internet policy and technical design issues related to innovation and freedom of expression online. Her books include Opening Standards: The Global Politics of Interoperability (MIT Press 2011); Protocol Politics: The Globalization of Internet Governance (MIT Press 2009); Information Technology in Theory (Thompson 2007 with Pelin Aksoy); and a forthcoming Yale University Press book on Global Internet Governance. She is a Fellow of the Yale Information Society Project and the Vice Chair of the Global Internet Governance Academic Network (GigaNet). DeNardis earned a PhD in Science and Technology Studies from Virginia Tech, an MEng from Cornell University, an AB in Engineering Science from Dartmouth College, and was awarded a postdoctoral fellowship from Yale Law School.

Course Schedule and Reading Assignments

SECTION I. INTRODUCTION TO HISTORY AND THEORY OF DIGITAL MEDIA

Historical Foundations of New Media

- Vannevar Bush, “As We May Think,” 1945.

An Introduction to Theories of Technology and Society

Section II. Identity, Culture, and Community

Digital Identity Formation

- Sherry Turkle “Who am we? We are moving from modernist calculation toward postmodernist simulation, where the self is a multiple, distributed system,” Wired Issue 4.01, 1996. Available online at http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/4.01/turkle_pr.html.


Digital Media, Community and Culture

- Sherry Turkle, Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less From Each Other, Basic Books, 2011. (Selected Excerpts)


Visual Culture and the Digitization of Race


**Digital Media and Gendered Culture**


**SECTION III. THE DIGITAL POLITICAL SPHERE**

**The Networked Public Sphere**

- Jurgen Habermas, “The Transformation of the Public Sphere’s Political Function” (Read section 20 only) in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, 1962, pp. 181-195. (Reading available on Blackboard)

**Media and Democracy**


Civic Media


SECTION IV: DIGITAL KNOWLEDGE ECONOMIES

Social Production of Knowledge


Digital Media Economies


• Clay Shirky, “Everyone is a Media Outlet,” Chapter 3 in *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing without Organizations*, The Penguin Press, 2008. (Reading available on Blackboard)

**Online Reputation Economies**


**SECTION V. DIGITAL MEDIA, POWER AND SOCIAL CONTROL**

**Restrictions on Media Freedom Online**


**Digital Infrastructure and Equality**


• Ed Felten, “Nuts and Bolts of Network Neutrality.” Princeton Center for Information Technology Policy. Reading available on Blackboard.

Surveillance and Privacy


- Siva Vaidhyanathan, The Googlization of Everything and Why We Should Worry, University of California Press, 2011. (Selected Excerpts)


Emergency Preparedness for Disruption of Classes

In the event of an emergency, American University will implement a plan for meeting the needs of all members of the university community. Should the university be required to close for a period of time, we are committed to ensuring that all aspects of our educational programs will be delivered to our students. These may include altering and extending the duration of the traditional term schedule to complete essential instruction in the traditional format and/or use of distance instructional methods. Specific strategies will vary from class to class, depending on the format of the course and the timing of the emergency. Faculty will communicate class-specific information to students via AU e-mail and Blackboard, while students must inform their faculty immediately of any absence. Students are responsible for checking their AU e-mail regularly and keeping themselves informed of emergencies. In the event of an emergency, students should refer to the AU Student Portal, the AU Web site (www.prepared.american.edu) and the AU information line at (202) 885-1100 for general university-wide information, as well as contact their faculty and/or respective dean's office for course and school/college-specific information.

Disability Support

If you experience difficulty in this course for any reason, please don't hesitate to consult with me. In addition to the resources of the department, a wide range of services is available to support you in your efforts to meet the course requirements.

Academic Support Center (x3360, MGC 243) offers study skills workshops, individual instruction, tutor referrals, and services for students with learning disabilities. Writing support is available in the ASC Writing Lab or in the Writing Center, Battelle 228.

Counseling Center (x3500, MGC 214) offers counseling and consultations regarding personal concerns, self-help information, and connections to off-campus mental health resources.

Disability Support Services (x3315, MGC 206) offers technical and practical support and assistance with accommodations for students with physical, medical, or psychological disabilities. If you qualify for
accommodations because of a disability, please notify me in a timely manner with a letter from the Academic Support Center or Disability Support Services so that we can make arrangements to address your needs.