

ANTH 2540/UGEC 2665
Summer Term 2025
Monday + Thursday: 10:30 – 12:15 pm (Lecture)
Monday + Thursday: 12:30 – 13:15 pm (Tutorial)
Venue: NAH 213

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Office Hours: By Appointment

Social Media and Culture

Human life without and outside of social media and digital technology has become almost unthinkable. Today, we literally hold the world in the palm of our hands: Mobile devices enable us to access the knowledge of generations through one click; chat simultaneously with friends all over the globe; organize protests or dance performances in a flash; instantaneously transfer money or gamble it away; lose ourselves in virtual worlds of adventure, sex, and magic; share our apartments, ideas, music, or meals; collaborate, innovate, and imitate. Yet, despite these seemingly endless possibilities, social media also generates exclusions of access; hierarchies of attention and perception; technologies of surveillance, tracking and tracing; and new modes of economic exploitation, or of racist and gendered violence!

This course encourages the students to research, question, and critically analyze this social mediation of human life, the new technologies of society, and the virtual forms of the body and self! We therefore will engage social media through the anthropological perspective that aims to understand what makes us human but also how we make the diverse cultural meanings and practices that constitute our differences.

The course links cutting edge ethnographic materials and anthropological concepts together to provide an opportunity for students to reflect personally on their own experiences and engage the world and communities around them. How has technology and how will technology continue to shape your lives? How does social media create interfaces and linkages around you? What are the technological, political and economic institutions that condition socially mediated lives and communities? What are the possibilities of daily practices to change the technologies of social media? How does social media structure and enable collective engagement? As an anthropology course, this course also will provide: **1)** Theoretical foundations and practical research tools that will be invaluable both for students to understand the changing worlds we all live in; and **2)** for students interested in careers in software, hardware, or other online-related businesses to understand the “social” side of social media and digital technology.

We will read a diverse array of qualitative and ethnographic research on attention, algorithms, embodiment, gaming, hackers, politics, hate, war, digital labour, and surveillance that explore the diverse, multiple and conflicting “culture(s)” of social media and digital technology. The readings serve as models of online social research that provide examples of methodology and research design to learn and practice techniques of online fieldwork and referencing.

Learning Objectives:

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

- describe and explain key anthropological theories and concepts for understanding the complex relationships between technology and society or culture.
- describe key examples of the wide variety of different social media platforms, of the different ways that different groups around the world use social media platforms, and of the ways that social media impacts larger cultural and societal developments.
- describe the history of social media and explain the various ways social media is rooted in other techno-social developments around the rise of the Internet.
- identify the ways that social media has changed with the introduction of mobile and other devices.
- analyze the ways that social media-related technologies affect and shape issues well beyond its bounds including notions of gender, identity, surveillance, activism, copyright, and social relationships.
- show, paradoxically, how technologies of communication are shaped by culture, both through its production and its ongoing use by people from a variety of cultures, even as culture is shaped by technologies.
- design a research plan on a selected issue or case in cyberspace that incorporates anthropological methods, questions, and concepts.
- write about the ways that people are making use of cyberspace and incorporating it into their new or already existing different cultural practices.
- write about their experiences with and in cyberspace in ways that enable those experiences to better illuminate critical theoretical concepts we encounter in class.

Course Format:

This course is conducted in lecture and tutorial format. The lecture will discuss and introduce the required readings, but it will not give a detailed summary of the readings. It is therefore essential that you do the required readings before class and come prepared with questions and comments. All required readings will be made available as PDFs on Blackboard. The lecture will be interactive with room for your questions and discussion. The tutorial is an extension of the lecture based on the student’s needs and interests. The tutorial will also facilitate the preparation of the final project proposal.

Physical presence in all lectures and tutorials is a basic requirement for this course. Excused absences are generally only permitted with a medical doctor's note or in case of a personal emergency. If you have to miss class, please e-mail me beforehand. It is your responsibility to obtain notes from your fellow students about the missed sessions. There will be no transcript of the lecture or tutorial provided afterwards, so please take notes.

Requirements and Assessment:

The following are the required assignments that will be graded.

1. **Reading Responses and Participation (20 %):** You are expected to do the readings and come to all lectures and tutorials. I strongly encourage you to ask questions and participate in discussion. You are also welcome to e-mail me questions or comments before or after class.
To help you engage the readings, you will have to submit three reading responses (see blackboard for deadlines). These are short questions about or critiques of the readings (no summary). Reading responses should not be longer than 100 – 150 words each.
2. **Midterm Exam (40%):** The Midterm-Exam is a take-home exam will give you two questions to choose from and answer in essay form (1000 - 1200 words). The questions will test the student's understanding of the anthropological perspective on social media and culture, and ask students to be able to think of and formulate examples based on their own interest. Submit your Midterm essays as a word-document on blackboard and attach the signed veriguide report. Midterm questions will be posted on May 29th (due on Tuesday, June 3rd by midnight).
3. **Site-based Final Essay (40 %):** This assignment asks you to write a site-based essay as exploration of the themes of our course. You will have to find a site for social media research and do some preliminary research/exploration. A site should be online, and can range from specific platforms, individual influencer accounts, to groups on specific platforms, or analysis of interactions across platforms and apps. The final essay should be between 1500 – 2000 words (excluding references). Submit your Final Essay as a word-document on blackboard and attach the signed veriguide report. The Final Essay is due on **Friday, July 4th (by midnight)**. You will meet with the instructor in the first half of the course to discuss your site and idea. You will also need to present your site in class.

VeriGuide requirements: Students are required by university policy to submit all exam papers to VeriGuide (https://academic.veriguide.org/academic/login_CUHK.aspx). An exam (midterm and final) assignment without a signed declaration from VeriGuide will not be graded.

AI Policy: All use of Generative AI is forbidden and will lead to an F (and will be reported)

Grade Descriptors:

- A:** Outstanding performance on all learning outcomes.
- A-:** Generally outstanding performance on all (or almost all) learning outcomes.
- B:** Substantial performance on all learning outcomes, OR high performance on some learning outcomes which compensates for less satisfactory performance on others, resulting in overall substantial performance.
- C:** Satisfactory performance on the majority of learning outcomes, possibly with a few weaknesses.
- D:** Barely satisfactory performance on a number of learning outcomes.
- F:** Unsatisfactory performance on a number of learning outcomes, OR failure to meet specified assessment requirements.

Policies and Support:

- **Technology Use:** This course obviously encourages the use of digital technology and devices. While such technology (laptops, tablets, smart phones) is an important tool to aid learning, please be respectful and do not distract yourself and your fellow students. Students are only allowed to use their tablets or laptops in class to take notes and access social media if necessary for the learning objectives of the course. Please do not use your devices for non-class related activities. Mobile phones must be turned on silent (not vibrate).
- **Educational Technology:** This class relies on the use of Blackboard. All required class readings, the out-of-class assignment submissions, as well as announcements will be done through it. Note that it uses the email address assigned to you by the University, so it is your responsibility to have an electronic mail forwarded to your main email address.
- **Respectful Conduct and Discussion Rules:** We will discuss many interesting and important topics. While I encourage thoughtful, engaged, and controversial discussion, I expect you to be polite and respectful of your classmates' opinions, limit your statements to academic (not emotional) arguments, and not use offensive language or judgmental statements. Please give each other time to talk, do not interrupt, and most importantly listen to each other.
- **Late Submission:** Late submission will suffer a fraction of a grade per day. For example, an A will become an A-.

- **Academic Honesty and Plagiarism:** Academic honesty is crucial and plagiarism is a serious offense. The university has recently updated its policies on Academic Integrity and the penalties for plagiarism and cheating:
http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/policy/academichonesty/Eng_hm_files_%282013-14%29/p06.htm. You are required to cite properly (guidelines: <http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/ant/tstyle.doc> and http://www.ilc.cuhk.edu.hk/english/resource/referencing_avoidingplagiarism1.pdf) to avoid plagiarism. Please do not hesitate to talk to me and ask questions about this.
- **Independent Learning Center:** If you need help with communication and learning skills, the University has a great resource for you. You can schedule a consultation or attend workshops on various strategies for improving learning outcomes
<https://www.ilc.cuhk.edu.hk/EN/mission.aspx>
- **Special Accommodation:** If you need special accommodations or classroom modifications, you need to notify both me and the University's Wellness and Counseling Center (<https://www2.osa.cuhk.edu.hk/disability/en-GB>) no later than the third week of class.

Class Schedule

1st Session, Monday (May 12): Introduction: Why Social Media? Why Culture?

No readings

2nd Session, Thursday (May 15): The Innovation of Social Media

Miller, Daniel. 2016. *Social Media in an English Village*. London. UCL Press: Pp. 1 – 44.

3rd Session, Monday (May 19): Media Landscape and Social Interaction

Taylor, Nicole & Mimi Nichter. 2021. "Media Landscape". In: *A Filtered Life: Social Media on a College Campus*. New York. Routledge: Pp. 28 – 54.

3rd Session, Thursday (May 22): Contested Lives: Public/Private, Addiction, and Surveillance

boyd, danah. 2014. *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens*. New Haven. Yale University Press: Pp. 54 – 100.

4th Session, Monday (May 26): Virtual Worlds

Boellstorff, Tom. 2008. *Coming of Age in Second Life*. Princeton University Press. Princeton: Pp. 3 – 17.

Rudyansjah, Tony and Pradipa P. Rasidi, 2022: “Virtual embodiment in physical realities Brand buzzers and disciplined bodies in an Indonesian cyberscape. In: *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 12 (2): 436–452.

6th Session, Thursday (May 29): Bodies and Embodiment

Taylor, Nicole & Mimi Nichter. 2021. “The Body Imperative”. In: *A Filtered Life: Social Media on a College Campus*. New York. Routledge: Pp. 88 - 123.

+ Posting Midterm Exam Questions (Due on Tuesday, June 3 before midnight)

7th Session, Monday (June 2): Platform Economy

In class movie: “The Gig is Up” (2021) + discussion

8th Session, Thursday (June 5): Attention Economy

Marwick, Alice. 2015. “Instafame: Luxury Selfies in the Attention Economy”. In: *Public Culture* 27: 137–160

+ *Post about project idea (due Monday, June 9 before class)*

9th Session, Monday (June 9): Digital Commodification

Jourdain, Anne, & Naulin, Sidounie. (2024). “Cooking and Crafting in a Digital Economy: The Effects of Online Commodification on Leisure Activities”. In: *Cultural Sociology*: 1-21.

10th Session, Thursday (June 12): Whose Work; Whose Data?

Gershon, Livia. 2019. We All Work for Facebook. Digital labor is valuable even when we do it for free. Should we get paid? <https://longreads.com/2019/04/26/we-all-work-for-facebook/>

An interview with McKenzie Wark (The Hacker Manifesto): <https://intertheory.org/wark-ruiz.htm>

11th Session, Monday (June 16): Politics and Narrative I

Bjork-James, Sophie. 2020: “Racializing misogyny: Sexuality and gender in the new online white nationalism”. In: *Feminist Anthropology*: 1- 8

12th Session, Thursday (June 19) Politics and Narrative II

Kuntsman, Adi and Rebecca Stein. 2015. *Digital Militarism: Israel’s Occupation in the Social Media Age*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. Pp. 1 – 17, 39 – 54 (chapters 1 + 3).

13th Session, Monday (June 23): Algorithms, Culture, and Power

Umoja Noble, Sofiya. (2018). *Algorithms of Oppression*. New York. New York University Press: Pp. 15 – 45.

Rosenberg, Louis. 2023: “The creepiness of AI has been put on full display”. In: *Big Think*: https://bigthink.com/the-present/danger-conversational-ai/?utm_medium=Social&utm_source=Facebook&fbclid=IwAR1FAmWd49jl_AJuc8xnoThLnVHoOQfIDPMuxKcuksSu96d0UPrZDC7QESk&mibextid=Zxz2cZ#Echobox=1676592366

14th Session, Thursday (June 26):

Student Presentations on Final project + Final Discussion

+++ *Final Essay due on Friday, July 4 (by midnight)* +++