

ANTH 2540/UGEC 2665
Term 2, 2021/22
Monday: 3:30 – 5:15 PM (Lecture)
Tutorial: 5:30 – 6:15 PM
Venue: Tsang Shiu Tim Bldg 312

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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 (post-)human 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. **All majors are welcome: from anthropology to humanities, social sciences, marketing to communication students and from computer science and engineering students to those from other sciences backgrounds.**

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.

The course is divided into four modules. The first module provides the basics of thinking about social media and digital technology from an anthropological perspective. The second module presents qualitative and ethnographic research tools to engage and analyze the social relationships and communities on- and offline. The final two modules are loosely structured around specific themes. We will read a diverse array of qualitative and ethnographic research on attention, algorithms, sex, gaming, hackers, politics, hate, war, open source sharing, digital labour, and surveillance that explore the diverse, multiple and conflicting “culture(s)” of social media and digital technology. The ethnographic 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 interactive explorations of our social media habits, relations, and entanglements.

In case you have to miss class, please also 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. **Out-Of-Class Assignment and Participation (15 %):** 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 apply the topics and readings to your social media experience, you will have to finish **one** out-of-class assignment and may be asked to present it during class. For this assignment you have to find a socially mediated source. This can be a viral video, game challenge, discussion thread, open source software, etc. As part of this assignment you will have to write a short accompanying note that links to or provides description of what you found, how this is something of social media and interesting to the course! This note should be less than 500 words. Post this note and the source on blackboard (in the discussion forum thread). Your 'Out-Of-Class' assignment has to be submitted anytime **after week 1 and before week 14** of the course. Please note that you will have to submit your own assignment, no group work!

2. **Midterm Exam (35 %):** The Midterm-Exam is based on the first two modules of the course. The questions will be handed to you in class (7th week: Feb 21st). This is a take-home exam. It consists of two questions to be answered in individual essays (each answer between 500 – 600 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. Please send your paper as a word-document from your CUHK e-mail account to the instructor. The deadline for the instructor to receive the e-mail is **Monday, February 28th by noon.** Please label the document: "LastName_FirstName_Midterm."

3. **Final Project (50 %):** The Final Project is an informed research project outline. You will have to find a site for social media research and do some preliminary research/exploration of this site. For the final project paper (1500 – 2000 words) you will have to present the site, define problems of social media to be explored there, give a research question, explain what methods you would use to answer this question, and give a short outlook (based on your preliminary research) on how the

possible answers connect to the readings/topics we explored. The final project paper is due on **Sunday, May 15th before midnight** via e-mail. Please send your paper as a word-document from your CUHK e-mail account to the instructor. Please label the document: "LastName_FirstName_FinalProject". Before the final paper, you will have to provide a short proposal of what site you will explore (by March 14) and you will give a short presentation of your project in the last week of class.

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

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.

Module I: Basics

Week 1 (January 10): Introduction: Why Social Media? Why Culture?

Recommended:

Miller, Daniel and Heather Horst. 2012. "The Digital and the Human: A Prospectus for Digital Anthropology." In Heather Horst and Daniel Miller eds., *Digital Anthropology*, New York: Berg: Pp. 3-37.

Week 2 (Jan 17): The Innovation of Social Media

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

Week 3 (Jan 24): Algorithms, Culture, and Power

Umoya Noble, Sofiya. (2018). *Algorithms of Oppression*. New York. New York University Press: Pp. 15 – 63.

Ongweso Jr., Edward (2020): “Google’s Firing of an Ethics Researcher Shows the Limits of Having ‘a Seat at the Table’”. In: *Vice.com* (December 9, 2020):

https://www.vice.com/en/article/epdpwn/googles-firing-of-an-ethics-researcher-shows-the-limits-of-having-a-seat-at-the-table?utm_content=1607470201&utm_medium=social&utm_source=MOTHERBOARD_facebook&fbclid=IwAR2InQgVHl4_GKOQyHFObhXM-TMYUDGE4lojWEYxPeDhRvpSWwnsMKZrxOM

+++ Week 4 (Jan 31): No Class because of Lunar New Year Vacation +++

Week 5 (Feb 7): Contested Lives: Boundaries of 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.

Module II: Doing Research on Social Media and Virtual Worlds

Week 6 (Feb 14): Netnography

Kozinets, Robert. 2010. *Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online*. London: Sage. Pp. 1-17 + 58 - 73.

Week 7 (Feb 21): Virtual Worlds and Ethnography

Tom Boellstorff, 2008. *Coming of Age in Second Life*. Princeton University Press. Princeton: Pp. 3 – 32.

+++ Handing out questions for midterm exam paper (due on Feb 28 by noon) +++

Interlude

Week 8 (Feb 28): Social Media as Dilemma

In class movie: “The Social Dilemma” (2020)

Module III: Matters and Content of Social Media

Week 9 (Mar 7): Body and the Self

Abidin, Crystal, and Joel Gwynne. 2017. “Entrepreneurial Selves, Feminine Corporeality, and Lifestyle Blogging in Singapore.” *Asian Journal of Social Science* 45(4-5): 385-408.

Jacobs, Katrien. 2012. *People's Pornography: Sex and Surveillance on the Chinese Internet*. Chicago: Intellect. Pp. 131 – 146 (chapter 4).

Week 10 (Mar 14): Attention Economy and Content Production:

Marwick, Alice. 2015. "Instafame: Luxury Selfies in the Attention Economy". In: *Public Culture* 27(1 75). Pp. 137–160.

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/>

+++ Deadline to submit short proposal (appr. 500 words) for final project (by noon) +++

Week 11 (Mar 21): Digital Labor and Digital Money

Schwartz, David. 2018. "Embedded in the Crowd: Creative Freelancers, Crowdsourced Work, and Occupational Community". In: *Work and Occupations* 45 (3). Pp. 255-282.

Interview: Koray Caliskan on Blockchain Technology and Cryptocurrencies. In: *Accounts* (Spring 2020).

Module IV: Politics

Week 12 (Mar 28): Politics and Narrative

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

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).

+++ Week 13 (Apr 4): No Class because of Reading Week+++

Week 14 (Apr 11): Hacker Practice and Ideology

Coleman, Gabriella and Alex Golub. 2008. "Hacker Practice: Moral Genres and the Cultural Articulation of Liberalism." In: *Anthropological Theory* 8. Pp: 255-277.

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

+++ Week 15 (Apr 18): No Class because of Easter Monday Holiday+++

Week 16 (Apr 25 +++ Make-up session): What now?

Short student presentations on final project + Final discussion

+++ Final Project due on May 15th +++