DEPARTMENT OF
GEOGRAPHY AND PLANNING

GPHY 401- Honours Seminar in Human Geography 1: Critical Geographies of the Digital Urban

Contact Time	2 x 1.5hr seminars
Format	Seminar discussions, project-based learning
Class Assessment	Participation; presentation; reading reflections; final event (subject to change)

COURSE OVERVIEW

In many ways our urban lives seem thoroughly digital – we navigate city space through Google maps, click through dating app profiles to see who's nearby, order food from online platforms like Skip the Dishes. Recent events have brought to the fore some of the concerns with how the digital is becoming enrolled in cities: in Los Angeles, the policing apparatus has enrolled Waymo driverless vehicles into surveillance of protestors, while drones have been spying on drivers in Kingston to catch distracted behaviour. Large data centres at the fringes of cities and in urban areas use massive amounts of fresh water while xAI operates polluting gas turbines in South Memphis. Landlords, too, are beginning to use digital algorithms to score potential renters and surveil tenants. In this course we seek to firmly emplace, ground, and spatialize geographies of the digital through cities and processes of urbanization. Drawing on concepts developed over the course of an undergraduate degree in geography, we'll materialize the cloud by thinking with geographers and critical journalists who interrogate the environmental impact of data centres on urban life; the labours involved in creating artificial intelligence databases; the types of discriminations built into urban policing hot-spotting systems; the warfare and destruction of cities wrought through AI targeting; and the effects of the digital – and especially artificial intelligence – in our own lives. We'll also pay particular attention to how people use digital technologies in the face of violence in order to protest technofascism and protect one another.

COURSE TOPICS

data colonialism; platform urbanism; algorithmic bias; racial capitalism; technofascism; data grabbing; digital revolutions; urban metabolism; environmental racism; urbicide and genocide; surveillance; sanitation

COURSE READINGS

Attoh K, Wells K, Cullen D (2019) "We're building their data": Labor, alienation, and idiocy in the smart city. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 37(6): 1007–1024.

Caprotti F, Liu D (2022) Platform urbanism and the Chinese smart city: The co-production and territorialisation of Hangzhou city brain. *GeoJournal* 87(3): 1559–1573.

Couldry N and Mejias U (2024) *Data Grab: The New Colonialism of Big Tech and how to Fight Back*. The University of Chicago Press

Datta, A. and Muthama D. M. (2025) Peripheralised Labour: The digitisation of Nairobi's land information system, in Datta, A. and Hoefsloot, F. eds. *Informational Peripheries: Rethinking the urban in a digital age*. London: UCL Press.

Hogan M (2015) Data flows and water woes: The Utah data center. *Big Data & Society* 2(2): 2053951715592429.

Levenda AM, Mahmoudi D (2019) Silicon forest and server farms: The (urban) nature of digital capitalism in the pacific northwest. *Culture Machine* 18: 1–14.

Nowak, S. (2023). The social lives of network effects: Speculation and risk in Jakarta's platform economy. *Environment and Planning A*, 55(2), 471-489. https://doi.org/10.1177/0308518x211056953

While AH, Marvin, Kovacic M (2021) Urban robotic experimentation: San Francisco, Tokyo and Dubai. *Urban Studies* 58(4): 769–786.