

Advanced Studies of Information & Communication Technology

PANDEMIC EDITION

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SOCY 422
Fall 2020

Readings, office hours & TA info posted on onQ
Optional Q&A sessions will be held via Zoom on Mondays, 9am EST

Course description

Popular and scholarly accounts of information and communication technology in the 1990s were optimistic about information and communication technologies, for example in terms of productivity or about their liberatory potentials. The hope was that because bodies would 'disappear,' so would traditional markers of difference: race, gender, sexuality, class, and ability would become more malleable, more open to playful re-interpretation, or even become irrelevant. Work, it was said, would become more efficient through the introduction of ICTs and thereby improve working conditions and quality of life. More recent scholarship takes a much more critical stance towards information technology. Not only have ICTs not fulfilled their promise, some are exacerbating social and economic inequalities. From hate speech over filter bubbles to precarious labor, data-driven technologies interlock across institutions and produce and reproduce social problems in the process. At the center of these developments is what scholars sometimes call "digital capitalism," a set of large-scale economic transformations which exploit the pervasive digitization of contemporary societies. This course focuses on the dynamics and consequences of digital capitalism in relation to social stratification and inequality. In the first part of the course, we will examine some of the more salient characteristics and dynamics of digital capitalism. The second part of this course will then focus on the ways in which digital capitalism produces, reproduces, and thrives on social inequalities in a range of different institutions. The aim of this course is thus to provide students with a 'big picture' view on how seemingly disparate information technologies form vast infrastructures across institutions, and how they are bound together by longstanding politico-economic processes.

Course schedule

Week	Dates	Topics
1	Sept 14	Introduction
*	***	Part I: History, epistemology, institutions
2	Sept 21	Data, categories, and problems of knowing
3	Sept 28	Digital capitalism I: Organizations & institutions
4	Oct 5	Digital capitalism II: Data, markets, stratification
*	***	Part II: Social problems in the digital age
5	Oct 12	Capitalizing on hate: The economic value of attention
6	Oct 19	Capitalizing on conflict I: The political value of (dis)information
7	Oct 26	Fall mid-term break (no class)
8	Nov 2	Capitalizing on conflict II: The complicated nature of networked protest
9	Nov 9	Capitalizing on inequality: Job ad & hiring algorithms
10	Nov 16	Capitalizing on trauma: Lower Ed
11	Nov 23	Capitalizing on poverty: The state and social services
12	Nov 30	Capitalizing on carcerality: PredPol and e-carceration
13	Dec 7	What now? Some questions about regulation

Learning objectives

Through this course, you should gain:

- an *appreciation* of the ambivalent role of technology for liberatory purposes;
- *knowledge and understanding* of different conceptualizations of technology in relation to power and politics, and the longstanding societal dynamics which undergird them;
- *critical thinking skills*: the ability to identify and describe key questions and concerns about the various ways in which technologies may be involved in maintaining or disrupting social order.

Organization

Instead of the weekly seminar, we will organize the course into pre-recorded brief lectures in which I explain key concepts, synchronous Q&A sessions which will be recorded for those who can't make them, asynchronous discussion forums, and media engagements (e.g. documentaries, podcasts, movies, etc.). For the Q&As, you will be able to post questions to a

discussion board, and I will answer your questions in tutorials. Those who will not be able to attend can post their questions ahead of the meeting and see a recorded version of the Q&A session later.

I have posted detailed instructions for how to navigate the weekly course content on onQ, but in general, the succession is as follows: start by watching/listening to the media (documentaries, podcasts). The media pieces will help you make the week's topic concrete and illustrate the significance of the scholarship you will be reading. Then do the readings and take notes. Then watch the prerecorded lectures which will explain and clarify a key concept/idea related to the readings. Post any remaining questions you might have to the discussion board and attend/listen to the Q&A session which we will hold live in the Monday timeslot. The Q&A sessions will be recorded for those who can't attend synchronously. Finally, complete the reading quizzes, to consolidate what you've learned, and think critically about its significance.

To help you stay on top of the content, I have punched in all due dates and deadlines into the onQ calendar. You can set up reminders through onQ as well, so that you get an email or a text message for each upcoming due date.

Expectations & assignments

The course is more reading intensive than usual, because there are so many interesting new books and articles coming out at the moment that I want to discuss with you. To offset the higher reading workload, written assignments are shorter than usual; but more will ride on your ongoing engagement with the readings. All assignments are submitted through onQ, and you can find the exact due dates there as well.

- *Weekly reading reflections.* Each week I will post a quiz with 2–3 questions to onQ. I expect you to demonstrate that you have read the text, that you have understood the basics of the author's argument, and that you can generate some questions about the argument's conceptual and/or practical implications.
- *Presentation or podcast.* You will record a brief presentation or produce a podcast episode (ca. 10–15 mins) in which you'll analyze a current event or controversy related to the topic of the week you're assigned to. You can go wild here! You can render the presentation in a classic academic format with slides, but you're also welcome to produce a podcast episode for a wider audience, or a fictional news report—as long as the piece centers on an analysis of processes related to digital technologies, power, and inequality. You may use this presentation to build up to the final written assignment.
- *A book review* of one of the following books (but do ask me if you'd like to review a different book, there are so many cool books coming out right now):
 - Benjamin, Ruha (2019). *Race after Technology. Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code.* Medford, MA: Polity.
 - Costanza-Chock, Sasha (2020). *Design justice. Community-led practices to build the worlds we need.* Cambridge MA: The MIT Press.

- D'Ignazio, Catherine and Lauren Klein (2019). *Data Feminism*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Eubanks, Virginia (2017). *Automating inequality. How high-tech tools profile, police, and punish the poor*. First Edition. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.
- Jefferson, Brian Jordan (2020). *Digitize and punish. Racial criminalization in the digital age*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Noble, Safiya Umoja (2018). *Algorithms of oppression. How search engines reinforce racism*. New York: New York University Press.
- Richardson, Allissa V. (2020). *Bearing Witness While Black*. Oxford University Press.
- Roberts, Sarah T. (2019). *Behind the screen. Content moderation in the shadows of social media*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

The review is 900-1100 words in length excl. references, double-spaced. These books explore several of the themes of this course, and your task is to assess the book you choose with the knowledge you learn here. The purpose of a book review is not (only) to summarize the content of the book, but to situate its merit and to critically evaluate the author's purpose, claims, methods, and evidence. I will evaluate how well you are able to comment on (a) how convincing the authors present their claims, as well as on (b) the book's import to our understandings of the politics of data and data science in society.

- An *op-ed* (ca. 750–900 words) on current issues or developments related to course topics. An *op-ed* is an brief but *informed* opinion piece meant to convince a broader audience of your perspective on a current debate. I will evaluate (a) how well you justify the relevance of your topic; (b) how well you articulate the point you're arguing; and (c) how well you articulate specific recommendations that follow from your argument.

Grading, submission & deadlines

All written assignments have to be submitted through onQ. The late penalty is 5% per day (but see below for academic considerations and accommodations which are a little more relaxed during this pandemic). Grading and due dates are as follows, but see the onQ course calendar for exact deadlines:

Grade component	Due dates	Weight
Reading reflections	weeks 3–13	25%
Presentation	weeks 3-13	25%
Book review	week 7	25%
Op-ed	week 13	25%

For your final grade, your numerical course average then will be converted to a letter grade according to the Queen's Official Grade Conversion Scale.

Grade	Numerical Range	What these numbers mean in plain English
A+	90-100	
A	85-89	"very good work"
A-	80-84	
B+	77-79	
B	73-76	"good work"
B-	70-72	
C+	67-69	
C	63-66	"satisfactory work"
C-	60-62	
D+	57-59	
D	53-56	"pass"
D-	50-52	
F	49 and below	"unsatisfactory work"

Readings and resources

All readings will be available via onQ. Note that this material is copyrighted and is for the sole use of students registered in the course. This material shall not be distributed or disseminated to anyone other than students registered in the course. Failure to abide by these conditions is a breach of copyright, and may also constitute a breach of academic integrity under the University Senate's Academic Integrity Policy Statement.

Copyright of Course Materials

Course materials created by the course instructor, including all slides, presentations, handouts, tests, exams, and other similar course materials, are the intellectual property of the instructor. It is a departure from academic integrity to distribute, publicly post, sell or otherwise disseminate an instructor's course materials or to provide an instructor's course materials to anyone else for distribution, posting, sale or other means of dissemination, without the instructor's express consent. A student who engages in such conduct may be subject to penalty for a departure from academic integrity and may also face adverse legal consequences for infringement of intellectual property rights.

Academic Integrity

Queen's students, faculty, administrators and staff all have responsibilities for supporting and upholding the fundamental values of academic integrity. Academic integrity is constituted by the five core fundamental values of honesty, trust, fairness, respect and responsibility (see www.academicintegrity.org) and by the quality of courage. These values and qualities are central to the building, nurturing and sustaining of an academic community in which all members of the community will thrive. Adherence to the values expressed through academic integrity forms a foundation for the "freedom of inquiry and exchange of ideas" essential to the intellectual life of the University (see the [Senate Report on Principles and Priorities](#)).

Students are responsible for familiarizing themselves with the regulations concerning academic integrity and for ensuring that their assignments and their behaviour conform to the principles of academic integrity. Information on academic integrity is available in the Arts and Science Calendar (see [Academic Regulation 1](#)), on the [Arts and Science website](#), and from the instructor of this course. Departures from academic integrity include plagiarism, use of unauthorized materials, facilitation, forgery and falsification, and are antithetical to the development of an academic community at Queen's. Given the seriousness of these matters, actions which contravene the regulation on academic integrity carry sanctions that can range from a warning or the loss of grades on an assignment to the failure of a course to a requirement to withdraw from the university.

Be especially mindful of unintended plagiarism. Regardless of how and where you retrieve information, the principles of academic integrity apply. Please visit these helpful websites to help you make sure that you are able to write things in your own words:

- Resources from [Queen's University](#)
- Resources from [MIT](#)
- Resources from [The University of Wisconsin](#)

Accommodation for disabilities

Queen's University is committed to achieving full accessibility for people with disabilities. Part of this commitment includes arranging academic accommodations for students with disabilities to ensure they have an equitable opportunity to participate in all of their academic activities. If you are a student with a disability and think you may need accommodations, you are strongly encouraged to contact the Queen's Student Accessibility Services (QSAS) and register as early as possible. For more information, including important deadlines, please visit the QSAS website.

Academic considerations for students in extenuating circumstances

Queen's University is committed to providing academic consideration to students experiencing extenuating circumstances that are beyond their control and are interfering with their ability to complete academic requirements related to a course for a short period of time.

The Senate Policy on Academic Consideration for Students in Extenuating Circumstances is available [here](#).

Each Faculty has developed a protocol to provide a consistent and equitable approach in dealing with requests for academic consideration for students facing extenuating circumstances. Arts and Science undergraduate students can find the Faculty of Arts and Science protocol and the portal where a request can be submitted at: <http://www.queensu.ca/artsci/accommodations>. Students in other Faculties and Schools who are enrolled in this course should refer to the protocol for their home Faculty.

If you need to request academic consideration for this course, you will be required to provide the name and email address of the instructor/coordinator. Please use the contact information given at the beginning of this syllabus.

Course schedule & readings

Sept 14: Introduction

- Barlow, John Perry (1996). A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace.
- Wired staff (2016). "Dear Internet: It's Time to Fix This Mess You Made". In: Wired.

Sept 21: Data, categories, and problems of knowing

- D'Ignazio, Catherine and Lauren Klein (2019). Data Feminism. Cambridge: MIT Press. Prepare the following chapters:
 - "Introduction"
 - "Chapter Three: What Gets Counted Counts"
 - "Chapter Seven: The Power Chapter"

Sept 28: Digital capitalism I: Organizations & institutions

- Rahman, K. Sabeel and Kathleen Thelen (2019). "The Rise of the Platform Business Model and the Transformation of Twenty-First-Century Capitalism". In: Politics & Society 47.2, pp. 177–204.
- Srnicek, Nick (2017). Platform capitalism. Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity, Ch. 2. "Platform capitalism."
- Zuboff, Shoshana (2015). "Big other. Surveillance capitalism and the prospects of an information civilization". In: Journal of Information Technology 30.1, pp. 75–89.

Oct 5: Digital capitalism II: Data, markets, stratification

- Fourcade, Marion and Kieran Healy (2017). "Seeing like a market". In: Socio-Economic Review 15.1, pp. 9–29.
- Couldry, Nick and Ulises A. Mejias (2018). "Data Colonialism. Rethinking Big Data's Relation to the Contemporary Subject". In: Television & New Media 33.4, pp. 1–14.
- Sadowski, Jathan (2019). "When data is capital: Datafication, accumulation, and extraction". In: Big Data & Society 6.1, pp. 1–12.

Oct 12: Capitalizing on hate: The economic value of attention

- Jane, Emma Alice (2014). “‘Back to the kitchen, cunt’. Speaking the unspeakable about online misogyny”. In: *Continuum* 28.4, pp. 558–570.
- Roberts, Sarah T. (2015). “Commercial Content Moderation. Digital Laborers’ Dirty Work”. In: *The intersectional Internet. Race, sex, class and culture online*. Ed. by Safiya Umoja Noble and Brendesha M. Tynes. New York: Peter Lang, pp. 147–160.
- Gillespie, Tarleton (2018). *Custodians of the internet. Platforms, content moderation, and the hidden decisions that shape social media*. New Haven: Yale University Press, “The myth of the neutral platform.”

Oct 19: Capitalizing on conflict I: The political value of (dis)information

- Noble, Safiya Umoja (2018). *Algorithms of oppression. How search engines reinforce racism*. New York: New York University Press, “Searching for people and communities.”
- Vaidhyanathan, Siva (2018). *Antisocial media. How facebook disconnects us and undermines democracy*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, “The Politics Machine.”

Oct 26: Fall mid-term break (no class)

Nov 2: Capitalizing on conflict II: The complicated nature of networked protest

- Tufekci, Zeynep (2017). *Twitter and tear gas. The power and fragility of networked protest*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, “Platforms and algorithms.”
- Richardson, Allissa V. (2020). *Bearing Witness While Black*. Oxford University Press, “Looking as Rebellion.”

Nov 9: Capitalizing on inequality: Job ad & hiring algorithms

- Bertrand, Marianne and Sendhil Mullainathan (2003). *Are Emily and Greg More Employable than Lakisha and Jamal? A Field Experiment on Labor Market Discrimination*. Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research.
- Ajunwa, Ifeoma (2020). “The Paradox of Automation as Anti-Bias Intervention”. In: *Cardozo Law Review* 41.
- O’Neil, Cathy (2016). *Weapons of math destruction. How big data increases inequality and threatens democracy*. New York: Crown, “Ineligible to serve: Getting a job.”

Nov 16: Capitalizing on trauma: Lower Ed

- O’Neil, Cathy (2016). *Weapons of math destruction. How big data increases inequality and threatens democracy*. New York: Crown, “Propaganda machine: Online advertising.”

- Cottom, Tressie McMillan (2017). Lower ed. The troubling rise of for-profit colleges in the new economy. New York: The New Press, "Introduction," "Jesus Is My Backup Plan," "Credentials, Jobs, and the New Economy."

Nov 23: Capitalizing on poverty: The state and social services

- Eubanks, Virginia (2017). Automating inequality. How high-tech tools profile, police, and punish the poor. First Edition. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, "Introduction," "High-tech homelessness in the City of Angels."
- Jefferson, Brian Jordan (2020). Digitize and punish. Racial criminalization in the digital age. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, "Computation and Criminalization."

Nov 30: Capitalizing on carcerality: PredPol and e-carceration

- Brayne, Sarah (2017). "Big Data Surveillance. The Case of Policing". In: American Sociological Review 82.5, pp. 977–1008.
- Wang, Jackie (2018). Carceral capitalism. Cambridge: MIT Press, "Introduction" (read pp. 34-51).

Dec 7: What now? Some questions about regulation

- Noble, Safiya Umoja (2018). Algorithms of oppression. How search engines reinforce racism. New York: New York University Press, "Searching for protection from search engines."
- Pasquale, Frank (2015). The black box society. The secret algorithms that control money and information. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, "Watching (and improving) the watchers."