Social Dynamics of the Internet

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<th>Academic Year</th>
<th>2017-18, Michaelmas Term</th>
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<tr>
<td>Day and Time</td>
<td>Mondays, Weeks 1-8, 9:00 – 10:30</td>
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<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Lecture Theatre, St Cross College, Oxford, OX1 3LZ</td>
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<tr>
<td>Course Providers</td>
<td>Professor Ralph Schroeder, Oxford Internet Institute, <a href="mailto:ralph.schroeder@oii.ox.ac.uk">ralph.schroeder@oii.ox.ac.uk</a></td>
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<td>Professor Gina Neff, Associate Professor and Senior Research Fellow, Oxford Internet Institute, <a href="mailto:gina.neff@oii.ox.ac.uk">gina.neff@oii.ox.ac.uk</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Teaching Assistant(s)*</td>
<td>Pu Yan, DPhil Student, Oxford Internet Institute, <a href="mailto:pu.yan@oii.ox.ac.uk">pu.yan@oii.ox.ac.uk</a></td>
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<td>Thomas Flavel, DPhil Student, Oxford Internet Institute, <a href="mailto:thomas.flavel@sant.ox.ac.uk">thomas.flavel@sant.ox.ac.uk</a></td>
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<td>Prerequisites</td>
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*Comments and enquiries in the first instance to the course Teaching Assistant(s).

Background

The Internet has fundamentally transformed aspects of society in recent decades. This course will examine some of the main areas of change, including political communication, connectedness in everyday life, and digital divides. The course will examine several digital technologies including smartphones and social network sites. In each case, a key question is: do digital media reinforce, reconfigure, or challenge existing cultural, economic and political dynamics? The course takes a global perspective, going beyond the United States to the rising giants of India and China. In these countries, smartphones rather than fixed lines and television provide the main means of internet access for much of the population, so the implications are quite different. One aim of the course is to understand new media in the context of some of the major current debates in the social sciences; globalization, democratization, and divides in access to information.

This course will provide an overview of the major findings from the research on the social implications of the internet within several social science disciplines, including communication studies, sociology, anthropology and political science. A further aim of the course is to identify the overlaps and divergences among different research approaches. Finally, the course aims to give students who come from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds a common grounding in research on the Internet, its social shaping and impact. It will also introduce some of the main theoretical traditions in the social sciences, and assess their strengths and limitations in relation to analysing the Internet.

Key Themes

Three key themes will run through all the topics discussed in this course, and students are expected to bear these in mind when undertaking course readings or attending classes:

1. Do online relations depart from, reflect, or complement offline social structures?
2. How do different scholarly disciplines contribute to our understanding and knowledge of the social implications of the internet? What are the assumptions made, and how powerful—or uncertain—are the findings? Are the findings from different disciplines complementary, or at odds with another?

3. How can we measure, observe, or assess the impacts and effects of digital technology? How useful are comparisons to older media technologies and where do those comparisons break down?

Course Objectives
The course will identify the strengths and weaknesses of different social science approaches. It will cover major theoretical debates and the empirical evidence that is needed to assess them. The course will range across some key topics—including the role of information and communication technology in everyday life, digital divides between developed and developing societies, and the relation between the internet and other technologies such as mobile phones—in order to illustrate the breadth and variety of substantive areas of study of the internet.

The course will also introduce the different social science disciplines and theories that address the social implications Internet and related information and communication technologies. These include media and communications, politics, sociology, and anthropology. Theories include social shaping and technological determinism, social network analysis, and medium theory. By the end of the course, students will have a thorough understanding of the main perspectives and key findings about the social implications of the Internet and other new media technologies.

Learning Outcomes
At the end of the course students will:

- Identify major theories and debates about new information and communication technologies and social change
- Identify where insights from across the social sciences overlap or diverge
- Relate a number of substantive topics that will be relevant for research on many aspects of Internet studies
- Relate social science theories on the Internet to policy questions and students’ own developing research questions about an internet-related topic.

Teaching Arrangements
The course will be taught during Michaelmas term in eight weekly classes, each consisting of a lecture followed by seminars with student presentations and discussion. There will also be bi-weekly workshops of one hour that will be led by a teaching assistant addressing examination preparation.

Students will have weekly written assignments before each session in answer to questions posed for each week, based on the key readings, which will be reviewed during the seminar sessions or submitted to the convenors or the teaching assistant.

Students are required to write one short (1,500–3,000 words) essay on any of the 8 topics covered. This formative essay will provide a means for students to obtain feedback on the progress they have achieved but does not contribute to the final grade for the course.

Note
Students should note that over the course of the year, small changes may be made to the content, dates or teaching arrangements set out in this reading list, at the course provider’s discretion. These changes will be communicated to students directly and will be noted on the internal course information website.
Assessment
The course will be formally assessed by an examination of three hours that will take place in the 0 week of Hilary term. The examination will consist of eight questions of which any three must be answered. (Please note that the assessment for this course is different for DPhil students. DPhil students should please refer to the Graduate Studies Handbook for guidance).

Any student who fails the examination will need to follow the rules set out in the OII Examining Conventions regarding re-sitting failed examinations.

Topics
1 Oct 9       Theories of Society and the Internet
2 Oct 16      Globalization and Domestication
3 Oct 23      Gender and Inequality
4 Oct 30      Mobile Phones, the Internet, and Perpetual Contact
5 Nov 6       The Politics of Data & Algorithms
6 Nov 13      Cultures of Production of Digital Technologies
7 Nov 20      The Politics and Economy of Attention
8 Nov 27      The Internet and Democracy

General Readings

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Selected Internet Resources

Pew Internet and American Life Project [http://www.pewinternet.org/index.asp](http://www.pewinternet.org/index.asp)
World Internet Project [http://www.worldinternetproject.net/](http://www.worldinternetproject.net/)

Key to Readings
A reading list is given below for each class. Those items marked with an asterisk (*) are essential reading and MUST be read by all students in preparation for the class. Items which are not marked with an asterisk are additional readings which need only be consulted in the preparation of student presentations or for essays.

Week 1: Theories of Society and the Internet
Theories about the social implications of the internet at the macro-level have emerged in sociology and media and communication studies. This lecture will introduce a range of these, including medium theory, social versus technological shaping, and social network analysis. Is it useful to speak of the
power of new media, or if the self has changed in a network society? Where do technological
determinism and the social shaping of technology depart from each other in understanding the
implications of the Internet? Is it possible to distinguish new from old media?

Question: How do different social theories explain the asymmetries of power relations brought about
by information and communication technologies in contemporary societies?

* Neumann, Russell W. The Digital Difference: Media Technology and the Theory of
Communication Effects. 2016. Cambridge MA: Harvard University
Press.


Hjarvard, Stig The mediatization of society: A theory of the media as agents of social


Fischer, Claude S. America Calling: A Social History of the Telephone to 1940 Social.

Society, pp.1-17.


Week 2. Globalization and Domestication

We all use a number of media on to maintain our relationships on a day-to-day basis. The
‘domestication’ theory of ICTs proposes that users shape new technologies by embedding them in
their everyday lives. This perspective focuses on the social relations around ICTs in the home and
changing patterns of, for example, time use and mobility. From this perspective, how do the uses of
the Internet compare with the uses of telephones, mobile phones, television, and other new media?

There are now also extensive cross-national studies of the uses of the Internet and other ICTs. There
are ever denser global social networks, but how do media fit into theories of globalization? To what
extent is it possible to answer a basic question such as whether the internet and other ICTs
homogenize social relations or make them more diverse across the globe?

Question: How might we study or measure the uses of the internet in everyday life? Are the uses of
the internet and ICTs converging or diverging in the developed world? Are digital technologies helping
to make social practices around the world more similar or are social differences being reinforced?

* Haddon, Leslie Domestication Analysis, Objects of Study, and the Centrality of
Technologies in Everyday Life, Canadian Journal of Communication.

* Norris, Pippa
Inglehart, Ronald Cosmopolitan Communications: Cultural Diversity in a Globalized World.

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<td>Law, Ginette; Dutta, Soumitra</td>
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**Week 3: Gender and Inequality**

New media change how people develop and present their social identities. Some scholars have termed the process of merging social worlds online “context collapse,” although other scholars caution falling into the conceptual trap of “digital dualism,” reifying the arguably non-existent gap between online and offline worlds. How does self-presentation intersect with existing gender inequalities and how do these changes compare internationally? Are there ways that women are excluded from online public spheres? Digital media are more than their use. How does who makes digital technologies shape the cultures of their use? How do the definitions of who can be considered ‘techie’ change over time?

Question: How do the production, use, and redefinition of digital technologies alleviate gender inequalities and how do they exacerbate them?

*Miller, D. et al.*  

*Hicks, Marie*  

*Ullman, Ellen*  

Pearce, K.E. & Vitak, J.  
Performing Honor Online: The affordances of social media for surveillance and impression management in an honor culture. 2015. *New Media & Society*.

Rosner, D. K., & Fox, S. E.  

Massanari, A.  

boyd, danah  
Week 4: Mobile Phones, the Internet, and Perpetual Contact

Mobile phones are becoming a complement to other forms of computer-mediated communication, and are themselves a means of maintaining ‘perpetual contact’. In some parts of the world, mobile phones have become much more rapidly diffused than other digital technologies. In some places mobile phones are more commonly used for emails and access to internet information than computers are. Are mobile phones an indication of convergence of practices globally? How do theories of ritual interaction and social cohesion compare with theories of multimodal connected presence in assessing the effects of mobile phones? This session will compare the internet and mobile phones as well as examining the social implications of mobile telephony.

Question: Does mobile communication reinforce social cohesion?


Week 5: The Politics of Algorithms and Data

Algorithms and big data are increasingly shaping our connectedness to others and to information. How are social media implicated in the political economies of personal data? What are the emerging concerns that algorithm ways of knowing replace other types of knowledge or judgement and at what costs to concepts of civic engagement, publics, and social justice?

Question:

Week 6: Organizations, Institutions and the Political Economy of the Internet

Does the internet enable new forms of organization with new possibilities and challenges for work and economic life or are existing types of economic power amplified? What roles do networks and platforms play in emerging structures of economic life? How might we study the emerging organizational and institutional arrangements that support the digital economy? This week’s readings look both different approaches to understanding the production of the internet and at how the internet and digital technologies afford new ways of organizing work.

Question: How do this week’s readings differ in the implications of their theories for studying organizations, social institutions, and power within the digital economy?


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<td>Page, K. L.</td>
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**Week 7: The Politics and Economy of Attention**

Digital media increasingly measure audiences: not just clicks, but how long people stay on sites and how they navigate across content. Do media systems, the boundaries of nation-states, shape information, or do digital media, including search engines and social media, do so? As online media increasingly replace offline ones, is there a greater concentration of what people attention to, or more diversity? How do search engines shape access – via link structure, dominance of certain markets, or user skills (or lack thereof)? What are the commercial imperatives of digital media companies in an increasingly competitive online environment? Finally, how do uses of information in everyday life help us to understand this changing landscape? Some have argued that we are subject to an information overload, but empirical research has not borne this out, despite a far greater abundance of information sources. Means to access the Web, reconfiguring knowledge and information in the process. A number of studies have found that, rather than democratizing the sources of information, search concentrates attention on a few dominant sites. How do search engines shape access – via commercial dominance, link structure, or user skills (or lack of skills)? Can theories of gatekeeping, and of ‘domestication’, shed light on how search shape the dissemination of information and ways in which information is used in everyday life? This session will provide an overview of search engine uses and findings about their implications.

**Question:** What shapes peoples’ attention online – their choices and needs, or socio-technical media systems?

*Webster, James.*  

*Vaidhynathan, Siva*  

Neuman, Russell et al.  

Schroeder, Ralph  
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**Week 8: The Internet and Democracy**

Political communications research has a number of well-established research traditions and concepts, including theories of ‘gatekeeping’ and ‘agenda setting’. Does a greater diversity of content and of media channels affect political opinion? Does the Internet offer new choices and enhance diversity, or does it fragment and homogenize news and political opinion? The US is often seen as exemplary, but how representative are its media institutions? And can it be expected that new social media enhance democratization processes? In this respect, we shall put the US into the context about democratization (and its absence) in other parts of the world.

Question: ‘How do digital media enhance democracy? Discuss with reference to the case of any one country’.

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