

Digital Civil Society:
The 2010s and the Future of Technology and Civil Society

COMM 230C / CSRE 230C
Spring Quarter 2020

3 units

Speaker Series (+1): Tuesday, 5:30-6:50pm

Seminar: Wednesday, 1:30-3:20pm

Students are not required to attend digital meetings in real time

Course Description

Between 1990 and 2010, civil society activists, organizations, and policymakers adopted digital tools into every aspect of their work. The general zeitgeist held that digital software and hardware were democratizing, cost-efficient, and helpful. The Arab Spring was met with a peak of enthusiasm, and then began a decade-long shift as the sector began to consider the harms that these tools, and our dependencies on them, enable and accelerate. Even as that reckoning is still unfolding, voluntary associational actors are adapting to the rise of pervasive DNA testing, artificial intelligence and automated decision making tools, biohacking, cryptocurrencies, and other digital developments. In the Spring Quarter, we examine emerging technologies, civil society's slowly growing responses to digital dependencies, and what the ever shifting technological terrain might mean for policy, organizational practice, and social norms.

In a short three decades we've seen the hope for digital networks shift from liberating and democratizing to an anxious age of surveillance capitalism. How did this happen, what's being done about it, and what does it mean for democratic governance and collective action in the future? The class examines the ways in which digital technology shapes how we communicate, organize, advocate, and engage with each other in markets, politics, and civil society. We will focus on the ways digital networks and technologies have changed how people come together to make change in the world, a sphere of action commonly called the social sector.

This is a year-long course, designed and offered as three independent quarters. Fall quarter focuses on the 1990s — the popular adoption of the internet in the northern hemisphere, the development of international digital networks, the creation of anchor digital civil society organizations (such as the Electronic Frontier Foundation and the Internet Archive), the emergence of the digital economy and the dot com bubble, global shifts in journalism coverage, key technology legislation and legal battles over free expression. Winter quarter shifts to the 2000s — the emergence of social media platforms, the rise of mobile connectivity, institutional shifts in journalism, and major developments in intellectual property, state surveillance, and digital activism. In the Spring Quarter, we focus on the 2010s and the future, from the Arab Spring and global political propaganda to electronic governments and biotechnologies. Across all three quarters, we will analyze the opportunities and the challenges to associational life, free

expression, individual privacy, and collective action. We will examine the technological, organizational, legal, economic, and social shifts that have accompanied our growing global dependence on digital networks. The class draws from law, media studies, political science, and history, bringing in research perspectives from Europe, the U.S, and African scholarship.

The spring quarter section, 230C, is a required course for CCSRE undergraduate fellows as they prepare for their summer internships. It is also an opportunity for students to meet and learn with the Digital Civil Society Lab's nonresident fellows. For more information on these fellows, see the Lab's [website](#).

Course Objectives

- Critique common assumptions about the democratizing nature of digital technologies and develop informed arguments about the threats to civil society and civil society's responses.
- Understand the impact of national and international laws and treaties on both the marketplace that shapes digital networks, software and hardware and on the nature and possibilities of associational life and political and civic activism.
- Be familiar with the different approaches to these issues taken by historians, media scholars, legal scholars, journalists, and political scientists.
- Understand the interactions between digital technology, markets, politics, and civil society.
- Formulate historically-informed arguments on whether or not we should put normative constraints on digital technologies to strengthen civil society.
- Draft original writing on digital civil society topics and incorporate peer-review feedback.
- Critique work presented by peers with an eye to strengthening the quality of the scholarship.
- Apply theoretical concepts to practical applications, workshop and present ideas relevant to the application of the class themes to the real world.

Meeting Schedule and Grading

This is a 3 unit class, including one weekly seminar of 2 hours and a mandatory public speaker series (Digital Civil Society +1 Series, Comm 230 X). Students will not be required to digitally attend seminar meetings but will be required to watch virtual instruction videos on their own time and complete the associated tasks by the deadline stated in that week's session notes. Students are encouraged to attend the +1 speaker series and, if they cannot attend, are required to watch the recorded video and respond to discussion questions. The course is credit/no credit for the spring quarter.

Grading Breakdown

Participation (completion of weekly discussion tasks): 40%
Assignments (three over the course of the quarter): 60%

Assignments

Assignment 1 (due April 20th)

Pick a practice that people are doing in response to covid-19 that involves the use of private resources for public benefit. How is this practice related to the triplex of government, market, and civil society? How is this practice related digital technology?

For example, a personal trainer is hosting workout sessions on his roof for quarantined neighbors. By offering free workout sessions, the trainer is turning the market practice of personal training into a free public service. The trainer might inspire other trainers to follow suit by posting online videos.

Other examples:

- People posting videos of themselves reading children's stories
- People purchasing gift cards from restaurants for later use
- Business owners giving out free toiletries to those in need

Submit a written response (one-page double-spaced) or a presentation (10 minutes).

Assignment 2 (due May 11th)

Track the development of the practice that you discussed in Assignment 1. Create a digital portfolio of the practice *or* reflect on how it has been taken up or how it has fizzled out. For example, collect videos of people hosting personal training sessions and compile them into a YouTube playlist, or write an analysis (one page double-spaced) of how the practice has developed over time.

Assignment 3 (due June 4th)

[Details pending health situation]

Students with Documented Disabilities

Students who may need an academic accommodation based on the impact of a disability must initiate the request with the Office of Accessible Education (OAE). Professional staff will evaluate the request with required documentation, recommend reasonable accommodations, and prepare an Accommodation Letter for faculty. Unless the student has a temporary disability, Accommodation letters are issued for the entire academic year. Students should contact the OAE as soon as possible since timely notice is needed to coordinate accommodations. The OAE is located at 563 Salvatierra Walk. Phone: 723-1066. URL: <https://oae.stanford.edu/>.

Instructor Virtual Office Hours

Lucy Bernholz (bernholz@stanford.edu)

- By appointment
- Standing Zoom meeting availability, Wednesdays 12:30-1:30pm (except May 15).

Virtual office hours: <https://stanford.zoom.us/j/7222356995>

Toussaint Nothias (tnothias@stanford.edu)

- By appointment (preferred time is usually 1.30/2pm on Thursday).
- Email to arrange a virtual meeting.

Jonathan Pace (jonathanpace@stanford.edu)

- By appointment
- Standing Zoom meeting availability, Mondays 12-1pm.
Email for Zoom link.

Argyri Panezi (argyri@stanford.edu)

- By appointment
- Standing Zoom meeting availability, Mondays 1-2 pm.
Email for Zoom link.

Cadence Willse (cwillse@stanford.edu)

- By appointment
- Standing Zoom meeting availability, Tuesdays 1-2 pm.
Virtual Office Hours: <https://stanford.zoom.us/j/779335016>

WEEK 1

April 7 | Speaker: Mutale Nkonde

Mutale Nkonde is a non-resident fellow at the Digital Civil Society Lab and the founder of AI for the People.

April 8 | Introduction to the Seminar: A Decade of Reckoning & What's Ahead

* ***For this class, and this class only***, we ask that students attend a real-time class on Wednesday, April 8th, 1:30-3:20. Zoom link will be listed here. *

This class introduces the key themes and assignments of the class. We begin with students' own experiences in digital civil society, drawing from their use of digital tools for organizing, communicating, and securing information. We will introduce the numerous disciplinary approaches that inform the class (history, political science, law, media and communication, race and ethnic studies) and provide an overview of the concept of civil society. This class will also discuss the continuity of Internet history and its importance for the formation of digital civil society. While the Fall quarter focused on the 1990s (see Fall Syllabus: *Making Money and Making Trouble on the 1990s Internet*) and the Winter quarter focused on the 2000s (see Fall Syllabus: *Booms, Busts and Revolutions*), the Spring quarter turns to the 2010s and current trends shaping the future of digital civil society.

Optional

Persily, N. (2017). The 2016 election: Can democracy survive the internet? *Journal of Democracy*. Available [here](#).

Milner, Y. (2018). An open letter to Facebook from the Data For Black Lives movement. *Medium*. Available [here](#).

(2019). Hong Kong protests: How technology is changing the game [Video]. *BBC*. Available [here](#).

WEEK 2

April 14 (+1) | Speaker: Helen Nissenbaum

April 15 | Beyond the Capitol: Electronic Governments

Are electronic governments viable? How does citizenship, accountability, and trust in governments work online? What challenges do governments face in the digital age? This class digs into examples of electronic government and digital citizenship.

Readings

Heller, N. (2017). Estonia: The digital rights republic. *The New Yorker*. Available [here](#).

Bridle, J. (2018). The rise of virtual citizenship. *The Atlantic*. Available [here](#).

Gross, A. (2019). Detroiters concerned over facial recognition technology. *The Detroit Free Press*. Available [here](#).

WEEK 3

April 21 (+1) | Speaker: Federica Carugati

April 22 | Beyond the C suite: Platform Cooperativism

The platform economy has been branded as many things; among them as the “sharing economy”, “cooperative economy”, and “gig economy”. How accurate are these terms? Is cooperation and sharing real features of this economy? How can participants in this economy actually cooperate?

This session focuses on digital civil society in the context of the platform-or gig-economy. We will discuss how platform economy workers cooperate and take collective action. We start by asking whether the workers of the gig economy see themselves as employees or self-employed freelancers. We will navigate through examples of platform cooperativism and finally look at contemporary actions of rideshare drivers organizing to mitigate the ongoing effects of the Coronavirus crisis.

Readings

Wood, A. & Lehdonvirta, V. (2019). Platform labour and structured antagonism: Understanding the origins of protest in the gig economy. Available [here](#).

Paul, K. (2020). The germ-sharing economy: Coronavirus takes a toll on gig workers. *The Guardian*. Available [here](#).

Rideshare Drivers United. (2020). California drivers crisis resource page. Available [here](#).

Optional

Morell, F. M. & Espelt, R. (2018). A framework for accessing democratic qualities in collaborative economy platforms: Analysis of 10 cases in Barcelona. *Urban Science* 2(3), 61. Available [here](#).

ILO Standards and COVID-19 (March 27,2020) available [here](#).

WEEK 4

April 28 (+1) | Speaker: Tinalo Dada

April 29 | Beyond Openness: Civil society Institutions

This session examines digital civil society through the lens of “openness.” From government data to personal genomes, the catchphrase of the 2010s could have been “open up.” This is ironic since the decade also saw the return to an internet of walled gardens and an increasingly dominant (closed) app economy. The key question for digital civil society may be “open for whom and by whom?” Structural barriers to justice and participation, such as racism, poverty, greed, and misogyny, aren’t overcome by simply opening up data; systemic changes requires a more thorough power analysis. Readings focus on the rise of civic tech, a subsector of civil society focused on “opening” governments, how open can still be closed, and the potential solutions that some forms of openness may still yield.

Readings

Dunbar-Hester, C. (2019). *Hacking diversity: The politics of inclusion in open technology cultures*. Read chapter 2, History, heresy, hacking (pp. 32-48). Available [here](#).

Schrock, A. R. (2016). Case study: Code for America. In Gordon, E. & Mihailidis, P. (Eds.), *Civic media: Technology, design, practice* (pp. 217-219). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. Available [here](#).

Hao, K. (2020). The messy, secretive reality behind OpenAI’s big to save the world. *The Technology Review*. Available [here](#).

Bee with a blog. (2020). Open is cancelled. *Medium*. Available [here](#).

WEEK 5

May 5 (+1) | Speaker: Corey Jackson

May 6 | Beyond Militarization: Virtual Reality and Exoskeletal Technology

Virtual reality and exoskeletal technologies have matured significantly over the past decade. Military and disabled communities have been at the forefront of their direct application, but these technologies could soon become fixtures of everyday life. What beneficial social purposes might they serve, and what are the dangers associated with widespread use of VR and exoskeletal technology? Will they transform psychological treatment, physical therapy, and hands-on education? Will they lead to perpetual immersion in virtual space and an obsession with body modification? In this class, we’ll consider the development of these technologies and analyze their vast social implications.

Readings

Jardin, X. (2005). VR goggles heal the scars of war. *Wired*. Available [here](#).

Engadget staff. (2016). ReWalk has built a stair-climbing exoskeleton, enabling a paralyzed man to walk again [Video]. Available [here](#).

Greenbaum, D. (2016). Ethical, legal and social concerns relating to exoskeletons. *ACM SIGCAS Computers and Society. Special Issue on Ethicomp*. 45(3): 234-239. Available [here](#).

WEEK 6

May 12 (+1) | Speaker: Samir Doshi

May 13 | Beyond Treatment: Medical Technologies and Biohacking

The promises of human augmentation come with a lot of challenges; medical, ethical and others. This session will look at the history of trans-humanism and tackle the challenges of human augmentation and biohacking. There are several different considerations from the perspective of civil society, ranging from questions of human agency and rights to the emerging communities and movements that have developed around these technologies and their possibilities.

Readings

Nelson, A. (2018). The social life of DNA: Racial reconciliation and institutional morality after the genome. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 69(3): 522-537. Available [here](#).

Bostrom, N. (2005). A history of transhumanist thought. *Journal of Evolution and Technology*, 14(1). Available [here](#).

O'Reilly, T. (2017). What will our lives be like as cyborgs? A case for embracing the 'augmentation' of human minds and bodies. *The Medium*. Available [here](#).

The Open COVID Pledge. (2020). Available [here](#).

Iam-media. (2020). No strings Covid-19 IP pledge initiative underlines delicate balance biopharma businesses must strike. *Iam-Media*. Available [here](#).

Optional

Sanchez, G. (2014). We are biohackers. *Delft University of Technology*. Available [here](#).

Zettler, P. J. & Guerrini, C. J. & Sherkow, J. S. (forthcoming). Finding a regulatory balance for genetic biohacking. In *Consuming genetic technologies: Ethical and legal considerations of new technologies*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. Available [here](#).

Wolinsky, H. (2016). The FBI and biohackers: An unusual relationship. *EMBO Report*, 17:. Available [here](#).

WEEK 7

May 19 (+1) | Speaker: Jay Nath

May 20 | Beyond Truth: Misinformation and Democracy

How, and when, does misinformation impact democratic representation? What is the line between persuasion and coercion? We explore these issues in different contexts to understand the challenges of misinformation in representative government.

Readings

Cadwalladr, C. & Graham-Harrison, E. (2018). Revealed: 50 million Facebook profiles harvested for Cambridge Analytica in major data break. *The Guardian*. Available [here](#).

Channel 4 News. (2018). Cambridge Analytica uncovered: Secret filming reveals election tricks [Video]. *Channel 4 News*. Available [here](#).

Ekdale, B. & Tully, M. (2019). African elections as a testing ground: Comparing coverage of Cambridge Analytica in Nigerian and Kenyan newspapers. *African Journalism Studies*. Available [here](#).

Karpf, D. (2019). Our digital disinformation and democratic myths. *Mediawell*. Available [here](#).

Optional

Zuckerman, E. (2019). QAnon and the emergence of the unreal. *Journal of Design and Science*. Available [here](#)

Chen, A. (2015). The Agency. *The New York Times*. Available [here](#).

WEEK 8

May 26 (+1) | Speaker: Todd Davies

May 27 | Beyond Visibility: Obfuscation Fashion and Protest Technologies

Obfuscation — the process of concealing one’s identity through physical, technical, and social means — has gone from a niche hobby among encryption enthusiasts to a comprehensive movement in social movements and the arts. Why should we care about obfuscation? What role does identity concealment play in contemporary protest activity, and what role could it play in the future? Will obfuscation become a distinctive fashion trend, as surveillance becomes an integral part of our technological lives? Does obfuscation turn a structural problem of data collection into an individual initiative of stylized anonymity? In this class, we’ll discuss the diverse applications of obfuscation technology in the realms of politics and art, and we’ll consider why we might, or might not, want to obfuscate ourselves.

Readings

Vanhemert, Z. (2013). An NSA whiz designs 4 fonts to foil google's all-seeing eye. *Wired*. Available [here](#).

Harvey, A. (2011). CV Dazzle. Available [here](#). Scroll through the looks!

Brunton, F. & Nissenbaum, H. (2015). *Obfuscation*. Read Chapter 3, Why is obfuscation necessary? Available under course Files.

Monaham, T. (2015). The right to hide? Anti-surveillance camouflage and the aestheticization of resistance. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 12(2): 159-178. Available [here](#).

WEEK 9

June 2 (+1) | Speaker: TBD

June 3 | Beyond the Dumpster: Electronic Waste

How do local, national, and global stakeholders react to technologies’ environmental impact? Are the concerns expressed by academics, non-profit organizations, and international organizations part of a multi-stakeholder approach to solve a pressing challenge or are they just revealing a regulatory or governance deficit? What are the broader implications and consequences?

Readings

Dobbe, R. & Whittaker, M. (2019). *AI and climate change: How they’re connected and what we*

can do about it. Medium. Available [here](#).

UN Environment Program. (2019). *UN report: Time to seize opportunity, tackle challenge of e-waste.* Available [here](#).

Basel Action Plan Report. (2019). *Holes in the circular economy: WEEE leakage from Europe.* Read pages 1-32 and page 105. Available [here](#).

WEEK 10

June 9 (+1) | Presentations

June 10 | Presentations