Digital Civil Society

COMM 230A / CSRE 230A

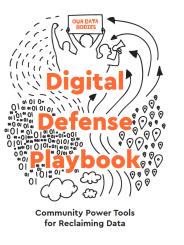
WAYS-SI (Social Inquiry), WAYS -EDP (Exploring Difference and Power)

<u>Meeting time:</u> Wednesdays, 10:30 AM – 1:20 PM (PST Time)

<u>Location: 380-380W</u> (Sloan Hall)











Course description

A vibrant civil society is a core component of democratic life. 'Civil society' includes social movements, philanthropists, unions, nonprofits, NGOs, charities, informal associational life, individual activism, and cooperatives, among others. In this course, students interrogate how civil society is evolving in a world of pervasive digitization and data collection.

The class takes a global perspective and historical approach. We will explore how civil society has played pivotal roles in developing digital technologies - as well as how these technologies shaped civil society in different ways across the world. We will put power and inequalities at the center of this history, looking in particular at how historical colonialism and its complex legacy shaped contemporary digital systems and civil society participation. The spirit of the class is both critical and generative. As such, we will also investigate how communities work to promote values, organizations, regulations and design that support the equitable and emancipatory use of technology. Topics covered in the class notably include: tech workers unionizing, advocacy about digital ID systems in India and Kenya, the human labor behind content moderation, and community-led efforts to address the digital divide. We will also have guest speakers joining the class throughout the quarter to share their research on digital civil society or their first hand experience working in digital civil society.

The course is global in scope (we will read authors and study cases from North America, Europe, Asia, and Africa), taught by a multidisciplinary team (communication, STS, education, history), and is committed to a syllabus inclusive of the scholarship, knowledge, and voices of marginalized communities. There are no requirements needed to enroll in this class, and we welcome students from all disciplinary backgrounds.

Quarter overview

(see the end of the syllabus for a full description of each session and readings)

- Week 1 Introduction to digital civil society
- Week 2 Alternative histories of the Internet.
- Week 3 Openness.
- Week 4 Privacy.
- Week 5 Access.
- Week 6 Identification.
- Week 7 Sociality.
- Week 8 Trash.
- Week 9 Labor.
- Week 10 Future.

Learning outcomes

After completing the course, students will be able to:

- Describe the scope of the concept of civil society, and discuss its usefulness and limitations;
- Define different constraints posed on civil society by technological designs, law, policy and social norms.
- Be able to adopt a historical view of digital technologies to contextualize current debates about technology and society
- Understand how social identities shape and are shaped by digital technologies
- Articulate how inequalities and power imbalance shaping digital ecosystems and associational life across the world
- Summarize different approaches to these issues taken by scholars across disciplines including historians, media and communication scholars, legal scholars, and political scientists.
- Conduct independent and interdisciplinary scholarship, and effectively use various types of digital archives.
- Apply theoretical concepts to practical applications and present ideas relevant to the application of the class themes to the real world.

Teaching team and office hours

- <u>Prof. Lucy Bernholz (bernholz@stanford.edu)</u>
- Prof Anushah Hossain (ahossain@stanford.edu)
- Prof. Toussaint Nothias (tnothias@stanford.edu)
- Ananya Karthik (Teaching Assistant)

Office hours are opportunities to discuss course material, queries, concerns, and other issues related to your academic success. Feel free to join even if you don't have any questions; conversation can be a lovely gateway to meaningful insight.

Meeting pattern

The class meets once a week for 170 minutes: Wednesday from 10:30 AM to 1:20 PM (PST Time).

Required material and teaching platform

This online syllabus will be your primary source of information for the class. It contains hyperlinks to the readings, information about assignments, office hours and more. This is a live document, which is routinely updated by the teaching team. Please bookmark it on your browser!

In conjunction with this live syllabus, we will also use Canvas. You will upload your weekly reading response and submit your assignments via Canvas; and the teaching team will use canvas to send announcements to the class.

Assignments

Grading breakdown

The class can be taken for a letter grade or credit/no credit. There are 5 graded components for this class:

•	Attendance and participation	15%
•	Weekly reading response	20%
•	Creative assignment	15%
•	Wayback Machine assignment	15%
•	ELI5 final assignment	35%

Assignments guidelines and criteria

• Attendance and participation

Attendance and participation are core components of your experience in the class. We expect you to come prepared by having done the readings (approximately 60 pages per week). The course will provide multiple ways of engaging including partner work, small group discussions, mock debates and more. We assess your engagement with the materials through how you discuss the readings in class, and your involvement during the in-class activities. We also consider your ability to engage others in conversation by asking them questions. Finally, we also take into account your participation and engagement during office hours with the instructor.

• Weekly reading response

Starting week 2, you will post a short (approx. 150-300 words) response on the Canvas discussion boards every Monday by 11:59pm PST. Each week, the teaching team will provide a prompt question. Students are expected to read everyone's submissions before class.

Every student may reserve two "passes," which means the freedom to skip submitting two response posts, no questions asked. For their chosen "pass," students will indicate that they are redeeming their "pass" on the online portal by the week's submission deadline. Students are still responsible for the reading assignment.

• Creative assignment: Who do you think I am?

In this assignment, you need to create a narrative told from the perspective of an algorithm, platform or other digital tool. Consider, for instance, the type of targeted advertisements you receive on a given platform / website, or think about how you might be classified in a demographic database. Based on this, how do you think the algorithm sees you? For instance, imagine that you are a facial recognition powered CCTV camera watching yourself walk into an airport or down a street, or a bot responding to you on

Twitter. What and who does the camera/bot see, and why? What is the voice of this camera/bot? What are its intentions, functions and intended/unintended consequences?

You may write a short essay (approximately 900 words) or go for an even more creative option: you may want to write a poem, create a graphic composition, a comic book, a network visualization, a painting, a script, or something else. If you go for one of these more creative options, we ask that you submit a 300 word reflection to explain your creation.

We encourage you to reach out to your teaching liaison by email or during office hours to think through this assignment and ask them any questions you may have.

Due date: End of week 4 (Sunday, Apr 30, 2023midnight, PST)

Grading criteria:

•	Submit on time:	2 points.
	Tackles the perspective of some digital tool or artifact:	3 points.
	Consider what it sees:	3 points.
	Consider what it does not see:	2 points.
	Quality of produced piece:	3 points.
	Creativity and uniqueness of the perspective considered:	2 points.

• Wayback machine assignment

This assignment will prepare you to become an internet historian. You'll be trawling through archives – specifically, the Internet Archive's <u>Wayback Machine</u> – to piece together your own history of one or more web pages. First, find a website whose evolution you're interested in tracing. Examples could include a blog, magazine, newspaper, non-profit organization, government agency, university department, or social media site, amongst others. Click through snapshots of your site using the Wayback Machine – these will be your primary sources – and prepare a 1000-1500 word reflection that addresses the following:



- 1) What narrative of the site emerges from the records contained in the Wayback Machine? What do you see changing and what stays still? What can one learn about society from these primary sources?
- 2) What information is missing from the archives? Consider content, but also structural aspects such as images, dead links, formatting, or page redirects. All of it is interesting.
- 3) What role do you think the Wayback Machine will play in the work of future historians? Does having records of the internet in this form inspire excitement or trepidation (or something else entirely!)?

Include at least three snapshots of your site with your response.

Due date: End of week 7 (Sunday, May 21, 2023midnight, PST)

Grading criteria:

•	Submitted on time:	2 points.
	Includes at least three website snapshots:	2 points.
•	Addresses Q1:	4 points.
•	Addresses Q2:	3 points.
•	Addresses Q3:	2 points.
•	Quality and creativity of write-up:	2 points.

• ELI5: Digital Civil Society Edition

In this final research paper assignment, we will flex our historical and comparative analysis muscles. First, select a technology or issue that engages with digital civil society. Examples include:

- Environmental sensors
- Drones
- Large language models
- Two-factor authentication
- Podcasts
- Smartwatches
- Mesh networks
- Figma
- Facial ID systems
- the Python programming language
- Virtual keyboards

You will be writing a **critical explainer** that places this object in social and historical context and its relevance to civil society. Imagine you are writing a long email or having a conversation explaining this technology and its relevance to society to a family member or friend. Your goal is to help them understand:

- 1) What the technology is in simple terms.
- 2) What questions we have in regards to it what are the concerns, opportunities, impacts, points of friction, unknowns, etc., particularly in relation to civil society.
- 3) What social and technological legacies it draws upon. What do you see as some historical antecedents? Go back in time as far as you'd like. In what ways is the present continuing the past, and how does it meaningfully break from it?
- 4) How this technology (will be) deployed, experienced, or adapted differently across geographic or cultural contexts. Provide a comparison between at least two different contexts. Speculation is permitted, but provide as concrete a justification as you can.

Make sure to base your analysis on evidence and make clear when you are referencing an outside source or providing your own assessment. Include in your sources at least one primary source that you directly analyze, and a mix of contemporary commentary (e.g. from a magazine, newspaper, nonprofit report, or popular blog), and scholarly articles.

Partway through the quarter, you will be responsible for coming to office hours with your teaching liaison and discussing your topic + three potential sources you might use.

Your final write up should be about ten pages (or ~3000 words). Images, references, and any other supplementary information fall outside this limit. References must be provided for all outside sources (in any citation format that includes authors, titles, years, URL or DOI and any other information someone might need to find the source).

Due dates:

- Proposal: End of week 5 (Sunday, May 6, 2023midnight, PST)
- Final assignment: End of week 10 (Sunday, Jun 11, 2023midnight, PST)

Weekly overview and readings

• Week 1 - Introduction to digital civil society. Apr 5, 2023

We begin with an introduction to the idea of civil society and its roles in democracies. Using the U.S. as an example, we'll critique both political theory and history to frame potential purposes of civil society. Drawing from economic theory, we'll consider how our dependence on digital systems shifts power, creates new opportunities, and requires new organizational structures, laws, and practices to maintain digital civil society. Finally, we'll collectively generate and consider a list of values, concerns, and concepts particular to how civil society functions in the digital age.

Prompt questions: Reflect on your own experiences participating in or leading some form of collective effort at change. What digital tools were used (e.g. mobile phones, shared documents, GPS, email, etc.) and how did you and your group think about the data trails you were creating?

Required readings:

- Hintz, Dencik, Wall-Jorgenson, "Challenging Datafication". In *Digital Citizenship in a Datafied Society*, Polity Press, 2018, pp 123-143. Link.
- Bernholz, Lucy. Blueprint 2023. Digital Civil Society Lab, Stanford University. Pp 12-13 Link
- Johana Bhuiyan, "Muslims reel over a prayer app that sold user data". LA Times, 23 November 2020. Link

• Week 2 - Alternative histories of the Internet. Apr 12, 2023

The creation of the Internet is a foundational event for the formation of digital civil society. But what do we mean by the Internet? When and where did the Internet start, exactly? And what are the groups that played a vital role in this history? In this session, we invite students to reconsider dominant narratives about the Internet and instead consider alternative histories. From the development of the telegraph in the 19th century to bulletin board systems in the 1980s, the class shows the pivotal roles historically played by civil society in these histories, alongside market and state actors.

Required readings:

- Starosielski, Nicole. "In our Wi-Fi world, the internet still depends on undersea cables". The Conversation, 2015. <u>Link</u>
- Blum, Andrew and Baraka, Carey. "Sea Change". Rest of World. 10 May 2022. Link
- Dhanashree Thorat, "Colonial Topographies of Internet Infrastructure: The Sedimented and Linked Networks of the Telegraph and Submarine Fiber Optic Internet". *South Asian Review*, 2019. Link.
- Driscoll, Kevin. "Social Media's Dial-Up Ancestor: The Bulletin Board System". IEEE Spectrum, 53, 11, 2016. Link.
- McIlwain, Charlton "Chapter 4: The Vanguard" in *Black Software* (Oxford University Press, 2019 Press), p-59-78. Link and full book available here.

Optional:

- Standage, Tom. *The Victorian Internet*. (Bloomsbury, 2013)
- Driscoll, Kevin. The *Modem World* (Yale University Press, 2022). Link
- Driscoll, Kevin. "Searching for missing net histories". Internet Histories, 2017. Link
- Starosielski, Nicole. "Circuitous Routes: From Topology to Topography" in *The Undersea Network* (Duke University Press, 2015). Read p 31 to 63. <u>Link</u>
- http://surfacing.in/
- https://www.submarinecablemap.com/

• Week 3 - Openness.

Apr 19, 2023

"We reject: kings, presidents, and voting. We believe in: rough consensus and running code." So said David D. Clark, one of the architects of the Internet. He was referring to the distributed open governance model that characterized the early internet. In this session, we grapple with the concept of "openness." What does it mean? How does openness in process and outcome affect & engage civil society? To what extent is openness a reflection of reality, as opposed to an ideal? What can't or shouldn't be open?

The readings this week trace openness across three spheres: open standards, open access, and open source software. We read manifestos with grand plans alongside reports from the field that provide an alternate perspective.

Required Readings:

- Borsook, Paulina. "How Anarchy Works." Wired. 1 October 1995. Link.
- Barlow, John Perry. "A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace." 8 February 1996. <u>Link</u>.
- Volpicelli, Gian M. "The Draconian Rise of Internet Shutdowns." *Wired.* 2 September 2021. <u>Link</u>.
- Swartz, Aaron. "Guerilla Open Access Manifesto." July 2008. Link.
- Resnick, Brian. "Why one woman stole 50 million academic papers and made them all free to read." *Vox.* 28 April 2016. Link.
- Raymond, Eric S. "The Cathedral and the Bazaar." 2001. Link.
- Hossain, Anushah. "Regional FOSS Communities: The View from Dhaka, Bangladesh." June 2021. Link.

Optional:

- Berners-Lee, Tim. "The many meanings of Open." 9 October 2013. Link.
- Prince, Matthew. "Why We Terminated Daily Stormer." *Cloudflare Blog.* 16 August 2017. <u>Link</u>.
- Drake, William, Vinton Cerf, and Wolfgang Kleinwächter. "Internet Fragmentation: An Overview." *World Economic Forum*. January 2016. <u>Link</u>.
- Krishnamurthy, Madaiah. "Open access, open source and digital libraries: A current trend in university libraries around the world." *Program: electronic library and information systems*, Vol. 42 No. 1, pp. 48-55. https://doi.org/10.1108/00330330810851582

• Week 4 - Privacy

Apr 26, 2023

Cookies. Tor. VPNs. Proxies. Bitcoin. HTTPS. Facial ID. This week, we focus on digital privacy. Why does civil society need privacy? What needs to be kept hidden, and from whom? And what tools do we have at our disposal to achieve this goal? We read a cultural history of privacy in the United States, then hop across the world to see how and if the concepts and tools translate.

Read:

- Rid, Thomas. "Anarchy." Rise of the Machines: A Cybernetic History. 2016. Link.
- James, George Harry. "Gaze Against the Machine: Counter-visuality and hyperreal strategies in the Hong Kong protests. *Epoche Magazine*. July 2020. <u>Link</u>.
- Deck, Andrew, Emily Fishbein, and Genevieve Glatsky. "Where anonymity on Twitter is a matter of life or death." *Rest of World*. 6 May 2022. <u>Link</u>.

Watch:

• Aoun, Sarah. "Working on the Frontlines: Privacy and Security with Vulnerable Populations." *USENIX Enigma 2023*. <u>Link</u>. [23 min]

Do:

- Try using Tor to access the web (e.g. Facebook). Be ready to report back on your experience.
- Week 5 Access.

May 3, 2023

While our world today feels incredibly connected, approximately 2.7 billion people around the globe still remain disconnected from the Internet. Concerns about a digital divide have existed for as long as the Internet, with civil society interacting in many ways with market and state actors to close the divide. In this session, we focus on a range of efforts to address the digital divide and increase access: the provision of "free" laptops (One Laptop per Child Initiative), "free" Facebook (Free Basics) and "free" Wikipedia (Wikipedia Zero). But we ask: access for whom? Access to what? Many digital rights activists and scholars question the supposed philanthropic nature of these initiatives, and instead describe them as a form of digital colonialism. This week, we review these current debates in light of earlier debates in the 1970s at the UNESCO about cultural imperialism and the new world information order.

Guest speaker: Adele Vrana (Whose Knowledge?)

Watch (required)

• Negroponte, Nicholas. "The vision behind One Laptop Per Child" Ted. 2006. Link

Readings (required):

• Nothias, Toussaint. "The Rise and Fall... and Rise Again of Facebook's Free Basics: Civil Society and the Challenge of Resistance to Corporate Connectivity projects". MIT Global Media Technologies and Culture Lab. 2021. Link.

- Koebler, Jason. "Angola's Wikipedia Pirates Are Exposing the Problems With Digital Colonialism" *Vice*, 2016. Link
- THIS ARTICLE LOOKS LONG BECAUSE IT HAS A LOT OF FOOTNOTES SIMPLY DO NOT PAY ATTENTION TO THE FOOTNOTES Carillo, Arturo. "Having Your Cake and Eating it Too? Zero-Rating, Net Neutrality and International Law". Stan. Tech. L. Rev. 364 (2016), GWU Legal Studies Research Paper No. 2020-39. Link
- Nelson, Sarah. "Russia isn't the first country to protest Western control over global telecommunications". *The Conversation*, 2019. Link.

Browse (required)

- State of the Internet's Language. 2023. Link
- Our Stories, Our Knowledges. 2018. Link

Optional:

- https://restofworld.org/2023/winners-2023-photography-contest/#/pawan-singh
- Ames, Morgan. The Charisma Machine, MIT Press, 2019.
- Schiller, Herbert. "Communication and Cultural Domination", *International Journal of Politics*. Link.
- Nothias, Toussaint. "Access Granted: Facebook's Free Basics in Africa", *Media, Culture, Society*, 2020. <u>Link</u>
- Sarah Nelson; A Dream Deferred: UNESCO, American Expertise, and the Eclipse of Radical News Development in the Early Satellite Age. *Radical History Review* 1 October 2021; 2021 (141): 30–59. Link

• Week 6 - Identification.

May 10, 2023

Why do we identify people, and how? Who gets to benefit from that identification? Identification processes are largely perceived as mechanisms of social protection and trust, with their digitization often presented as a silver bullet to increase reliability and efficiency. In this session, instead, we consider how technologies of identification are part of a broader history of social control. We examine two forms of contemporary identification: digital ID systems, and IP addresses. How do these forms of identification re-entrench, or even accelerate inequalities with and across countries? And in what ways does civil society play a role in advancing these technologies but also in resisting their harms?

Guest Speaker: Yussuf Bashir (Haki na Sheria Initiative)

Required readings:

- Nyabola, Nanjala. "National digital ID initiatives have a trust problem". Rest of World, 2021. Link.
- Thomas, Elise. "Tagged, tracked and in danger: how the Rohingya got caught in the UN's risky biometric database". *Wired*, 2018. Link
- Sudhir and Sunder. "What Happens When a Billion Identities Are Digitized?" Yale Insights, 2020. Link.
- Brandom, Russell. "Slack is banning some users with links to Iran even if they've left the country". *The Verge*, 2018. <u>Link</u>

Optional:

- Ahmed, Shazeda. "The Messy Truth About Social Credit". Logic, 2019. Link
- Wu, Tim. Chapter 2. Who controls the Internet.

• Week 7 - Sociality.

May 17, 2023

The social has always been part of the digital. From early computer games with chat, to BBS, Usenet, Neopets, Facebook, Reddit, Tiktok, and Zoom — humans have been connecting with each other using computers across time and space. What has sociality looked like across these different platforms and eras? How can virtual communities and networks expand or contract civil society? This week we dive into the joy, creativity, and connection offered by the internet, while also minding its limits. Alongside sociality, we also meditate upon loneliness, exclusion, and harassment.

Guest Speaker: Jasmine Walker (Reddit moderator)

Required readings:

- Williams, Alex. "MySpace: A site with 26 million 'friends'." *New York Times*. September 2005. Link.
- Morley, Madeleine. "I Could Never Abandon Them': Neopets Users Play On." *New York Times*. November 2021. Link.
- Pardes, Arielle. "On Instagram, Black Squares Overtook Activist Hashtags." *Wired.* June 2020. Link.
- van der Nagel, Emily. "From usernames to profiles: the development of pseudonymity in Internet communication." *Internet Histories*. 2017. DOI: 10.1080/24701475.2017.1389548
- Huff, Chuck, Deborah G. Johnson, and Keith Miller. "Virtual harms and real responsibility." *IEEE Technology & Society Magazine*. Summer 2003. Link.

• Week 8 - Trash.

May 24, 2023

Victor Hugo wrote that the sewer is the conscience of the city; it is where all things converge and confront one another. This week we take on the dark underbelly of the internet - trash, spam, abuse, and their human and non-human overseers. What is the threat? What separates a good actor from a bad? And how does automation play in – are all bots evil? We read about evolving definitions of spam, the hidden bots among us on Wikipedia and other platforms, the test that will tell you if you're human, and the very human gatekeepers who keep our screens clean. We'll discuss where civil society falls in all of this - what rights and protections are owed to the public and to laborers? How and when should we intervene?

Guest Speaker: Sam Bretheim (Craigslist)

Required readings:

- Brunton, Finn. Spam: A Shadow History of the Internet. 2013. Intro and Chapter 3. Link.
- Halfaker, Aaron and John Riedl. "Bots and Cyborgs: Wikipedia's Immune System." *IEEE Computer Society*. March 2012. Link.
- Sen, Mayukh. "The Bengali Click Farmer." *The New Inquiry*. 27 June 2016. <u>Link</u>.

Watch:

• Bradley, Garrett. *Like*. https://fieldofvision.org/shorts/like [9 min]

Optional:

- The Spamhaus Project. "The Definition of Spam." Link.
- Elliott, Vittoria and Tekendra Parmar. "The despair and darkness of people will get to you." *Rest of World.* 22 July 2020. Link.
- Taylor, Astra. "The Automation Charade." Logic Magazine. 1 August, 2018. Link.
- Week 9 Labor.

May 31, 2023

In this session, we turn our attention to collective action, organizing, and unionizing emerging from tech labor. How do tech workers (from engineers to Uber drivers), labor organizers, and community organizers come together to advocate for change in the tech industry? What are the challenges they are facing? We will examine how tech workers are organizing for their right to decent work - but also how they are advancing other causes through collective action, such as greater diversity in the industry and bans on certain technologies. We will explore historical precedents of collective action in the technology sector, and how they can help us understand our current moment. Throughout, we will wrestle with the question: can pressure from inside the tech industry be powerful enough to bring about meaningful change?

Guest Speaker: Adrienne Williams (Distributed AI Research Institute)

Required readings:

- Williams, Adrienne, Miceli, Milagros and Timnit Gebru. "The Exploited Labor Behind Artificial Intelligence" *Noema*. 2022 <u>Link</u>
- Guest, Peter. "We're all fighting the giant": Gig workers around the world are finally organizing". *Rest of World*. 2021 Link
- Dubal, Veena. Economic Security & the Regulation of Gig Work in California: From AB5 to Proposition 22, 13 Eur. Lab. L.J. 51 (2022). Link
- Hobsbawm, Eric. "The Machine-Breakers", Past & Present 1. 1952. Link
- Zhong, Jonathan and Nathan Mathias. "Building Collective Power to Refuse Harmful Data Systems". Citizen and Technologies Lab. 2020. <u>Link</u>.

• Week 10 - Future.

Jun 7, 2023

This final session provides a time for students and teaching staff to reflect collectively on what they learned throughout the class; how the class changed their perspective on digital technologies and civil society, and how they plan to incorporate some of these insights into their work/career/life moving forward. A portion of the time is dedicated to students presenting work in progress of their final essay.

*** No readings this week***

Access and Accommodations

Stanford is committed to providing equal educational opportunities for disabled students. Disabled students are a valued and essential part of the Stanford community. We welcome you to our class.

If you experience disability, please register with the Office of Accessible Education (OAE). Professional staff will evaluate your needs, support appropriate and reasonable accommodations, and prepare an Academic Accommodation Letter for faculty. To get started, or to re-initiate services, please visit oae.stanford.edu.

If you already have an Academic Accommodation Letter, we invite you to share your letter with us. Academic Accommodation Letters should be shared at the earliest possible opportunity so we may partner with you and OAE to identify any barriers to access and inclusion that might be encountered in your experience of this course.

Honor Code

Every student is expected to abide by Stanford's Honor Code. Taken from Stanford's Office of Community Standards: "The Honor Code is the university's statement on academic integrity written by students in 1921. It articulates university expectations of students and faculty in establishing and maintaining the highest standards in academic work". See here for more information: https://communitystandards.stanford.edu/policies-guidance/honor-code