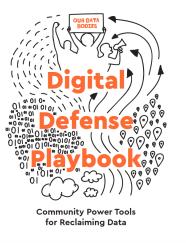# Digital Civil Society

COMM 230A / CSRE 230A / AFRICAAM 230A
WAYS-SI (Social Inquiry), WAYS -ED (Engaging Diversity)
Meeting time: Wednesdays, 9:45 AM – 12:45 AM (PST Time)
Location: 160-322 (Wallenberg Hall)

Course description

A vibrant civil society is a core component of democratic life. 'Civil society' includes social movements, grassroots activism, philanthropists, unions, nonprofits, NGOs, charities, informal associational life, and cooperatives, among others. In this course, students interrogate how civil society is evolving in a world of pervasive digitization and data collection. Using human rights as an anchor, we will explore how digital technologies perpetuate long-standing threats and create new challenges for digital rights. We will also analyze how communities develop strategies to mitigate these harms and actively promote values, organizations, regulation, and design that support the equitable and emancipatory use of technology. Topics covered in the class include: mis-disinformation and racism/sexism; algorithmic bias; tech workers unions; immigration and technology; Covid-related digital surveillance. 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 America, Europe, Asia, and Africa), taught by a multidisciplinary team (communication, computational social science, education, history, law), and is committed to a syllabus centering on the scholarship, expertise, and voices of marginalized communities. There are no requirements needed to enroll in this class, and we welcome students from all disciplinary backgrounds.

To learn more about our Lab and the work we support, please visit:
https://pacscenter.stanford.edu/research/digital-civil-society-lab/

Pedagogical ethic in times of crises: Learning can be a joyous, liberating, and deeply satisfying experience. Making it such during times of extreme difficulty, sorrow, and concern is the highest priority for the teaching team and the DCSL community. We are deeply committed to students' individual and collective experiences and approach our teaching with an emphasis on solidarity, care, empathy, and flexibility. We request that students enter the learning experience with similar commitments so that we can all learn together.

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

- Week 1 (Jan 5) - Digital Civil Society and Human Rights.
- Week 2 (Jan 12) - Privacy.
- Week 3 (Jan 19) - Assembly and Association (Guest: Alissa Richardson, USC).
- Week 4 (Jan 26) - Freedom of Expression (Guest: Julie Owono, Oversight Board).
- Week 5 (Feb 2) - Right to Health.
- Week 6 (Feb 9) - Freedom of Movement. (Guest: Esha Bandari, ACLU)
- Week 7 (Feb 16) - Right to Vote.
- Week 8 (Feb 23) - Workers' Rights. (Guest: Nina Hall, John Hopkins)
- Week 9 (March 2) - Cultural Rights. (Guest: Roderick Crooks, UC Irvine)
- Week 10 (March 9) - Paths forward for digital civil society.

Learning goals

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 law and policy, technological designs, and social norms.
- Critique common assumptions about the internet and digital technologies from an intersectional perspective.
- Understand how social identities shape and are shaped by digital technologies
- Summarize different approaches to these issues taken by scholars across disciplines including historians, media and communication scholars, legal scholars, and political scientists.
- Describe the work and remit of anchor digital civil society organizations.
- Understand how different geographic and social contexts shape the nature and possibilities of digital associational life and political and civic activism.
- Apply theoretical concepts to practical applications and present ideas relevant to the application of the class themes to the real world.
- Formulate research-grounded arguments and recommendations on how to strengthen digital civil society.

Teaching team and office hours

- Prof. Lucy Bernholz (bernholz@stanford.edu)
  - Office hours: tbd
  - Zoom details: tbd
- Prof. Toussaint Nothias (tnothias@stanford.edu)
  - Office hours: tbd
  - Zoom details: tbd
- Prof. Samantha Bradshaw (srbradsh@stanford.edu)
  - Office hours: tbd
  - Zoom details: tbd
- Prof. David Hausman (dhausman@stanford.edu)
  - Office hours: tbd
  - Zoom details: tbd
- Prof. Soojong Kim (sjkim97@stanford.edu)
  - Office hours: tbd
  - Zoom details: tbd
- Prof. Ashley Lee (ashley.lee@stanford.edu)
  - Office hours: tbd
  - Zoom details: tbd
- Corazon Johnston (teaching assistant) (cj0hn@stanford.edu)
  - Office hours: tbd
  - Zoom details: tbd

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 180 minutes: Wednesday from 09:45 AM to 12:45 PM (PST Time).

Required material and teaching platform

Our primary platform for the class is Canvas. This is where you will access the readings, receive announcements, watch videos, post written responses, and submit your assignments.

Grading and assignments

Grading breakdown

The class can be taken for a letter grade or credit/no credit. There are 4 graded components for this class:

● Attendance and Participation	20%
● Weekly Reading Response	30%
● Creative Assignment	20%
● Digital Civil Society Solution Project	30%

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 (no more than 40 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.

- **Weekly writing:**
  Each week, students will post a short (approx. 150-300 words) response on the Canvas discussion boards every Sunday at 11:59pm PST. Each week, the teaching team will provide a set of prompt questions from which to choose. Students are expected to read everyone's submissions and respond to one other student by posing a reaction (approx. 100-200 words) by Monday at 11:59pm PST.

  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 and posting reactions to their peers' responses each Sunday.

Late policy: We have added flexibility to our course structure and assignments to accommodate anyone who may now be lacking resources they originally thought they would have available. That being said, please plan ahead to the best of your ability. It is important that assignments are submitted on time in order to give everyone ample time to read and benefit from their peers' insight.

- **Creative assignment (due Sunday Feb 13, midnight)**

  This assignment is meant to be a playful way for you to consider the roles digital technologies play in everyday life and in shaping social identities. We provide three options for this assignment:

  - *Option 1: "Who do you think I am?" essay.*
    Write a short essay (800 words) written from the perspective of an algorithm or a digital artefact. Consider, for instance, the type of targeted advertisements you might receive on a given platform / website. Based on this, how do you think the algorithm sees you? Or imagine that you are a CCTV camera watching yourself walk into an airport or down a street, or a bot responding to yourself on Twitter. What and who does the camera/bot see, and why? Write this short essay as if you were the algorithm/digital artefact, making choices and assumptions about the person you are targeting, and sharing with the reader how and why you (the algorithm) function the way you do (e.g. what are the incentives and assumptions driving the algorithm?).

  - *Option 2: Data self portrait.*
    Think about your digital trails, that is, all the data points that you have left behind since you were born. Now, using these, try to recreate a portrait of yourself. This option is the more open creative option: you may want to write a poem, draw a painting, create a graphic composition, a network visualization, a computer script, or something else. Whatever you choose, we ask that you submit a 500 word reflection to explain your creation.

  Note: We realize that all students might not be familiar/immediately comfortable with the creative bent of this assignment, which is why we are providing two options. Our teaching team will carve out time in class to answer questions about this assignment. Students are also encouraged to reach out to instructors to connect individually and seek guidance in developing their assignment.

- **Digital Civil Society Solution Project (due Friday March 11, midnight)**

   The goal of this assignment is to come up with a solution to a practical problem related to issues discussed in class. The teaching team will provide a set of practical problems to choose from. Students will then have to develop a solution to the project. The solution can take different forms: a policy memo; a technological prototype or proof of concept; a community education project; an artistic project; a legal opinion response or something else. This assignment is purposefully fluid to accommodate students from different academic backgrounds, as well as to offer opportunities for students to try something new. Whatever the option chosen, our main criteria for grading will be 1. The robustness of the background research, 2. The clarity, relevance and strength of the response, and 3. the quality of the presentation. We have put in place several milestones to ensure you make progress towards this final assignment throughout the quarter: you'll need to pick a challenge and submit a short proposal by week 4; meet with your instructor liaison by week 6, and present in class on the last week.

   Group project option: for students who are interested in similar topics and want to work on this final assignment as a group, we welcome this option. In this case, please reach out to your IL to discuss this by the end of week 4. Our grading criteria are the same but we ask that students indicate clearly which student worked on which part of the assignment.

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, review appropriate medical documentation, recommend reasonable accommodations, and prepare an Accommodation Letter for faculty. The letter will indicate how long it is to be in effect. Students should contact the OAE as soon as possible since timely notice is needed to coordinate accommodations. Students should also send your accommodation letter to instructors as soon as possible. The OAE is located at 563 Salvatierra Walk (phone: 723-1066, URL: http://oae.stanford.edu).

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" (https://communitystandards.

Milestones / Assignments Schedule Overview

	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6	Week 7	Week 8	Week 9	Week 10
Attendance and Participation	**Throughout**									
Writing Response	**Throughout**									
Creative Essay					**Recommended submission date** (Sunday 11:59pm PST)	**Max due date** (Sunday 11:59 pm PST)				
Digital Civil Society Solution				Submit paragraph proposal to IL					**Recommended submission date** (Sunday 11:59pm PST)	**Max due date** (Friday 11:59 pm PST)

Week-by-week description and readings.

Week 1. Introduction
Lead instructors: Toussaint Nothias, Lucy Bernholz, Corazon Johnston.

This session introduces the major themes of the class, starting with human rights (civil, political and social) and the concept of civil society in democracies, and the ways in which they interact with digital dependencies and the political economy of digital access.

Required readings:

- "Muslims reel over a prayer app that sold user data" by Johana Bhuiyan, *Los Angeles Times,* November 2020.
- "A New AI Lexicon:Human Rights" by Catriona Gray, *Medium,* October 2021.
- "The Steep Cost of Capture" by Meredith Whitaker, *ACM Interactions,* December 2021.

Optional readings:

- "The Invention of Digital Civil Society" by Lucy Bernholz, *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Summer 2019.
- Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Week 2: Privacy.
Lead instructors: Sam Bradshaw, Ashley Lee, Corazon Johnston.

Privacy is a fundamental human right for democracy and civic participation, as well as human well-being and safety. This week we will explore how privacy has changed in a digitally-dependent environment. We will look at privacy in infrastructure and data, and the practices of surveillance capitalism and data colonialism that shape contemporary communication and society. What are the new challenges and risks posed by mass surveillance and pervasive data collection to people and civil society? How do individuals and groups navigate these challenges and promote privacy rights in a surveillance-driven society?

Required pre-class activity:

Diary of 24 hours of digital surveillance.

For 24-hours, keep a diary tracking all the ways in which you are being monitored by digital technologies as you move throughout your day. Think about where you go, when you use your phone or other device, what street cameras might be monitoring you, or where you make purchases and interact with other technologies. What data are you giving out, and to who? Submit your diary to the teaching team via the URL shared in class and on Canvas.

Required readings:

- Black Mirror, Season 3, Episode 1 (group streaming option will be announced during class)
- Resistance to the new data colonialism must start now. Al Jazeera.

Optional readings:

- Privacy by Infrastructure: The Unresolved Case of the Domain Name System by Samantha Bradshaw and Laura DeNardis. *Policy & Internet,* vol 11(1), pp. 16-37
- Invisible Networked Publics and Hidden Contention. Ashley Lee. *New Media & Society.*

Week 3: Assembly & Association.
Lead instructors: Ashley Lee, Soojong Kim, Lucy Bernholz.

Democracy depends on people being able to gather, take action, and make decisions together. The two specific rights underpinning these actions are assembly and association, which have traditionally differed along a temporal dimension (assembly can be short term, association is longer). We'll look at how digital networking and organizing complicates this understanding, how young people organize, and use data from a paper in progress on Black Lives Matter and countermovement Facebook groups for a hands-on experience of studying how people organize and assemble online, offline, and the relationships between the two.

Required readings:

- "Can free Assembly Survive the Internet?" Lucy Bernholz and Toussaint Nothias, *Public Books,* March 2021.
- Social Media Transformed Teens' Ability to Build Activist Movements Online. *Teen Vogue.* December 2019.
- Black Lives Matter and its Countermovements: The Information Ecosystem of the Racial Justice Movement. Soojong Kim and Ashley Lee (preprint)

Optional readings:

- U.S. Protest Law Tracker, International Center on Nonprofit Law,
- **Gender Dimensions of Foreign Influence Operations**

Guest speaker: Alissa Richardson (University of Southern California)

Week 4: Freedom of Expression.
Lead Instructors: Soojong Kim and Sam Bradshaw.

Freedom of expression has been one of the most contentious rights discussed in the digital era. Digital platforms have created new opportunities for individuals and groups to reach large audiences and to have a voice and be heard. But simultaneously new challenges have also emerged around the amplification of fringe, false, or hateful narratives that can affect political participation, organization, and expression. In this class we will explore the role of platforms as informational intermediaries and its social, political, and cultural consequences; how disinformation and hate speech are spread and moderated by the platforms; and the implications of private authority over speech for expression.

Required readings:

- Renee DiResta. (2018). Free Speech Is Not the Same As Free Reach. *Wired*
- Emily Bazelon. (2020). The First Amendment in the age of disinformation. *The New York Times*
- Tarleton Gillespie. (2018). All Platforms Moderate. In *Custodians of the Internet,* Yale University Press

Optional readings:

- Speech Police, by David Kaye. Chapter 1.

Guest speaker: Julie Owono (Facebook Oversight Board)

Week 5: Right to Health.
Lead Instructors: Soojong Kim and Toussaint Nothias

Starting this week, we turn to social, economic and cultural rights. We begin with the right to health, which points to universal minimum standards of health to which all individuals are entitled. We consider the intersection of the right to health, civil society and digital technologies through three main topics: how different technologies may improve outcomes for health; algorithmic bias in healthcare provision; public framing of public health in a digital world, specifically covid-related mis and disinformation.

Required readings:

- "Digital Surveillance, Civil Society and the Media during the Covid-19 Pandemic", Toussaint Nothias, Kyra Jasper, Amélie-Sophie Vavrovsky, Sophia Beauvoir, and Lucy Bernholz
- "Racial bias in a medical algorithm favors white patients over sicker black patients", Washington Post
- "The Information Ecosystem of Online Group with Anti- and Pro-vaccine Views on Facebook", Soojong Kim and Kwanho Kim.

Optional readings:

- "What's really at stake with Vaccine Passports", Elizabeth Renieris, CIGI, April 2021.
- "Vaccine Nationalism is patently unjust", Nanjala Nyabola, Nation, March 2021
- "A.I. could worsen health disparities". Dhruv Khullar in *New York Times*, January 2019
- "Medical algorithms are failing communities of color"m Donna Christensen, Jim Manley, Jason Resendez in *Health Affairs*, September 2021.

Week 6: Freedom of movement.
Lead Instructor: David Hausman.

So long as borders persist, governments face difficult decisions about how much and how to protect the right to freedom of movement. This week, we'll discuss the role of digital technology in migration control. For example, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) uses electronic monitoring to track immigrants whom it releases from detention. Should we oppose that monitoring as a digital jail or welcome it as an alternative to actual jail, where the U.S. government places many asylum seekers? In another example, Customs and Border Protection (CBP) has the right to conduct digital searches (like physical searches) at the border without a warrant. Is that rule justifiable? And finally, the Supreme Court prevented the Trump Administration from adding a census question about citizenship status. To what extent should the government be allowed to track the immigration status of people in the United States?

Required readings:

- *Report: ICE Digital Prisons: The Expansion of Mass Surveillance as ICE's Alternative to Detention* (pp. 1-10)
- *Merchant v. Mayorkas*, No. 20-1077 (1st Cir. 2021) (allowing digital device searches at the border) (pp. 4-8 & 13-23).
- Adi Robertson, *ICE rigged its algorithms to keep immigrants in jail, claims lawsuit*, The Verge, Mar. 3, 2020.
- Department of Commerce v. New York, No. 18-966 (census citizenship question case) (PDF pages 28-34 & 73-75)

Optional readings:

- David Hausman, *The Danger of Rigged Algorithms: Evidence from Immigration Detention Decisions*, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3877470.
- American Immigration Council, Rising Border Encounters in 2021: An Overview and Analysis, https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/sites/default/files/research/rising_border_encounters_in_2021.pdf.
- Eli Saslow, *A Haitian asylum seeker had spent two years in U.S. detention until an Ohio couple tried to do something about it*, Dec. 16, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/waiting-for-safe-haven/2018/12/16/158387fc-fe3b-11e8-862a-b6a6f3ce8199_story.html.

Guest speaker: Esha Bandari (ACLU)

Week 7: Voters' rights.
Lead instructors: David Hausman and Lucy Bernholz.

The right to vote is a fundamental element of democracy but it is not always available to everyone. It's also harder to define than you might think. How much must the government *facilitate* voting in order to avoid violating the right to vote? One way of looking at the history of democracy in the U.S., for example, is as an ongoing struggle for enfranchisement. This fight has used data from the country's earliest days - census counts and the three-fifths clause - as a means of delimiting who can vote. The digital age has complicated this right in numerous ways. Some of these are administrative - focusing on the actual machinery of administering elections, from redistricting software through to the possibilities and threats of internet based voting, issues of access and suppression, and calls for open source voting systems. Others come from the broader context of mis/disinformation, demands for digital IDs, new opportunities for suppression and calls for access from rural or disabled communities. We'll consider how different technologies interact with aspirations for both participation and suppression.

Required readings:

- Digital Technology in Elections, EU Parliament https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2018/625178/EPRS_BRI(2018)625178_EN.pdf
- Freedom House - Election watch in digital age https://freedomhouse.org/report/election-watch-digital-age
- Sue Halpern, *Why You Can't Just Vote on Your Phone During the Pandemic*, The New Yorker, June 19, 2020.
- Nathan Heller, *Estonia, The Digital Republic*, The New Yorker, December 11, 2017.

Optional readings:

- "Going from bad to worse: From Internet Voting to Blockchain voting"   doi: 10.1093/cybsec/tyaa025
- Internet Voting in Comparative Perspective: The case of Estonia
- https://www.jstor.org/stable/40647646
- Eddie S Glaude, *Democracy in Black: How Race Still Enslaves the American Soul*, excerpts
- Michal G. Hanchard, *The Spectre of Race: How Discrimination Haunts Western Democracy*, excerpts from Chapter 4

Class 8: Workers Rights.
Lead instructors: Ashley Lee and Lucy Bernholz.

AI and automation are transforming the nature of work. In this session, we examine how digital transformations in work and workplaces raise fundamental questions about the right to decent work. Workplaces of all kinds - schools, rideshares, factories and law firms - are increasingly places of full-time surveillance. The same app that enables you to call for a car from your phone makes the driver of that car subject to an "algorithmic boss." Globally, digital platforms and automation are creating new classes of underpaid, overworked labor. Labor rights groups are finding new ways to fight back, sometimes using the same data sources that corporations use to control the work without hiring the worker. We'll examine the ways technologies are being used by employers to expand their control of their workers and how workers are organizing for their right to decent work.

Required readings:

- Sarah T. Roberts, *Behind the Screen* (excerpt)
- Kate Crawford, *Atlas of AI*, Chapter 2. Labor
- Workers Info Exchange
  https://www.workerinfoexchange.org/
- Drivers Cooperative NYC https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/28/technology/nyc-uber-lyft-the-drivers-cooperative.html
- Gig workers around the world are finally organizing https://restofworld.org/2021/gig-workers-around-the-world-are-finally-organizing/

Optional readings:

- Labor Organizing in the Age of Surveillance, Charlotte Garden
  https://heinonline.org/HOL/P?h=hein.journals/stlulj63&i=67
- Ifeoma Ajunwa, Kate Crawford, and Jason Schultz, Limitless Worker Surveillance, 105 Cal. L. Rev. 735 (2017)., Available at SSRN: **https://ssrn.com/abstract=2746211**
- Tech Worker Handbook - https://techworkerhandbook.org/
- Predictive analytics to prevent organizing - https://www.morningbrew.com/hr/stories/2021/11/03/how-companies-use-predictive-analytics-to-get-ahead-of-union-drives
- https://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/data-algorithms-at-work/#_edn8

Guest speaker: Nina Hall

Week 9: Cultural Rights.

Lead instructors: Sam Bradshaw and Toussaint Nothias.

The Internet is a rich site for culture for communities around the world. But it also introduces several challenges for property, ownership and cultural rights. [Something about platforms and data colonialism]. At the same time, new and emerging technologies like blockchain are reshaping the value of culture and rights, and in ways that raise questions for fairness, equality, cultural rights, and even environmental protection. In this class we will discuss cultural rights in the context of social and digital technologies, the new challenges that are emerging, and how civil society works to protect cultures and communities through technological innovation.

Required readings:

- "Access Granted: Facebook's Free Basics in Africa", Toussaint Nothias, *Media, Culture, Society,* 2020.
- "NFTs are changing the cultural value of creation", Podcast, TechCrunch

Optional readings:

- "Angola's Wikipedia Pirates Are Exposing the Problems With Digital Colonialism", *Vice,* March 2016.

Guest speaker: Roderick Crooks (UC Irvine)

Week 10: Paths forward for digital civil society.

- In class presentations of student projects.