CSC356: Platform Activism

Smith College [Fall 2021]

Instructor
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Place & Time
Ford 345

Mondays
Usually 1:20-4:00pm
Occasionally 7:00-9:30pm

Course Overview

Networked platforms like social media sites, gig sharing apps, and game consoles have become important spaces for grassroots activism, but human-computer interaction (HCI) researchers continue to grapple with the question of how our work can be used to effect positive social change online. In CSC356 you will have the opportunity to:

- Examine how platforms shape our creative labor & communication
- Develop a critical perspective on the power of big tech
- Contrast approaches from HCI activists
- Practice participatory design with a grassroots community
- Build & release a new tech intervention on a media platform

Format & Workload

Class meets weekly on Monday afternoons, except once a month when it will be held in the evening. Those evening meetings will be announced the week prior with a reminder sent the day before. Classes will follow a **seminar format**. During the first 90 minutes we'll have a student-led discussion of the week's readings and after a long break we'll reconvene for 50 minutes of project workshop time. Expect to spend **8 hours per week outside of class** on your readings and major project assignments.

Reading Discussions & Major Projects

During this course you will critically discuss a selection of readings and complete a major project related to platform activism. You will be expected to **read 2-3 papers each week** and pose a question, reflection or topic for discussion in our Discord server. Twice during the semester you will **act as a discussant** who leads our class meeting by drawing on the group's reflections. You will use the knowledge you build from critically reflecting on the readings to inform the focus of your major project. Working either as individuals or in pairs, you will propose and **complete a research study or design intervention**. You may choose to undertake a literature review, conduct a community study, or build+launch a prototype. Regardless of the form, you will write a **3,000-4,000 word paper about your project** that you will present for discussion during our final meeting.

Weekly Schedule

Week	Date	Topic, Readings, Discussants & Project Due Dates
1	Sep. 6	[Labor Day]
2	Sep. 13	**Welcome & Introduction**

3	Sep. 20	**How Platforms Shape What Society Sees: The Algorithmic Lens**
		• *Twitter and Tear Gas Chap. 6: Platforms and Algorithms*
		  Zeynep Tufekci (2017)
		• *Custodians of the Internet Chap. 6: Facebook, Breastfeeding, Suspension*
		  Tarleton Gillespie (2018)
		
		Discussants: Ellen, Ileanna

4	Sep. 27	**How Platforms Hide the Humans Powering Them: The Legions of Oz**
		• *Custodians of the Internet Chap. 5: The Human Labor of Moderation*
		  Tarleton Gillespie (2018)
		• *Ghost Work Chap. 1: Humans in the Loop*
		  Mary L. Gray and Siddharth Suri (2019)
		
		Discussants: Ananda, Wakana

5	Oct. 4	**How Platforms Harness Creative Labor: The Panoptic Ouroboros**
		• *Bit by (Twitch) Bit: "Platform Capture" and the Evolution of Digital Platforms*
		  William Clyde Partin (2020)
		• *Cultures of Precarity and "Grinding" for Audiences on Twitch.tv*
		  Charlotte Panneton (In Press)
		• *Seeing Like the Streamers: Reprogramming the Panopticon*
		  Johanna Brewer (In Press)
		
		Discussants: Casey, Eleni

		Major Project Site/Topic Selection (Due: 10/3)
6	Oct. 11	[Autumn Recess]

7	Oct. 18	**Platforms, Resistance, and the Power of Storytelling**
		• *Hollaback! The Role of Storytelling Online in a Social Movement Organization*
		  Jill Dimond, Michaelanne Dye, Daphne LaRose, Amy Bruckman (2013)
		• *Design Justice Chap. 3: Design Narratives: From TXTMob to Twitter*
		  Sasha Costanza-Chock (2020)
		
		Discussants: Katie, Yuhan

		Major Project Proposal (Due: 10/17)

8	Oct. 25	**The Aspirations and Failings of Participatory Design**
		• *Design Matters in Participatory Design*
		  Liam J. Bannon, Pelle Ehn (2012)
		• *Design Justice Chap. 2: Design Practices: "Nothing About Us Without Us"*
		  Sasha Costanza-Chock (2020)
		
		Discussants: Bethany, Bri

9	Nov. 1	**Supporting Grassroots Communication with Novel Technology** • Turkopticon: Interrupting Worker Invisibility in Amazon Mechanical Turk Lilly Irani and M. Six Silberman (2013) • *"We Come Together as One…and Hope for Solidarity to Live On": On Designing Technologies for Activism and the Commemoration of Lost Lives* Angelika Strohmayer, Janis Lena Meissner, Alexander Wilson, Sarah Charlton, Laura McIntyre (2020) Discussants: Mackie, Yuanyuan
10	Nov. 8	**Sending in the Good Bots** • *Botivist: Calling Volunteers to Action Using Online Bots* Saiph Savage, Andrés Monroy-Hernández, Tobias Höllerer (2016) • *Bot-Based Collective Blocklists in Twitter: The Counterpublic Moderation of Harassment in a Networked Public Space* R. Stuart Geiger (2016) Discussants: Casey, Wakana
11	Nov. 15	**Channeling Community Power to Shut Down Harassment** • *Classification and Its Consequences for Online Harassment: Design Insights from HeartMob* Lindsay Blackwell, Jill Dimond, Sarita Schoenebeck, Cliff Lampe (2017) • *Inclusion at Scale: Deploying a Community-Driven Moderation Intervention on Twitch* Johanna Brewer, Morgan Romine, T.L. Taylor (2020) Discussants: Ellen, Mackie
12	Nov. 22	**From Perfunctory Participation to Equitable Engagements** • *"Participation Is Not Enough": Towards Indigenous-Led Co-Design* Dorian Peters, Susan Hansen, Jenny McMullan, Teresa Ardler, Janet Mooney, Rafael A. Calvo (2018) • *Deconstructing Community-Based Collaborative Design: Towards More Equitable Participatory Design Engagements* Christina Harrington, Sheena Erete, Anne Marie Piper (2019) Discussants: Bethany, Yuhan
		Major Project Paper Outline/Draft (Due: 11/21)
13	Nov. 29	**Confronting Systemic Erasure in and through HCI** • *Getting Ourselves Together: Data-Centered Participatory Design Research & Epistemic Burden* Jennifer Pierre, Roderic Crooks, Morgan Currie, Britt Paris, Irene Pasquetto (2021) • *I Can't Breathe: Reflections from Black Women in CSCW and HCI* Sheena Erete, Yolanda A. Rankin, and Jakita O. Thomas (2021) Discussants: Eleni, Katie, Yuanyuan

14	Dec. 6	**Emerging HCI Frameworks for Substantive Change** • *Critical Race Theory for HCI* Ihudiya Finda Ogbonnaya-Ogburu, Angela D. R. Smith, Alexandra To, Kentaro Toyama (2020) • *HCI Tactics for Politics from Below: Meeting the Challenges of Smart Cities* Cedric Deslandes Whitney, Teresa Naval, Elizabeth Quepons, Simrandeep Singh, Steven R. Rick, Lilly Irani (2021) Discussants: Ananda, Bri, Ileanna
14'	Dec. 10	**Major Projects Discussion** [Final Class Meets on a Friday]
		Major Project Paper (Due: 12/9)

Communication

All online communication for this course will take place **via Discord** (a text, voice, and video chat service popular with gamers, live streamers, and programmers). If you do not already have an account, please create one. **Join our server** using the invitation, then follow the instructions in the pinned message in #general to set your nickname and pronouns.

CSC356-F21 Server Invitation
https://discord.gg/RgARk5gahy

- #announcements: Important notices about deadlines, discussants, office hours, etc.
- #general: Discuss course themes, majors projects, off-topic ideas, etc.
- #reflections: Post your questions, thoughts, or topic prompts for the weekly readings.
- DMs: Message me directly for matters that require individual communication.

I will endeavor to answer time-sensitive messages within one workday, but please try to bring your questions to the group when possible. Chances are, someone else has been wondering the same thing. Sometimes I miss DMs, so don't be shy about pinging me again if you're waiting on a reply. Lastly, please note that I'm terrible at responding to email. I'll read it, but you'll either get a reply right away, or between two days and two years later.

Office Hours

Office hours are a time when you can **ask me questions about... anything!** Weekly drop-in hours are for any student who would like to stop by and chat. Drop-in hours occur on a rotating schedule; times and dates will be announced on Discord. You are also welcome to book a 1-1 appointment if you need a different time or would like to speak more privately. For now, office hours will be **held remotely** in my lab **on Gather**.

Inclusive Design Lab on Gather
https://gather.town/app/NfY57eEoJJb22wzP/InclusiveDesignLab

Grading
Assessment of performance in this course is weighted to reflect the workload.

- 50% Major project
- 25% Reading reflections & class participation
- 25% Discussant duties

Your success in this class will depend on **active engagement** with both the material and each other because platform activism is a group effort. To do well, you must demonstrate that you are working to master both **critical reflection and collective action**.

Academic Integrity
Most of the work for this class will be completed individually or in pairs. Regardless of the assignment, if you assist one another, either as a teammate or peer reviewer, you must **acknowledge your collaborators**. Likewise, I expect you to always **cite all sources** used in the preparation of your major project. This includes not only scholarly books, papers, and articles but also online magazines, YouTube videos, social media posts, etc.

Participation & Absences
Though formal attendance will not be taken, you won't be able to participate in class if you are not there. We only meet thirteen times so **your presence in each class matters**. If you know you will have a planned absence, please let me know two days in advance; and if you have an emergency, please inform me after you are safe.

Extensions & Lateness
It is essential you complete your work in a timely fashion in order to fully participate in the class discussions. Extensions will only be given in cases where the student's Dean provides a written request. **Lateness will impact assessments** and you should expect delayed feedback on work submitted after the deadline.

Comfy Class Policies
Laptops and phones can be distracting, but they are important tools in our work. I propose we might benefit from having a live chat available for silent participation during class, but we should discuss and collectively set a policy for how we use devices. Similarly, hydration is essential so you are welcome to bring beverages, but you must use **closed containers** to avoid spills. We will have two breaks during which you can have a snack, but while we are still masking let's **refrain from eating** during class.

Fostering Respect & Inclusion
During this course we will engage in scholarly discussions and activities that rely on your ability to collaborate. So that we can build our sense of community, please keep a paper placard with your **name and pronouns** on your desk. Similarly, make sure you change your Discord nickname to your preferred first name and set your pronouns in our channel. When communicating with one another, whether in class or online, I expect you to practice

active listening. When someone is speaking (or typing), you should be focused on understanding what they are expressing rather than thinking of how you will respond. Additionally, I ask you to remember that we all come from different backgrounds that shape our unique perspectives, and so we ought to **respect one another** when we have sincere differences of opinions.

Diversity Statement & Equity Commitment

As a mixed-race, Native, non-binary, neurodivergent person who was the first in their family to earn a doctoral degree, I have stake in bettering, and a first-hand knowledge regarding, the experience of marginalized folks in our society. I know that a welcoming learning environment can have a real impact, and so I am committed to making this **classroom a comfortable place** for all my students. Please let me know if you ever have thoughts, questions, or concerns about ensuring that we **treat one another equitably**.

Accessibility & Accommodations

Learning and teaching with masks on will be a challenge for all. My voice will be amplified during class. but if you have trouble understanding what someone is saying, hold up three fingers ('W' in the ASL alphabet) to indicate you are not clear on what they are sharing. You are welcome to use a live captioning app on your mobile device if it increases your ability to understand when others speak. Course materials including readings, slides, and lecture notes will be provided as PDFs that are screen reader compatible. If you have any issues accessing the materials, let me know as soon as possible and I will work to find a solution. Should you encounter barriers to participation in this or any other course, please reach out to Laura Rauscher, **Director of Disability Services, by calling (413) 585-2071** to make an appointment to discuss support and accommodations.

Health Resources

College can be stressful, even more so in the midst of a pandemic, but you are not alone. Please reach out for help if you are feeling unwell or overwhelmed. The Schacht Center on campus provides a variety of **free & confidential** health and counseling services. You can email healthservices@smith.edu or call (413) 585-2250 for any medical concerns. To set up an appointment for mental health support you can email counselingservices@smith.edu or **call (413) 585-2840 if you are in crisis**.

Acknowledgments

Some of the conceptualization for this course was inspired by previous classes at Smith and other institutions. Thanks to my academic colleagues for sharing their syllabi.