PT330 DIGITAL POLITICS

Seminar Leader: Magdalena Taube
Course Times: Tuesdays, 1:30 – 4:45 p.m.
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Office Hours: -

Course Description
The course “Digital Politics” is an introduction to critical internet studies with a hands-on approach. Berlin has a reputation of being the “Capital of Digital Dissidence” with many important parties to this movement, including anti-surveillance groups, internet freedom activists and relevant NGOs residing in the German capital. Yet, what does this status for the city mean exactly? How are politics shaped within the digital realm? What are the technological means available, and the underlying theoretical approaches to the question of their use? This course provides theoretical as well as practical knowledge about the internet as a political tool. Furthermore, there will be a strong focus on internet politics and policy. A number of experts in the field of internet activism, surveillance and citizen media will join us and introduce their projects to the class, giving first-hand insights into their work. We will also make field trips to the actual spaces of digital activism here in Berlin to find out why Berlin is referred to as the “Capital of Digital Dissidence.” In addition to reading requirements addressing the theoretical basics of internet studies, there will also be a strong focus on using digital tools in a practical way. With the help of these tools we will create an online multimedia documentary. (Here’s an example: http://berlinergazette.de/are-we-up-for-anonymity/?p=1)

Requirements

Attendance
Attendance at all classes is expected. More than two absences (that is, absence from one three hour session) in a semester will significantly affect the participation grade for the course. Students should consult the Student Handbook for regulations governing periods of illness or leaves of absence.

Writing Assignments
Students are required to submit a mid-term essay of 5000 words on a subject of the class. At the end of the term students will turn in their seminar project which is a group work by 3 to 4 students. The seminar project is a digital longform essay that contains written text by each student (5000 words each) and other multimedia elements such as video, info graphics, maps, photo.

Other Assignments
Students will give short presentations introducing digital tools that will be used within the course. It’s possible to form groups of up to 3 students to hold these presentations. The presentation should be 15 minutes long and should contain a digital handout. The specifics of each presentation will be clarified once the course has started.

Grade Breakdown
classroom participation: 30 %
student project (digital longform essay): 30 %
midterm paper: 15 %
presentation: 15 %

Schedule*

**Session #1: Introduction - What is the aim of this course? (August 30)**
The first session will focus on digital longform storytelling as a means for publishing on the web. Furthermore we will brainstorm topics for the student project and get to know each other.
Reading requirement: [http://berlinerгазетe.de/are-we-up-for-anonymity/?p=1](http://berlinerгазетe.de/are-we-up-for-anonymity/?p=1)

**Session #2: Politics and the Web: Searching for the Digital Street (September 6)**
What are the tactics of political activism on the web? What is the historical context of civil disobedience on the Internet? In this session we will focus on the DDOS attack as a form of political activism. The second half of the session will introduce wordpress as a publishing tool.
Student presentation #1: How to use wordpress

**Session #3: The fight for privacy on the web (September 13)**
This session will focus on the topic of internet security and privacy. It will contain a so called CryptoParty. The term Crypto-Party was coined in the 1990s in the wake of the Cypherpunk movement and it is a “grassroots global endeavour to introduce the basics of practical cryptography such as the Tor anonymity network, key signing parties, disk encryption and virtual private networks to the general public. The project primarily consists of a series of free public workshops” (Wikipedia) Within our course we will have a guest who is a cyber security specialists and who will introduce basic concepts of digital security.
Guest expert: Michael Prinzinger

**Session #4: In Action: The many faces of Anonymous (September 20)**
According to Wikipedia “Anonymous is a loosely associated international network of activist and hacktivist entities”. What are the political claims of this group? How was it formed and who cultivates it today? In this session we will introduce Anonymous and the many digital tactics the group applies. A critical analysis ensues.
Student presentation #2: What is “Anonymous”?

**Session #5: Social Media and political Movements part 1 – the case of Sazae in Japan (September 27)**
“SAZAE bot is a twitter bot, mainly active on Twitter in Japan. It is a parody-bot avatar of the most famous character in the country. These are the 3 distinctive features that distinguish SAZAE bot from other typical parody bots. The concept of SAZAE bot is “Anonism”, which is a coined word that indicates anonymous activities. This demonstrates the idea of devoting one’s consciousness to anonymous activities throughout their daily lives, whether online or offline.” (Prix Ars Electronica) – We will talk with 2 people from Japan who are actively involved in creating SAZAE.

**Guest expert:** Riho and Masa, 2 activists from Japan, involved with SAZAE

**Student presentation #3:** Critical introduction to twitter

**Session #6: Social Media and political Movements part 2 - #BlackLivesMatter (October 4)**
#BlackLivesMatter ist a political movement that would not have been possible without the web, especially the social media website Twitter. In 2013, the movement began with the use of the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter after the shooting death of the African American Trayvon Martin. In this session we will introduce twitter as a tool for political activism and analyze the BLM movement.


**6 p.m.: Field trip:** Netzpolitischer Abend at c-base (more info to come)

**Deadline:** Draft for student projects

**Session #7 Digital Politics in Berlin (October 11)**
A guest expert will explain the political sphere of digital politics with a focus on Berlin. A first field trip will bring the students to the famous c-base in Berlin – a hacker space which opens its doors for the public for regular discussion with the title “Netzpolitischer Abend“.

**Guest expert:** Chris Piallat, Referent Netzpolitik German Bundestag

**Deadline:** Mid term paper – please provide your essay of at least 5000 words until Oct 11.

**Session #8: Social Media Abyss? (October 25)**
This session will focus on negative impacts of social media usage. Abiol Lual Deng, a human rights activists and social media expert will report on how rumours spread through social media can have massive impact in instable regions.

**Reading requirement:** Lovink, Geert (2016): Social Media Abyss. (not published yet, will be provided by Taube)

**Guest expert:** Abiol Lual Deng, Social Media Analyst, Doctors without Borders, Bucavu (Congo)

**Session #9 (November 1): Radical Imagination**
“Traces of financialization—the intertwined economic, political social and cultural resonances of financial capitalism—can be found in children’s play. This demonstrates both the saturation of society with the ethos of speculative accumulation and the dependence of financialization on that saturation. Examining the case of children’s play with Pokémon cards (a globally popular collectable card game) Haiven argues that children use these artifacts to gain the skills, competencies and forms of subjectivity germane to a financialized society. He posits that Pokémon card play and trading allows children to develop skills in navigating a world of rapidly shifting, relational values, all within and as part of a broader paradigm of capitalist financialization.” (M. Haiven) – In this session we will turn our focus on capitalism and capitalism critique. The hype around the augmented reality game Pokémon Go in the summer 2016 will be analysed critically and put into the context of digital politics.


**Guest expert:** Max Haiven, Canada

**Session #10: #refugeeswelcome - Refugee movements in Berlin (November 8)**
Since the summer of 2015 numerous people in Berlin have been involved in forming support infrastructures for refugees. This work has not only politicized the so called “Willkommensbürger” but also has an impact on the live of the refugees. What is the role of social networks in this field? How do people use facebook and other platforms? We will talk with Sarah Mousavi who is a refugee activist herself.


**Guest expert:** Sarah Mousavo, refugee activist, Berlin

**Student presentation #4:** Critical introduction to facebook.

**Session #11: Snowden Files for all? Debate and Film Screening (November 15)**
The Snowden revelations have caused a global debate on the most pressing issues of our post-digital societies: democracy and privacy, accountability and power of governments as well as corporations. Yet, what does it mean to handle the documents in a responsible manner? How can we preserve them in accessible and sustainable ways? How can we transform them into a knowledge commons? At the beginnings of this process we have to deal with the challenge to transform the Snowden files into public records, e.g. by making them accessible through public libraries. This session will focus on a case study. This session will also feature a film screening of the Award winning documentary Citizen Four by Laura Poitras.

**Reading requirements:**
- [https://vimeo.com/146362950](https://vimeo.com/146362950) (video)

**Student presentation #5**: Data visualization.

**Session #12: The representation of “minorities” on the web (November 15)**
This session will broaden the perspective of the class by opening a new issue all together: The representation of „minorities“ on the web. This is a deeply political issue in the digital realm and there will be a guest expert introducing the work of Leidmedien.de. This web site and initiative focuses on the representation of people with disabilities in the media. Leidmedien uses social media as their main channel and will be an interesting case study as well as research topic.
Guest expert: Lilan Masuhr, Leidmedien

**Session #13: What’s next? (November 29)**
This session will focus on the question how the futures of the web could look like. We will read and discuss the work of Astra Taylor, who claims: "The Internet has been hailed as an unprecedented democratizing force, a place where everyone can be heard and all can participate equally. But how true is this claim? In a seminal dismantling of techno-utopian visions, The People’s Platform argues that for all that we "tweet" and "like" and "share," the Internet in fact reflects and amplifies real-world inequities at least as much as it ameliorates them. Online, just as off-line, attention and influence largely accrue to those who already have plenty of both."


**Session #14: Project work (December 6)**

**Deadline for student projects** (digital longform essay): December 10, 10 a.m.

**Session #14: Presentation of student projects (December 13)**
Presentation of digital longform projects.

*Please note that the schedule and reading requirements may be subject to changes.*