This course will explore the politics of our contemporary digital landscape. It will track the evolution of the digital media landscape from the early internet to the social web, through to how today’s digital infrastructures shape the public sphere and the social, economic and political interactions that it facilitates. Digital media and online platforms, once celebrated as a democratic good for giving voice and representation to those excluded from the public sphere and from political processes, have increasingly come under scrutiny for how they can also intensify social and economic inequality, amplify political divisions, lower the character of our civic discourse, and even undermine democracy. Like other technologies before them, digital media are profoundly political -- they are developed, shaped, and used according to specific social, political, geographic and economic conditions. At the same time, digital media are powerful sociotechnical agents which reshape publics, politics and the governance of society. At the end of this class, students should understand and critically engage with this reciprocal relationship between media and politics, including the central debates, controversies and issues that shape the contemporary digital landscape. Students will be trained to present, comment and write critically about the power, politics and governance of digital media.

Learning Objectives

- To highlight critical perspectives in the current debates around the influence and power of digital technologies.
- To demonstrate in discussion, writing, and presentation an informed understanding of how digital media shapes politics.
- To understand the history of the Internet, and its evolution from a decentralised ecosystem to the current platform economy.
- To engage critically with a broad interdisciplinary literature

These outcomes will be demonstrated through weekly memos, a case study presentation and a final essay. Active participation is mandatory.

GENERAL INFORMATION
Professor: Taylor Owen
Email: taylor.owen@mcgill.ca
Office hours: Room & hours

Teaching Assistant: Maxime Coulon-Hamelin [maxime.coulon-hamelin@mail.mcgill.ca]

Required text: All course readings will be available on MyCourses.

Grading Breakdown

Pop Quizzes -- 10%
Weekly memos (10 in total) -- 20%
Case presentation and memo (group) -- 30%
Paper proposal -- 5%
Final paper -- 35%

SCHEDULE OF COURSE READINGS

PART 1: The Evolution of Media & Digital Technologies

WEEK 1: INTRODUCTION

Monday (Jan 6): Introduction to the course structure. The short first class will provide an introduction to the syllabus, grading breakdown, and course format.

Wednesday (Jan 8): Introduction to course themes (media, politics, governance)

NOTE: Please start Week 2 readings as it is a bit longer

WEEK 2: FROM THE EARLY INTERNET TO THE SOCIAL WEB

The Internet was born out of a confluence of government research, military funding, entrepreneurialism, and brazen ideological optimism. In this class we will discuss the history of the Internet, from the hackers who imagined personal computing to the rise of some of the world's largest and most powerful technology companies, whose products were said to take the power of publishing and broadcasting away from established institutions, to provide individuals with the ability to speak to and report on the world around them, to enable a new form of collective action that would radically reshape global politics.

Monday (Jan 13)


Barlow, 1996. A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace. [Link]


Zuckerman, 2013. Cute Cats to the Rescue? Participatory Media and Political Expression. [Link]

*Disruptive Power*, Introduction

**Wednesday (Jan 15)**

CASE STUDIES:

1. Compare, contrast and evaluate the use of social media by the Howard Dean and Obama campaigns.
2. How did Egyptian activists use social media in their Tahrir Square protests, and how did the Egyptian state crack down?

**WEEK 3: THE PLATFORM ECOSYSTEM**

In the past decade, the services provided by so-called “platform companies” have become impactful spaces where powerful social movements, activism, and protest can be organized, where electoral campaigns can be contested and democratic participation can be mobilized. The perceived political importance of platforms has grown to the extent that many disparate events — ranging from Brexit and global upswings in populism and nationalism to the genocide in Myanmar — are increasingly being laid on the doorstep of a handful of North American technology companies. In this class, we explore platforms political companies both as political actors that engage in governance (with a focus on how they engage in content moderation) and are governed (through policy, regulation, and law).

**Monday (Jan 20)**


Wednesday (Jan 22nd)

CASE STUDIES:

(1) Document and critically evaluate the growth of Facebook and how it has evolved as it grew and expanded internationally.
(2) How has Amazon transformed retail in America?

PART 2. How digital infrastructure shapes the public sphere

WEEK 4: MIS/DISINFORMATION

Only a few years ago, digital technologies were being portrayed as not only revolutionary, but perhaps even inherently democratizing. Recently, however, the wave of optimism seems to have died out, and is increasingly being replaced by concerns that various digital technologies are being increasingly used as a form of social control. By manipulating voters, interfering in elections, and serving up misinformation during important political events, only six years after “the revolution was tweeted,” people are now seriously asking if “social media is killing democracy.” What happened? Are these concerns legitimate, and where did they come from? In this class, we will discuss the latest research on media manipulation, ‘fake news,’ bots, and more.

Monday (Jan 27th):


Wardle, Claire and Hossein Derakhshan, 2018. Information Disorder Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policymaking. First Draft

Wednesday (Jan 29th)

CASE STUDIES:

(1) How did the Russian government intervene in the 2016 US presidential election, what was their objective, and did it work?
(2) How did the Canadian government prepare for potential foreign interference and information manipulation in the 2019 Federal election, and what role did mis/disinformation play in the election?
WEEK 5: JOURNALISM

The practice and institutions of journalism are in the midst of a radical transformation. At the core of this is a shift from a hierarchical industrial mode of production to a networked post-industrial model. We will discuss how and why this shift is occurring and what its implications are for a political system that is meant to be held accountable by a free press.

Monday (Feb 3):


Thompson, 2018. Inside Facebook’s Two Years of Hell. *Wired.*


Wednesday (Feb 5):

CASE STUDIES

(1) Compare the business models and journalism practices and norms of The New York Times to that of Buzzfeed.

(2) Explore the history, characterises and reach of the so called “Intellectual Dark Web.” How does this network of sites compete with traditional news outlets? What does it tell us about the state of journalism on platforms such as Facebook and YouTube.

WEEK 6: MONEY

In this week, we explore how the financial models underlying platforms economy, including the attention economy, surveillance capitalism and gig labour. This will include discussion of how data profiles are used to target ads at users, how attention and behaviour have become commodities, how data is used to provide content that is most likely to result in engagement and increased time on the site, and how technologies are having a profound global impact on labour, work, and trade. We discuss the effects of 21st century “platform capitalism” on the information ecosystem and on the global economy.

Monday (Feb 10):


Excerpts Wu, Tim. (2016). The attention merchants: The epic scramble to get inside our heads

**Wednesday (Feb 12):**

**CASE STUDIES:**

1. Outline how Uber uses data in its business model, detail the evolution of the company and its critics, and explore how it represents an example of the platform economy.
2. Detain and map the ecosystem of data brokers and how these data can be used for political microtargeting by political campaigns.

**WEEK 7: SURVEILLANCE**

Just as the Internet has empowered individuals and networks, it has also proven remarkably susceptible to the re-establishment of state control. In this class we will explore how states are both threatened by digital technologies, and how both democracies and autocracies are using control over these networks to watch, influence, and exert control over their citizens.

**Monday (Feb 17)**


Glenn Greenwald, 2016. The Surveillance State, in Journalism After Snowden, Bell and Owen eds.

Jon Penney, Chilling Effects, Internet Policy Review

Disruptive Power Chapter 8, ‘The Violence of Algorithms’
**Wednesday (Feb 19):**

CASE STUDIES:

(1) Detail the history of the Sidewalk Labs project in Toronto and explore how it represents the extension of surveillance into the public realm

(2) Provide a summary of the company Palantir, and how it is used in both the domestic and international domains.

**WEEK 8: ALGORITHMS AND POWER**

As the largest tech giants (Facebook, Amazon, Microsoft, Apple) shift to algorithmic processing and decision-making using AI and machine learning, their power and potential bias increases – while they are global companies, they do not universally affect all users in the same way. Such systems can “bake in” inequalities at several levels – who gets to build these systems and where they are built, who the imagined users are, who profits from them, and what political goals they serve. This class will explore how power relations become embedded into the design of AI systems, the social implications of their use in both the private and public sectors, and the contemporary debates around making fair, transparent and ethical AI.

**Monday (Feb 24):**


Discriminating Systems: Gender, Race, and Power in AI: *AI Now*.


Meyers-West, 2019. In the Outcry over the Apple Card, Bias is a Feature, Not a Bug. *AI Now Medium*.

Opinion: AI for Good is Often Bad. *Wired*.


**Wednesday (Feb 26):**

CASE STUDIES:

(1) Provide a summary of the potential harms of facial recognition technology for the public sphere and detail the recent ban of facial recognition by the city of San Francisco
(2) Compare and contrast efforts to make “AI for Good” through calls for Fair, Accountable, Transparent and Ethical systems from a technical perspective, with a social justice approach by the Data Justice Lab.

Paper Proposal Due Feb 28th.

WEEK 9: NO CLASS ** READING WEEK **

WEEK 9: ACTIVISM

This week we will explore the impact of digital technologies on the institutions and practices of activism and political organization. From the Arab Spring to today’s most impactful social movements (such as #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter), activists and civil society seem to be using social networks to organize more effectively and efficiently. But does digital activism translate meaningfully into concrete collective action and change in the long term?

Monday (March 9):

Disruptive Power Chapter 3, ‘Spaces of Dissent’


Wednesday (March 11):

CASE STUDIES:

(1) Profile the Kony2012 movement and position it within the debate about slacktivism.

(2) How did the #metoo movement change how we think about digital activism. Does it provide a positive example of collective online activism?

PART 3. Governing the Digital Public Sphere

WEEK 9: CONTENT MODERATION

There are over a billion pieces of content uploaded to Facebook every day, and over 500 hours of video to YouTube every minute. This content is posted in hundreds of languages and must abide by the laws of democratic and autocratic countries alike. The challenge of this task is magnified by the pace with which
problematic or illegal content can circulate, human costs of moderating violence and extreme content, as well as the significant legal, ethical cultural and political complexity of determining what speech should be removed. This week we will explore how content moderation shapes our civic and political discourse.

**Monday (March 16): Content moderation**


The Secret lives of content moderators in the US. *The Verge*


**Wednesday (March 18):**

**CASE STUDIES:**

(1) Detail the rational, history, implementation and critiques of Facebook’s supreme court. What problems does this hope to solve, and what challenges does it face?

(2) Compare the recent changes in political ad policies at Facebook, Google and Twitter and how this effect the 2020 US election.

**WEEK 10: PLATFORM GOVERNANCE**

As pressure mounts for platform companies and the social, political and economic activities that they enable to be better governed, two competing democratic blocks are emerging (we will talk about a third, the Chinese model, next week. The EU is moving swiftly in the direction of a rights based approach to platform governance, with broad regulatory and legal restrictions on content policy, data right and competition. Meanwhile, many in the US are advocating for a firm-centric approach which would potential see anti-trust policy applied to the platforms, reversing prior acquisitions and breaking up core services. This class will explore these two models for platform governance and the domestic and geopolitical factors driving each.

**Monday (March 23):**

Owen, Taylor 2019. The Case for Platform Governance. CIGI Essay. Link


Who Strikes Fear Into Silicon Valley? Margrethe Vestager, Europe’s Antitrust Enforcer, New York Times


**Wednesday (March 25)**

CASE STUDIES:

(1) What is NetzDG and why was it adopted by the German government, how has it been implemented, what were the unintended consequences?

(2) Detail the case for using antitrust policy to break up American tech companies.

**WEEK 11: THE CHINESE MODEL**

The third geopolitical block emerging in the platform governance discussion (aside from the US and the EU), is an autocratic state-centric model being developed and exported by Chinese companies. This week we explore how Chinese state companies developed an alternative model for the internet, how the state has used this model to control the political activity of its citizens, and how and why this tech-stack is now being outsourced to other countries.

**Monday (March 30)**


**Wednesday (April 1)**
CASE STUDIES:

(1) How is the political decision over Huawei 5G evolving in Canada? Why is this a key strategic asset and what are the geopolitical considerations?

(2) What is TikTok? How did it emerge as a global social network, what is its relation to the Chinese State, why and how are they supporting it and what are they gaining from it?

WEEK 12: THE FUTURE OF THE INTERNET

What are the implications of an Internet that is increasingly influenced by a handful of large technology companies? An Internet which is used by governments to spread propaganda, tamper with elections, and mislead voters? An Internet which experiences critical security issues, especially as millions more devices come online every year? In the final class, we will step back and reflect on the future of the Internet and its impact on global affairs, domestic politics, and society.

Monday (April 6)


Naughton, 2016. “Has the Internet Become a Failed State?” The Guardian.


Future of the Internet with Vint Cerf, transcript.

ASSIGNMENTS

POP Quiz - 10 %

Pop quizzes will be administered in lectures and will cover basic concepts from the week’s readings and lecture material. If you are completing all of the reading and attending the lectures, they should be very simple. There will be anywhere from 7-12 pop quizzes in the semester. Your lowest pop quiz score will be dropped (including zero) and the rest will be weighed accordingly.

Weekly Memos (10 total) - 20%

For 10 out of the 12 weeks, you will write a short, approximately 500 words (2 paragraph) memo that engages with at least two of the week’s readings. You have considerable freedom to pose questions you had as you read; contrast readings; connect themes you saw emerging among texts and critique authors’
arguments. The goal is to reflect upon the readings and share your own reflections of the week’s theme. You may use the description/questions under each week’s heading on the syllabus as your guideposts. These memos should be posted through the “Discussion” section of MyCourses by 6pm on the Sunday before Monday’s class. Responses cannot be done ahead of time for the term. Each assignment is worth 2 points: 0=missing or does not meet expectations; 1=approaches expectations; 2=meets expectations.

Case Study Presentation – 30%

Each week, on “Day 2” of our course schedule, two groups will present on a case (one case per group) related to that week’s theme. Students will sign up for cases and dates in class on week 1. Groups cannot be changed once they are set. Each group member will receive the same grade (1 grade per group). The goal of this session is to walk the class through the case and outline why it is important, for understanding the week’s topic.

This assignment will involve two parts:

a. Briefing memo (40%)

You will produce a 3-page memo summarising the case. This should be written in an accessible style, should be heavily hyperlinked, and can include bullets, lists and diagrams. This memo will be circulated to the class. It must include:

- Two key readings
- Background of case
- Why it matters and what does this tell us about the week’s theme
- Summary of scholarly and public debate
- Discussion Questions

The memo must be sent to the TA on the Monday at 5pm before the week of your presentation

Email to maxime.coulon-hamelin@mail.mcgill.ca with subject: “Case Study Assignment”

b. Presentation (60%)

In your group, you will make a 20 minute presentation to the class, outlining the case and the debate about it in a dynamic way. You should use slides for this presentation and all group members must actively participate.

Paper Proposal - 5% DUE: Friday February 28th.

In preparation for your final paper (see below), you will submit a one-page proposal that describes what you’re going to write about, what theories or questions you’ll be working with, and what literature (from class and outside sources) you will be drawing from. Bullet-point form is acceptable. This is an opportunity for you to receive feedback before you begin your final paper, so use this opportunity to your advantage.

Final Paper - 35 % DUE: April 6

The final paper will be approximately 7-8 pages, or 4000 words. You may choose to conduct a ‘deep analysis’ of a given theme from class, to the extent that you move your discussion considerably beyond what has already been covered in class (course powerpoints, reading material, student case presentations
and class discussion) OR you may choose an ‘evaluation paper’ on a topic not covered in class that relates to media and politics, broadly constituted. The paper requirements will be discussed in class in advance of the due date.

**MCGILL COURSE POLICIES & STUDENT RESOURCES**

Mobile phones, smartphones, IM programs, audio players and other gadgets or programs that make noise or distract you or your classmates are not welcome in our classroom. Please turn them off at the start of class.

No audio or video recording of any kind is allowed in class without the explicit permission of the instructor. MC2 devices are not to be used for voice communication without the explicit permission of the instructor.

**Grading policy:**

Grades will be assigned according to the scale set out in the Arts and Sciences calendar, reproduced below. Students should note the following “definitions” attached to letter grades, as these will be observed strictly: “good” work will receive a grade in the C range; “very good” work will receive a grade in the B range; “excellent” work will receive a grade in the A range; the grade of A will be reserved for work that is unambiguously “outstanding.” It is expected that the distribution of grades in this course will reflect normal standards for courses at this level in the arts and sciences at Canadian universities.

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<th>Numerical Scale of Grades</th>
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<td>A-</td>
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*Grade Appeals:*
Clarification of graded assignments can be a very valuable learning experience. However, grade appeals are typically without merit. Academics place high-value on published work that has been peer-reviewed because we believe that authors are not the best judges of the intellectual quality of their own work. There is no appeals process for scholarly peer review: academics must accept the judgments of peer reviewers contracted by the venues to which they submit their work. This standard informs my approach to grade appeals: it is assumed that you are not the best judge of the quality of your own research and writing. I will only ever elevate a student’s grade on an assignment for one of two reasons: the student was not held to the same standards as everyone else; or a calculation error was made in the grade. Calculation errors will be corrected, with apologies, at any time.

Students seeking clarification of a grade should review the assignment and make an appointment to discuss the grade with the teaching assistant. Please keep in mind the qualifications regarding letter grades set out above.

If further clarification is required, students may schedule a meeting to discuss the assignment with the professor. The professor will neither defend nor contest the grader’s/TA’s evaluation of the paper, but will discuss possibilities for improvement on subsequent assignments.

If a student wishes to dispute a grade, the following procedures must be followed:

No sooner than 48 hours after receiving the grade and no later than 5 working days after receiving the grade, you must submit a 1-2 page letter (printed on paper, not by email) to the professor, detailing the grounds for the appeal, accompanied by the original, graded paper and any evidence to which you refer. Please provide a postal or e-mail address for the response.

If a review of the assignment is granted, it will be graded *sui generis*, which means that the grade could remain the same, be elevated or be reduced.

**Late submissions and missed exams:**

Late Papers will be penalized 1/3 of a letter grade per day that they are late, including weekends (ex. A two-day late B+ paper counts as a B-). Late papers will be excused only in exceptional and unavoidable circumstances that are supported by appropriate documentation. If you know you won’t be able to meet a deadline set up a meeting well before the due date to make alternative arrangements. Make up exams will only be arranged if the professor is provided with appropriate documentation (i.e. a doctor’s note) no later than one week after the missed exam.

**McGill University statement on academic integrity:** McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the code of student conduct and disciplinary procedures (see [www.mcgill.ca/integrity](http://www.mcgill.ca/integrity) for more information). Students should note that the professor also values academic integrity very highly, and will be vigilant in its enforcement. In accord with McGill University’s Charter of Students’ Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.
Further Resources:

Accommodations: If you require accommodations due to special circumstances, challenges or disabilities, please notify both the professor and Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD) as soon as possible. The OSD provides a broad range of support and services to assist students, faculty, and staff with disabilities. (3100 Brown Student Services Bldg., 398-6009 (voice), 398-8198 (TDD), http://www.mcgill.ca/osd/).

Illness: Students are responsible for material covered in all classes, including those missed due to illness. Examinations will not be re-scheduled, and assignment due date extensions will not be considered, for any reason other than documented illness. Anyone unable to attend examinations or complete assignments due to illness is expected to make every effort to contact the professor prior to the examination or due date, and to co-operate in arranging a make-up examination or revised due date. If unable to reach the instructor, students should contact the Department of Art History & Communication Studies at 514.398.1828. Appropriate documentation will be required to support requests for special consideration due to illness (see http://www.mcgill.ca/oasis/general/advising/illness).

Academic resources: Students looking for additional assistance with academic reading, study, research and writing skills should consult the McGill academic resources website at www.mcgill.ca/students/academicresources/.

Counseling: The Counseling Service provides personal, academic, and career counseling to undergraduate and graduate students. They also offer workshops on study skills, multiple choice exams, and text anxiety/stress management. The service is located at suite 4200 Brown Student Services Bldg, 398-3601 www.mcgill.ca/counselling/. A list of workshops can be found at: http://www.mcgill.ca/counselling/workshops .

Additional Student Resources

Social Equity and Diversity Education (SEDE) McGill for issues surrounding diversity and inclusion on campus: https://www.mcgill.ca/equity_diversity/

Sexual Assault Center of the McGill Students Society for confidential support and resources for community members experiencing or witnessing sexual violence: http://www.sacomss.org/wp/ Office for Sexual Violence Response, Support and Education (OSVRSE) for individuals impacted by sexual violence: https://www.mcgill.ca/osvrse/.

McGill Writing Centre for students needing free assistance with academic or professional writing skills: https://www.mcgill.ca/mwc/

First Nations and McGill

McGill University is on land which has long served as a site of meeting and exchange amongst Indigenous peoples, including the Haudenosaunee and Anishinabeg nations. We acknowledge and thank the diverse Indigenous people whose footsteps have marked this territory on which peoples of the world now gather.
L’Université McGill est sur un emplacement qui a longtemps servi de lieu de rencontre et d’échange entre les peuples autochtones, y compris les nations Haudenosaunee et Anishinabeg. Nous reconnaissons et remercions les divers peuples autochtones dont les pas ont marqué ce territoire sur lequel les peuples du monde entier se réunissent maintenant.