

COMM/SPP/CICS 627 Spring 2026 - Fixing Platform Power

Class Time: Monday, 7-9:30 pm

Class location: CS 142

I am planning to teach in person. If COVID or any other emergency prevents us from meeting in person, we will move to my zoom room: <https://umass-amherst.zoom.us/my/ethanzuckerman>

Otherwise, please plan on attending each session in person. This is a highly participatory class with lots of group work. It's hard to get the full experience virtually, and the second half of each class will be basically impossible to attend virtually - each session will be recorded on Echo360 in case you are forced to miss classes.

Instructor: Ethan Zuckerman (ethanz@umass.edu)

In person office hours: Tuesday 4-6pm, 530 Thompson Hall. No reservations necessary, and office hours are a shared experience - your visit will likely overlap with another student, and that's by design. But if you want one on one time with me, or you want to discuss something personal, email me and we will set up a different time, likely via zoom.

I highly recommend coming to office hours - this is a fairly big class, and our best chance to meet and talk one on one will likely come during office hours. You should come visit with me whether or not you're having difficulties in the class. There are usually snacks.

Course description

For the past decade, user-generated participatory media - social media - has emerged as the dominant model for content of the Internet. From Facebook to Twitter, YouTube to Wikipedia, content created by non-professionals and circulated for commercial and non-commercial motives underpins seven of the top 10 websites in the US, and has become an increasingly important component of the news ecosystem. In the last few years, short video content - notably TikTok, Instagram reels and YouTube shorts - has become a hugely important part of the media ecosystem.

With the launch of ChatGPT in November 2022, a new type of participatory media has emerged. The novel content created by large language models, image generators and other AI-driven tools is created by machines, but those creations are the result of human prompts. (Virtually all these systems are trained on huge sets of data from user-generated material, and the sharing of AI-generated material is now transforming existing social media.)

While participatory media relies on humans - directly and indirectly - contemporary participatory media is characterized by a reliance on large, centralized and extremely powerful companies, often referred to as "platforms". Humans provide the interactions, but platforms provide the stage for those interactions. There's an increasing awareness - from users, policymakers,

scholars and others - that platforms are not neutral actors. They have their own agendas, and they are extremely powerful in shaping user action, to the point where there is widespread concern that what's good for platforms is often harmful for users.

Platform power wouldn't matter but for the fact that platforms are extremely popular, and they are popular because they are often useful for their users. But we are in the midst of a broad, international discussion about what relationship users and platforms should have to one another. What if social media platforms are leading to increased political polarization, or generative AI tools are undermining our collective agreement as to what's true? What if social media feeds or AI tools are being designed to maximize our engagement with them? Who is responsible for maximizing the benefits platform tools can bring us, and minimizing the harms? Corporations, governments, users ourselves?

This class examines possible problems with existing modes of social media, AI and platform power and discusses ways in which these tools could be a benefit to individuals and societies, develops case studies of successful and healthy online communities, and ultimately designs and builds tools to improve existing participatory platforms or replace them with novel models. Students will write reflectively about weekly readings and discussions and participate in multi-week projects, ultimately building teams to work on final projects.

(Note: all readings and assignments are subject to change! Don't read too far in advance - this field changes daily, and I will be swapping readings in and out as new research and writing appears.)

Course Objectives:

If all goes well, students will learn to:

- Understand and analyze contemporary debates about the digital public sphere, particularly as they concern AI, social media and platform power
- Discuss advantages and disadvantages of regulatory, legislative, technical and normative ways to regulating participatory platforms
- Work in multifunctional teams to brainstorm, prototype, and use methods of user-centric design
- Present and defend ideas about the design of interventions to improve the digital public sphere

Course requirements:

There are no textbooks required for the course and the instructor will provide all materials for participation in in-class exercises. All readings are available online and are linked to from this syllabus.

Students must complete readings for each class on noon the day of class, and submit a thoughtful, brief (one paragraph maximum) question to help stimulate in class discussion. Students must participate fully in in-class discussions and small group work.

Method of Instruction

This class will meet on Monday nights from approximately 7pm - 9:30pm for synchronous discussion and project work. Students are expected to do the readings before class. I will offer a lecture that offers context for the readings - the lecture makes lots more sense if you've done the reading. :-)

Each week, students will submit a question for discussion by midday Monday - discussion Monday night will be shaped by these questions. Roughly half the class will be an overview of what we've read, and discussion of the questions you've brought up. The second half of class will be a series of exercises designed to help you work together in teams, to expand your working methods to include "design thinking" and to prepare you for the teamwork inherent in the final two projects.

Class participation will require approximately 2.5 hours per week. Reading and writing will likely require 6-10 hours weekly.

Assignments

All assignments should be posted on the course site associated with the appropriate assignment. Group assignments can be posted by any member of the team, but should have the names of each participant on the cover page. Please submit as PDF, DOC or other easily opened file, and please have your last name in the filename.

Weekly Discussion Question (due Monday at noon so we can prepare for class): Based on one or more of the readings each week, generate a thoughtful discussion question.

Assignment #1: No phone day reflection (Due: Feb 16)

Spend 24 hours without your phone, preferably on a day where it's necessary to leave your house, go about your daily business, etc. (No fair spending 24 hours on a yoga retreat.) Write a 500-1000 word reflection on the experience. What accommodations do you need to make to get through the day? How does this exercise change how you think about your relationship with your phone? Is "addiction" the right way to understand your relationship with your phone, or are other terms a better description? (For no special bonus points, except bragging rights, spend the 24 hours without using any internet connected devices as well.)

Assignment #2: Media diary (Due: March 2)

For a week, maintain a diary of all the media you encounter - news, entertainment, etc. Pay attention in particular to how you came into contact with a piece of media - did you choose to

read it, discover it via social media, have it recommended to you? What parts of your media diet are algorithmically driven? Do you understand why you're encountering certain content? How are you encountering information through different mediums and how do you feel about the encounters?

After collecting data for at least one week, produce a visualization of your media consumption. Please feel free to color outside the lines for this - no Excel charts. Students have used everything from watercolors, Instagram video stories to interpretive dance to visualize their media consumption.

Assignment #3: Online community case study (Due: March 27)

Write a case study of a healthy online community. What criteria are you using to determine online health? How does the community in question exemplify healthy behaviors?

Case studies should be 3-5 pages (around 3000 words). You are encouraged to include images and screenshots. We will be selecting a few case studies for sharing out to the class, so be prepared to share your case studies in a 5-minute presentation!

Assignment #4: Project proposal (Due: Apr 22)

What can social media do for us? For particular communities? For democracy? Propose a project designed to improve social network spaces. This could be a successor system designed to address a problem with existing platforms, a new community atop an existing platform or an entirely new platform. In your proposal, clearly identify the specific problems and communities you're aiming to address. Proposals can be 1-2 pages and are informal documents to capture project ideas.

This assignment and the final project **MUST BE COMPLETED IN MULTIFUNCTIONAL TEAMS**. I will not be accepting solo assignments. Maximum team size is 5. Recommended team size is 2-4. Historically, teams of 2 have been the most successful.

Assignment #5: Final project (Due: May 4)

For your final projects, you will prepare a design document and implement a functional prototype designed to improve social network spaces.

Evaluation will depend on your performance on these five assignments and participation in class, including active discussion of the assigned readings.

Grading rubric is as follows:

Assignments 1, 2 and 3: - each 15% of your grade

Assignments 4 and 5: - collectively 40% of your grade (Assignment four is not graded, but is checked.)

In class participation and questions: 15% of your grade

Course Grade Scale: Your final grade in the course will be based on the following scale:

94-100%	A	80-82%	B-	67-69%	D+
90-93%	A-	77-79%	C+	60-66%	D
87-89%	B+	73-76%	C	Below 60%	F
83-86%	B	70-72%	C-		

Course Policies and Guidelines

Classroom Environment: Students are required to maintain a classroom environment that is respectful and nurturing where everyone can express all parts of themselves without the fear of judgment. Be mindful of each other and try not to make assumptions about your peers or your instructors or their beliefs. At the same time, our project is that of intellectual debate and challenge. I ask you to take on the work of questioning and criticizing ideas, focusing on that aspect of discourse rather than questioning individuals' intentions.

You are invited to let me know, and correct me if I use the wrong name and/or pronouns to refer to you in class. Throughout the course, feel free to email me or make an appointment with me to discuss any conflict that comes up amongst your peers or if you have any feedback regarding the tone and sensitivity with which these topics are being discussed in class.

The University of Massachusetts Amherst was founded and built on the unceded homelands of the Pocumtuc Nation on the land of the Norwottuck community. This legacy, and broader legacy of American conquest of Native lands is an essential component of the historical narratives we are exploring in this class, and has relevance for the problems we tackle today. Please read [the university's Land Acknowledgement here](#) and reflect on the complexities of a democratic experiment that was inextricably intertwined with the forced removal of the peoples who came before us on our campus.

Absence: Each student is granted one unexcused absence. Beyond these, please meet with me to discuss challenges you are having being physically present in class. Please inform me about any religious holidays or university-sponsored travel (with adequate documentation) conflicts so that we can plan to accommodate your needs in the course.

Deadlines: Deadlines for papers in this class are designed so that we can discuss your ideas in class. If you're late submitting your papers, we don't get the chance to discuss the work you've done, so I ask that your work be as timely as possible. If you won't be able to turn in an assignment on time, please alert me so we can work out accommodations.

Disability Services & Class Accommodations: UMass provides academic resources to those who are registered with Disability Services. In order for me to accommodate your needs, you must be registered with Disability Services and communicate that to me. We will work together

to ensure your needs are met and the strictest confidentiality is always in place. See [Disability Services](#) for assistance.

Academic Honesty: Violations of academic integrity will be dealt with according to the [UMass Academic Honesty Policy and Procedures](#).

Device Use: Obviously, devices like laptops and mobile phones are a mixed blessing in a classroom. On the one hand, they are powerful tools for note taking, research and learning more about ideas raised in class. On the other hand, it's really easy to lose track of a conversation if you're texting with your friends. You're strongly encouraged to use your laptops to take notes either for yourself or as part of a shared document, and to participate in the class Slack channel. You're encouraged to use a smartphone to take part in polls in class. You're expected to focus on the course and not on the many other distractions of your devices. You'll work it out. I have faith in you.

AI Policy: You are welcome and encouraged to use AIs like Grammarly that help you sharpen your writing and present your ideas, especially if English is not your first language. You are allowed to use generative AI tools and large language models/chatbots to produce work for this class **BUT YOU MUST DISCLOSE THEIR USE** and you are responsible for any errors they generate. For disclosure, I request a statement at the end of each assignment that specifies if AI was used and what it was used for - brainstorming, polishing text, etc. If AI misrepresents your ideas, says something stupid or - most likely - cites texts that don't exist, you'll be graded on that error. I strongly recommend that, if you do use AIs to help your writing, that you read what they produce very carefully, and I strongly discourage you from using AIs to complete assignments or to find citations for works you want to reference. In my experience, they do this quite badly, and nothing infuriates me like tracking down hallucinations.

Week 1: February 2, 2026 - Welcome and overview

We'll start with an introduction from everyone, followed by an overview of the syllabus and expectations for the class. I'll discuss the logic of the class, the major ideas we'll end up considering in the course of our work, and what work you'll be doing over the course of the semester.

Because we haven't had the chance to do any reading, we'll watch and discuss an excerpt from the Black Mirror episode "Nosedive". No pre-reading required, but feel free to read this piece by Sophie Gilbert on Black Mirror if you'd like: [Sophie Gilbert, "Black Mirror's 'Nosedive' Skewers Social Media" \(The Atlantic\)](#)

In class:

- Overview of class, expectations, what's covered
- Digital media map - what social media and AI tools do you use? Which have you chosen not to use?
- Watch, discuss Black Mirror: Nosedive

In small groups: The Marshmallow Challenge. Break into groups of three people - you MUST work with two people you don't already know. You will have 18 minutes and very limited materials with which to construct a structure that elevates a marshmallow as far as possible above the desk. Highest marshmallow wins a valuable prize.

Week 2: February 9, 2026 - Humans are (still?) the Killer App: A History of Social Media

Even before we connected computers via the internet, humans used computers to connect with one another. We trace the history of social interaction via computer networks back to email lists, through MUDs and MOOs, bulletin board systems, multiplayer games and contemporary social networks. What are the characteristics of a social network? Is social media an inevitable outgrowth of networking humans? How is AI changing what happens on social media? On our need for social media?

In small groups: Technology biography. Pair up with someone you haven't met before. Through the process of interviewing each other, write a brief biography of that person's relationship to technology. Some possible questions:

- What's the first technology you remember using? Remember really loving?
- What technology are you lost without? What would you do if you couldn't use that technology for a key task?
- What technology do you wish you could make go away, globally?
- What technology are you embarrassed about using? Proud of using? Refuse to use?

Readings:

[boyd and Ellison, "Social Network Sites: Definition, History and Scholarship"](#)

[Mailland and Driscoll, "Minitel: The Online World France Built Before the Web"](#)

[Dibbel, "A Rape In Cyberspace"](#)

[Turner, Where the Counterculture Met the New Economy: The WELL and the Origins of Virtual Community](#)

Optional: [Intro + Chapter 1 from Rheingold, The Virtual Community](#)

Complete the reading, listening, and watching so you can submit a question to the forum for this class by noon Monday.

Assignment #1: No phone day reflection (due February 16)

Spend 24 hours without your phone, preferably on a day where it's necessary to leave your house, go about your daily business, etc. (No fair spending 24 hours on a yoga retreat.) Write a 500-1000 word reflection on the experience. What accommodations do you need to make to get through the day? How does this exercise change how you think about your relationship with

your phone? Is "addiction" the right way to understand your relationship with your phone, or are other terms a better description? (For no special bonus points, except bragging rights, spend the 24 hours without using any internet connected devices as well.)

Week 3: February 16, 2026 - Tobacco, Asbestos and Facebook: The Real or Imagined Dangers of Social Media

Asbestos was a life-saving fire retardant material before it was understood as a cause of cancer. Cigarettes were seen as a safe way to relax before they were understood as a public health hazard. 2026 is bringing about a wave of litigation regarding social media: teen social media user "KGM" is suing Meta and YouTube, and Snapchat and TikTok have already settled cases with her. Is social media addictive? Destructive to our psyches? Is AI leading us towards psychosis? How much of this is real, and how much is a "technopanic"?

Readings:

Haidt, [summary of The Anxious Generation](#)

Haidt, [Social Media is a Major Cause of the Mental Illness Epidemic in Teen Girls. Here's the Evidence.](#)

Vaidhyathan, [Are Cellphones Really Destroying Kids' Mental Health?](#)

Cheng et. al., [How do social media use, gaming frequency, and internalizing symptoms predict each other over time in early-to-middle adolescence?](#)

Ogders, [The great rewiring: is social media really behind an epidemic of teenage mental illness](#)

Marwick, ["To catch a predator? The MySpace Moral Panic"](#)

Jamali, [TikTok settles just before social media addiction trial to begin](#)

Totally optional readings:

[Harris, "How Technology Hijacks People's Minds"](#)

Tristan Harris's [slide deck to Google employees on limiting distractions](#)

Harry Brignull's [Dark Patterns website](#)

Complete the reading and watching by noon Monday so you can submit a question to the forum for this class.

Due: Assignment #1 (by noon, February 16)

We will report back on the day without a phone assignment and discuss the media diary assignment in the second half of class.

Assignment #2: Media diary (due March 2)

For the next week, maintain a diary of all the media you encounter - news, entertainment, etc. Pay attention in particular to how you came into contact with a piece of media - did you choose to read it, discover it via social media, have it recommended to you? What parts of your media diet are algorithmically driven? Do you understand why you're encountering certain content? How are you encountering information through different mediums and how do you feel about the encounters?

After collecting data for at least one week, produce a visualization of your media consumption. Please feel free to color outside the lines for this - no Excel charts. Students have used everything from watercolors, Instagram video stories to interpretive dance to visualize their media consumption.

If we have time (small groups): What's the Worst that Can Happen? Consider a recent technological development - ChatGPT is a good one to work with. You and your team are sinister masterminds, working for a criminal organization or problematic government. Develop a plan to cause maximum damage to society as a whole by using your chosen technology.

Week 4: February 23, 2026 - Platform power versus democracy

In 2016, Cambridge Analytica claimed to have manipulated Americans and Britons into voting for far-right parties and policies. In 2020, fierce online battles over COVID vaccines turned into a fierce real-world battle over whether Donald Trump had won the election. At Trump's inauguration in 2025, he took power with the heads of Meta, Google, X and TikTok on the dais. While in office, he's become a shitposting memelord, filling Truth.social with AI slop

Social media is accused of increasing polarization and creating ideological echo chambers, of spreading mis- and disinformation, and of reducing trust in professional news media. AI accelerates this process, making it harder to know whether any image or video is real or generated. Can democracy survive the changes of the digital public sphere, or are these threats misunderstood and exaggerated? Are we blaming deeper societal problems on digital media, or is the rise of participatory media increasing tensions that already exist in society?

Complete the reading and watching by noon Thursday so you can submit a question to the forum for this class.

Readings:

[Craig Silverman, "How Teens In The Balkans Are Duping Trump Supporters With Fake News"](#)

[Benkler et. al., Breitbart-led right-wing media ecosystem altered broader media agenda](#)

Nyhan et al., [Like-minded sources on Facebook are prevalent but not polarizing](#)

Clegg, [You and the Algorithm: It Takes Two to Tango](#)

Tornberg and Chueri, [When Do Parties Lie?](#)

Stuart Thompson [How President Trump Uses AI](#)

Optional reading:

[Tripodi, Searching for Alternative Facts](#)

[Anonymous. What Happened After My 13 Year Old Son Joined the Alt-Right](#)

[Vosoughi, Roy and Aral; "The spread of true and false news online"](#)

In small groups: Visualization Workshop. Using a simple data set and the databasics.io tools, examine a data set in search of insights. Create and share a visualization of the data using art materials. [Dear Data](#) is a great source of ideas for creative visualizations.

Week 5: March 2, 2026 - "This is Why We Can't Have Nice Things" - when digital media helps people be terrible

As digital media has become an inescapable part of our lives, people have found new and creative ways to be dreadful to one another online. This includes harassment, bullying, non-consensual intimate imagery (so called "revenge porn"), deepfakes and various forms of child exploitation. Most of the ways in which we can be awful to one another are not new - though some like deepfake porn are - but the scale and apparent anonymity of interactions online prevent new challenges for technologists and for the law.

At minimum, these novel paths to online harm present challenges for users and administrators of digital platforms... or perhaps a revenue opportunity, in the case of Elon Musk's embrace of sexually exploitative imagery. They are now turning into reasons to reform or ban forms of digital media entirely. How should we as a society approach emergent patterns of online harm?

[Danielle Citron, Addressing Cyberharassment: An Overview of Hate Crimes in Cyberspace](#)

Nir, [Chelsea Asked for Nude Photos. Then the Sextortion Began](#)

DeVries and Keller, [A Marketplace of Girl Influencers Managed by Moms and Stalked by Men](#)

Mickle, [Amid Sextortion's Rise, Computer Scientist Taps AI to Identify Risky Apps](#)

Cress, [EU Investigates Elon Musk's X Over Grok AI Sexual Deepfakes](#)

Due: Assignment #2 - Media diary (by noon). We will spend a significant part of class looking at Media Diaries and discussing what we learned by creating them.

Week 6: March 9, 2026 - What Do We Want Digital Media to Do For Us?

Thomas Jefferson observed that he would prefer a free press and no democracy to a democracy without a free press. Since inception, the role of media in US democracy has been central, as a space to allow a vast nation to discuss how to govern itself. Can we imagine digital media that would be good for us as participants in a democracy?

Readings:

[Intro + Chapter 1 from Gallagher. How the Post Office Created America](#)

[Schudson, "Six or Seven Things News Can Do for Democracy"](#)

[Zuckerman, "Six or Seven Things Social Media Could Do for Democracy"](#)

[Applebaum and Pomerantsev. "How To Put Out Democracy's Dumpster Fire"](#)

Bruce Schneier, ["Ten Ways AI Will Change Democracy"](#)

Complete the reading by noon Monday so you can submit a question to the forum for this class.

Small group: With the rise of COVID and election disinformation around 2020, social media platforms took steps to fact-check social media posts. This led to a conservative backlash and a retreat from moderation by X under Elon Musk and by Meta after Trump's election. You are a senior policy advisor to a new social network designed to provide an EU-hosted alternative to TikTok. What are your proposed policy guidelines on factchecking?

Assignment #3: Online community case study (due March 27, midnight.)

Write a case study of a healthy online community. What criteria are you using to determine online health? How does the community in question exemplify healthy behaviors?

Case studies should be 3-5 pages (around 3000 words). You are encouraged to include images and screenshots. We will be selecting a few case studies for sharing out to the class, so be prepared to share your case studies in a 5-minute presentation!

Due March 27, so I can read studies before class on March 30. Some studies will be presented in class on the 30th.

March 16, 2024 - Spring break - Enjoy! And don't come to class, as I won't be here. Or do, and make your own fun.

Week 7: March 23, 2026 - Celebrating Successful Online Communities

Facebook in Sri Lanka has led to anti-Muslim violence. But Wikipedia has created enormously valuable educational resources. Why do some online communities provide supportive and creative environments while others veer towards toxicity? What can we learn from different ways

of designing and building these communities? We will look at the case studies students have written, as well as additional case studies to understand the space.

Readings:

[Liptak, How a Vermont Social Network Became a Model for Online Communities](#)

[Fiesler et al: An Archive of Our Own. A Case Study of Feminist HCI and Values in Design](#)

[Jake Pitre, "Being Queer on Tumblr: Privacy and Anonymity in the Age of Social Media"](#)

[Brock, From the Blackhand Side: Twitter as a Cultural Conversation](#)

Alikhan, [Knowledge is Human](#)

Complete the reading by noon Monday so you can submit a question to the forum for this class.

In small groups: Map the communities you are a member of. Are you a leader of this community? An active participant? A passive participant? What are the overlaps between the communities you are a part of? Give us a visualization - perhaps using Venn diagrams - of the different communities that make up your social world.

Week 8: March 30, 2025 - Healthy community case studies.

We will hear presentations of healthy community case studies and discuss what we have learned in the process, identifying "design patterns" that frequently recur in successful online spaces.

In the second half of class, we will discuss the structure of the final project, a design brief for an intervention to address a significant problem with social media. We will discuss the format of the design brief and have a workshop on design research, drawing on some of the readings listed below. You don't need to read them thoroughly, but please skim and familiarize yourself with them.

Readings:

[IDEO Method Cards](#)

[Strategies for Qualitative Interviewing](#)

[How Might We](#)

[Atomic Object - How Might We](#)

[Beyond the Cult of Human Centered Design](#) - Rob Girling and Emilia Palaveeva

Week 9: April 7, 2025 - Feeds and Algorithmic Auditing

When Facebook launched NewsFeed, an algorithmically curated list of items posted by friends in 2006, it was hard to imagine it would be central to debates about the future of democracy in 2025. Do we need algorithmic help coping with the abundance of social media produced by people we follow? How do those algorithms shape our views of the world and who controls them? How do we understand what algorithms and AIs are doing, and how should that understanding inform policymaking and regulation?

Readings:

[Tufekci, "YouTube, The Great Radicalizer"](#)

[Chen et al. - Exposure to Alternative and Extremist Content on YouTube](#) (Read the exec summary, optionally read the whole thing)

[Wall Street Journal, How TikTok's Algorithm Figures You Out](#)

[Sandvig et al. "Auditing Algorithms"](#)

[Gobo Team, "Why We Built Gobo"](#)

[Persily, Facebook hides data showing it harms users. Outside scholars need access.](#)

Recommended, but not required

[Wang, Why TikTok made its user so obsessive? The AI Algorithm that got you hooked.](#)

[Ribeiro et. al - Auditing Radicalization Pathways on YouTube](#)

[Ledwich and Zaitsev - Algorithmic Extremism: Examining YouTube's Rabbit Hole of Radicalization](#)

[The Platform Accountability and Transparency Act](#)

Complete the reading by noon Monday so you can submit a question to the forum for this class.

Assignment #4: Final Project Proposal (Due: Apr. 22, noon)

What can digital media do for us? For particular communities? For democracy? Propose a project designed to improve platform-governed participatory spaces. This could be a successor system designed to address a problem with existing platforms, a new community atop an existing platform or an entirely new platform. In your proposal, clearly identify the specific problems and communities you're aiming to address. Proposals can be 1-2 pages and are informal documents to capture project ideas - you are required to turn one in for my review, but it will not be independently graded.

In small groups: Algorithmic audit. Pick an application or tool that uses algorithms to suggest content or products. Collect a set of algorithmic recommendations and speculate why you're being suggested these particular post or products. Try the same tool from different accounts and see if you can triangulate some rules for how recommendations get set.

Week 10: April 13, 2026 - Moderation and Governance

One of the key difficulties in user generated content systems is determining what content can be allowed on a platform - platforms without moderation (4chan) tend to be chaotic, hard to use and unwelcoming. But moderation is costly for platforms to provide and it acts as governance, subjecting speech to controls that individuals have little or no influence over. What are ethical and practical ways to regulate online communities? Will increased use of AI make moderation less traumatic for moderators, or will it shift the hardest work onto humans? Could moderation become a form of governance in online communities?

We will begin the class with a short excerpt from "The Cleaners", a film about content moderation and the people who do the hard work of cleaning up the internet. Feel free to watch ahead of time - it's a \$3 rental on Vimeo. Warning: about 28 minutes in, there is imagery of blood and violence - we'll stop before that point in class.

Readings:

[Casey Newton - The Trauma Floor](#)

[Gray and Suri - The Humans Working Behind the AI Curtain](#)

[Robert Peck: The Punishing Ecstasy of Being a Reddit Moderator](#)

[Mike Masnick: Hey Elon, Let Me Help You Speed Run the Content Moderation Learning Curve](#)

Mosleh et al, [Differences in misinformation sharing can lead to politically asymmetric sanctions](#)

Complete the reading by noon Monday so you can submit a question to the forum for this class.

Small groups: Social media can be harmful not just to its users, but to the moderators who protect online spaces. You're a legislative aide to a senator deeply concerned about the conditions examined in Newton's "The Trauma Floor". What do you recommend? Legislation to promote safer working conditions for moderators? More widespread use of AI to minimize human content exposure? A shift towards community-based moderation? What legislation or policies do you propose?

Week 11: April 24, 2025 - Economic models for digital media (Note - we meet Friday, not Monday)

Most social networks are free to use, and supported by targeted advertising. AI tools like ChatGPT have tried to sell subscriptions, but are now exploring targeted advertising. What's emerged as a default model to support these spaces is sometimes referred to as "surveillance capitalism" - we subject ourselves to surveillance in exchange for "free" services. Is surveillance capitalism new, or just an extension of pre-existing models for supporting media? Is it dangerous to us as individuals or a society? What other models might support digital media?

Readings:

[Zuboff, "Big Other"](#)

[Zuckerman, "The Internet's Original Sin"](#)

[Ceglowski, "The Internet with a Human Face"](#)

Doctorow, [An Audacious Plan to Halt the Internet's Enshittification and Throw It Into Reverse](#)

Complete the reading by noon Monday so you can submit a question to the forum for this class.

We'll discuss project proposals in the second half of class - please submit by April 22 so I have a chance to read them over.

Week 12: April 27, 2026 - Solutions and their Problems

Thankfully, we are not the only ones working on making digital media fairer, safer, more transparent and sustainable. Mastodon, BlueSky and countless blockchain projects are trying to decentralize social media. Middleware proponents are building software to give users more rights and control. Scholars and activists are creating new ways of auditing existing platforms. Can we avoid extending the problems that have plagued social media into AI?

Readings:

Malone, [Is the TikTok Ban a Chance to Rethink the Whole Internet?](#)

[King, What is the Fediverse and Can It Decentralize the Web?](#)

Hoff and Kramer, [The future of social media may be decided in Europe](#)

Keller, [The Future of Platform Power: Making Middleware Work](#)

Zuckerman, The Case for Unpermissioned Research

Optional:

[Kazemi: Run Your Own Social Network](#)

Assignment #5: Final project (due May 4)

For your final projects, you will prepare a design document and implement a functional prototype designed to improve social network spaces. You are encouraged to work in multifunctional teams.

Week 13: May 4, 2026 - Presentation of Final Projects

No reading.

Every team will have approximately 5 minutes to present your final project.

There will be snacks.