

Soc 427: Justice in the Digital Age

Winter 2021

Instructor:

Karina Rider

karina.rider@queensu.ca

Office hours:

Mondays 2-4pm

Zoom link on onQ

Course description

There is increasing recognition amongst scholars, journalists, policymakers, and activists that digital technologies can reinforce and shape inequality. From the social media platforms monitoring and monetizing user behavior; to algorithms determining prison sentencing; to the fitness trackers strapped around our wrists, digital technologies are intimately bound up with our interactions with each other, governments, employers, and ourselves—experiences which are increasingly connected to the quotidian experience of inequality. Whether we are charged a higher insurance premium, denied university admission, invited for an interview, or approved for social welfare programs, the negotiation of such crucial life chances is increasingly shaped by digital technologies.

What do we do about this situation? Is it possible for digital technologies to be built, used, and maintained in ways which ameliorate, rather than exacerbate, inequality? If so, how should this be done? Where do we even start? In this course we will be exploring different ways in which digital technologies provoke questions of (in)justice. The course is divided into three parts. In Part I, we will cover how digital technologies are shaping social movements. We will start by looking at some optimistic accounts of what digital technologies can do to help social movements—whether promising quicker mobilizations or more egalitarian forms of organisation—and continue with some empirical accounts which paint a more ambivalent, or perhaps critical, picture. In Part II, we will be looking at grassroots efforts to regulate the technology industry. We will cover a range of topics and tactics being deployed by scholars, activists, and policymakers, each with a different understanding of what is wrong with the technology industry and how it should be fixed. Part III focuses on what can be called ‘grassroots technopolitics,’ or the different ways in which groups are trying to embed ideas of justice into the materiality of technologies themselves—often technologies which are community-owned, and which challenge existing institutional structures, such as corporations and other capitalistic entities, which have historically driven the design, production, and governance of such technologies.

Learning objectives

By the end of the course, students will:

1. *Understand* how digital technologies are shaping political action;
2. Be able to *assess* and *articulate* the promises and pitfalls of different tactics which use and target digital technologies for social justice; and
3. Develop a set of skills for (a) *identifying* the main claims of academic writings and (b) *critically assessing* such claims.

Organization

This is a remote course. There is no mandatory attendance at lectures or discussion sessions. However, I strongly encourage you to attend the live discussion session that will be hosted Wednesday mornings at 11:00am (EST) and will run for approximately an hour (although students are welcome to engage for longer depending on the number of questions that come up). I will record a brief lecture video each week, posted on Mondays, which will provide context for the week's topic and each reading. I suggest you follow these steps each week (but, of course, do whatever works best for you):

1. Watch the lecture video (posted Mondays)
2. Do the readings, and draft an outline for your weekly reflection (Monday-Tuesday)
3. Attend the discussion session to discuss your thoughts on the reading and your main takeaways (Wednesdays)
4. Finalize your weekly reflection (Thursday-Friday)
5. Submit your reflection (Friday)

Assignments

There are three assignments in this course.

1. *Weekly critical reflections* (50%). There are 10 reading reflections which students will submit each Friday, starting Week 3, covering the material from that week (for example: the first reflection will be due January 29, and will cover the readings under “The promises of networked movements”). For each reflection, you will select **one** reading and critically reflect on what they tell us about the promises and pitfalls of different efforts to realize digital justice. I will post a template on onQ outlining what should be included in the reflections (including the author's research questions, methods, and the main components of their argument). I strongly recommend that you draft your reflection and bring it to the weekly discussion session held on Wednesdays. Your lowest two grades will be dropped.
2. *Participatory project outline* (15%). Midway through the term, you will submit an outline for the final assignment. I will ask you to select a digital justice action (organized either by a social movement or an organization dedicated to questions of digital justice) in which you will participate. The outline will ask you to describe the event or action you plan to attend, make preliminary connections to course readings, and anticipate what your main argument will be.
3. *Participatory project* (35%). For the final assignment, you will participate in an action organized by either (a) an online social movement, or (b) an organization dedicated to questions of digital justice. I strongly suggest you identify this early in the term, so you have time to plan your participation around the date the action will be held. You will then submit a write-up of the action, identifying what issue it is meant to address, how it gets people involved, and a critical reflection on the organization's understanding of digital justice. You will need to substantially incorporate at least two course readings in your paper.

Grade component	Due date	Weight
Weekly critical reflections (total 10; lowest 2 dropped)	Fridays, Jan 22 – April 9	50%
Participatory project outline	Sunday Feb 21	15%
Participatory project	Friday April 16	35%

Grading, submissions, and late policy

As this is a seminar, there are no Teaching Assistants, and I will be doing all of the grading. All assignments are submitted through onQ. If you need an extension, please contact me as early as possible so we can work something out. Any assignments submitted after the deadline *without* an approved extension will be deducted 5% of the final grade per day (e.g. if you receive an 80 on an assignment you submitted one day late, your final grade will drop to a 75).

For your final grade, your numerical course average will be converted to a letter grade per the Queen's Official Grade Conversation Scale.

Grade	Numerical range
A+	90-100
A	85-89
A-	80-84
B+	77-79
B	73-76
B-	70-72
C+	67-69
C	63-66
C-	60-62
D+	57-59
D	53-56
D-	50-52
F	49 and below

Readings and resources

There is no textbook for this course. All readings, lecture slides, Zoom video recordings, and contact information will be available on onQ. Note that this material is copyrighted and is for the sole use of students registered in the course. Do not distribute or disseminate this material to anyone other than students registered in the course. Failure to abide by these conditions is a breach of copyright and may also constitute a breach of academic integrity under the University Senate's Academic Integrity Policy Statement.

Academic integrity

Queen's students, faculty, administrators, and staff all have responsibilities for upholding the fundamental values of academic integrity: honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility, and courage (see www.academicintegrity.org). These values and qualities are central to the building, nurturing, and sustaining of an academic community in which all members of the community will thrive. Adherence to the values expressed through academic integrity forms a foundation for the "freedom of inquiry and exchange of ideas" essential to the intellectual life of the University (see the [Senate Report on Principles and Priorities](#)).

Students are responsible for familiarizing themselves with the regulations concerning academic integrity and for ensuring that their assignments and their behavior conform to the principles of academic integrity. Information on academic integrity is available in the Arts and Science Calendar (see [Academic Regulation I](#)), the [Arts and Science website](#), and from the instructor of this course. Departures from academic integrity include plagiarism; the use of unauthorized materials; and facilitation, forgery, and falsification, and are antithetical to the development of an academic community at Queen's. Given the seriousness of these matters, actions which contravene the regulation on academic integrity carry sanctions that can include: a warning; the loss of grades on an assignment; the failure of a course; and a requirement to withdraw from the university.

For additional tips on how to avoid unintentional plagiarism, please visit the following:

- [Avoiding Plagiarism and Cheating \(Queen's University\)](#)
- [Avoiding Plagiarism: Paraphrasing \(MIT\)](#)
- [Quoting and Paraphrasing \(University of Wisconsin - Madison\)](#)

Accommodations

Queen's University is committed to achieving full accessibility for people with disabilities. Part of this commitment includes arranging academic accommodations for students with disabilities to ensure they have an equitable opportunity to participate in all their academic activities. The [Senate Policy for Accommodations for Students with Disabilities](#) was approved at Senate in November 2016. If you are a student with a disability and think you may need accommodations, you are strongly encouraged to contact the Queen's Student Accessibility Services (QSAS) and register as early as possible. For more information, including important deadlines, please visit the [QSAS website](#).

Academic considerations

Academic consideration is meant to help students manage a **short-term** extenuating circumstance that is beyond the student's control and could affect their academics. This might be a sudden physical or mental illness, a serious injury or required treatment for the student or their significant other; bereavement (e.g. death of a family member or close friend); a traumatic event (e.g. sexual assault, divorce); or unforeseen technological or workplace disruptions (e.g. computer malfunction, power outage affecting access). You have three options for submitting a request for academic considerations:

1. Without supporting documentation (up to 3 days)
2. With supporting documentation (up to 3 days)
3. With supporting documentation (between 4 days and 3 months)

For more information on where to submit your considerations requests, visit the [Faculty of Arts and Science web portal](#). Students whose home department is *not* in the Faculty of Arts and Science should consult the protocol for their home Faculty.

Copyright on course materials

Course materials created by the course instructor, including all slides, presentations, recorded lectures, handouts, tests, exams, and other similar course materials are the intellectual property of the instructor. It is a departure from academic integrity to distribute, publicly post, sell, or otherwise disseminate an instructor's course materials to anyone else for distribution, posting, sale, or other means of dissemination without the instructor's *express consent*. A student who engages in such conduct may be subject to penalty for a departure from academic integrity and may also face adverse legal consequences for infringement of intellectual property rights.

Course Schedule

Week	Dates	Topic	Assignments
1	Jan 11-15	Introduction: What is digital justice?	
2	Jan 18-22	Introduction: Social movements, civic engagement, and political action	
Part I: Digital Tech and Social Movements			
3	Jan 25-29	The promises of networked movements	Critical reflection 1 (Jan 29)
4	Feb 1-5	Digital social movement organizations	Critical reflection 2 (Feb 5)
5	Feb 8-12	Navigating visibility	Critical reflection 3 (Feb 12)
6	Feb 15-19	*****Reading Week*****	Midterm (Feb 21)
Part II: Regulating Big Tech			
7	Feb 22-26	Inclusion	Critical reflection 4 (Feb 26)
8	March 1-5	Transparency, accountability, fairness	Critical reflection 5 (March 5)
9	March 8-12	Labor	Critical reflection 6 (March 12)
10	March 15-19	Local economies	Critical reflection 7 (March 19)
Part III: Grassroots Technopolitics			
11	March 22-26	Data	Critical reflection 8 (March 26)
12	March 29-April 2	Design	Critical reflection 9 (April 2)
13	April 5-9	Abolition	Critical reflection 10 (April 9) & Final (April 16)

Readings

Week 1 (Jan 11-15). Introduction: What is digital justice?

What does it mean to talk about justice in the digital age? This week, we will consider some major arguments which posit that it is crucial to think about how social movements are necessarily addressing inequalities which are—seemingly inexorably—generated or exacerbated by current digital technologies.

Readings

1. Costanza-Chock, Sasha. 2020. “#TravelingWhileTrans, Design Justice, and Escape from the Matrix of Domination.” Pp. 1-30 in *Design Justice: Community-Led Practices to Build the Worlds We Need*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
2. Noble, Safiya Umoja and Sarah T. Roberts. 2017. “Engine Failure.” *Logic Magazine* 3: 89-99.

Week 2 (Jan 18-22). Introduction: Social movements, civic engagement, and political action.

What is a social movement? What’s the difference between volunteering and activism? This week, we are going to build a foundational vocabulary for talking about different forms of political action and engagement.

Readings

1. Eliasoph, Nina. 2013. “Why Do Theorists Say Associations are Crucial for Democracy?” and “Volunteering and Political Activism.” Pp. 9-63 in *The Politics of Volunteering* Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
2. Almeida, Paul. 2019. “Social Movements: The Structure of Collective Action.” Pp. 1-18 in *Social Movements: The Structure of Collective Mobilization*, Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

Part I: Social Movements and Digital Technology

Week 3 (Jan 25-29). The promises of networked movements.

How can digital technologies augment social movements? This week we will be covering some core texts which have theorized how digital technologies can help make social movements more participatory and democratic.

Readings

1. Shirky, Clay. 2008. “Collective Action and Institutional Challenges.” Pp. 143-160 in *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing without Organizations*. Penguin Books: London, UK.
2. Bennett, W. Lance and Alexandra Segerberg. 2012. “The Logic of Connective Action.” *Information, Communication, & Society* 15(5): 739-768.

Week 4 (Feb 1-5). Digital social movement organizations.

How do promises about the benefits of digital technologies for social movements play out in practice? This week we will cover two empirical accounts which look at how activists actually use digital technologies on the ground and how they might have deleterious effects on organizing efforts.

Readings

1. Tufekci, Zeynep. 2017. "Leading the Leaderless." Pp. 49-82 in *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
2. Schradie, Jen. 2019. "Bureaucracy's Revenge and the Organization of Digital Activism." Pp. 84-143 in *The Revolution That Wasn't: How Digital Activism Favors Conservatives*. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA.

Week 5 (Feb 8-12). Navigating visibility.

It might seem common-sense to state that social movements unilaterally benefit from the visibility which digital technologies afford, but it is more complicated than that. This week we will consider the difficulties digital social movements encounter when having to navigate the question of what to make (in)visible in different situations, which can be a challenge when participation is so widespread.

Readings

1. Uldam, Julie. 2017. "Social Media Visibility: Challenges to Activism." *Media, Culture, & Society* 40(1): 41-58.
2. Williams, Apryl. 2020. "Black Memes Matter: #LivingWhileBlack with Becky and Karen." *Social Media + Society* Oct-Dec: 1-14.

Part II: Regulating Big Tech

Week 7 (Feb 22-26). Inclusion.

One common criticism of our increasing reliance on Big Tech is that it excludes everyone who cannot afford their technologies. But is bridging the "digital divide" as much an unequivocal good as it might seem at the outset? The readings this week challenge our understanding of the "digital divide" and common approaches to trying to bridge it.

Readings

1. Eubanks, Virginia. 2011. "The Real World of Information Technology" and "Trapped in the Digital Divide." Pp. 23-48 in *Digital Dead End: Fighting for Social Justice in the Information Age*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
2. Ames, Morgan. 2019. "Little Toys, Media Machines, and the Limits of Charisma." Pp. 109-136 in *The Charisma Machine: The Life, Death, and Legacy of One Laptop per Child*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Week 8 (March 1-5). Transparency, fairness, and accountability.

Another tactic scholars, activists, and policymakers are taking to the growing ubiquity of algorithms in public decision-making is to make them more transparent through efforts such as auditing. This week we will discuss different ways groups are trying to make algorithms more transparent, fair, and accountable—as well as criticisms of some of these approaches.

Readings

1. Young, Meg, Michael Katell, and P. M. Krafft. 2019. "Municipal Surveillance Regulation and Algorithmic Accountability." *Big Data & Society* 2: 1-14.
2. West, Sarah Myers. 2020. "Redistribution and Rekognition: A Feminist Critique of Algorithmic Fairness." *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 6(2): 1-24.

Week 9 (March 8-12). Labor.

This week we will cover some recent efforts to organize in the high-tech sector. We often think about Big Tech workplaces as having some of the most desirable jobs available, where people are well-compensated, given freedom to work on projects which interest them, and ultimately are able to find personal meaning and fulfillment through their employment. But this hides a much darker side to the technology industry, one which is frequently characterized by harassment, retaliation, and poor working conditions.

Readings

1. Tarnoff, Ben. 2020. *The Making of the Tech Worker Movement*. Logic Magazine.
2. Kinema, Emma and Paris Marx. 2020. "Why Game and Tech Workers Are Organizing with Emma Kinema." *Tech Won't Save Us Podcast*. [Link via onQ]

Week 10 (March 15-19). Local economies.

Although we tend to think about digital technologies as place-less, simply existing in 'the cloud,' they are designed, produced, and maintained in very real, physical spaces. Tech campuses and offices bring together engineers, designers, and developers in the hopes of launching the next Amazon or Facebook. What impact does this commercial development have on local communities and how are local residents resisting the impact of the tech sector's growth?

Readings

1. McElroy, Erin. 2019. "Data, Dispossession, and Facebook: Techno-Imperialism and Toponymy in Gentrifying San Francisco." *Urban Geography* 40(6): 826-845.
2. Alfrey, Lauren and France Winddance Twine. 2018. "Compassionate Capitalism: Tax Breaks, Tech Companies and the Transformation of San Francisco." Pp. 504-517 in *The Routledge Handbook on Spaces of Urban Politics* (eds. Ward K, Jonas AEG, Miller B, and Wilson D). Routledge: New York.

Part III: Grassroots Technopolitics

Week 11 (March 22-26). Data.

Data is thoroughly political. How institutions produce, measure, define, and analyze data about us can have significant impacts on our life chances. Is it possible to design data systems with a different set of values which prioritize justice? What would such a process look like?

Readings

1. D'Ignazio, Catherine and Lauren F. Klein. 2020. "Collect, Analyze, Imagine, Teach." Pp. 49-72 in *Data Feminism*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
2. Currie, Morgan, Britt S. Paris, Irene Pasquetto, and Jennifer Pierre. 2016. "The Conundrum of Police Officer-Involved Homicides: Counter-Data in Los Angeles County." *Big Data & Society* pp. 1-14.

Week 12 (March 29-April 2). Design.

Design is just as thoroughly political as data. How technologies work, what they visualize and hide, and what they assume about their users, can all have significant impacts on life chances. This week, we will read two pieces which outline a different way of approaching design—one which prioritizes justice.

Readings

1. Maharawal, Manissa M. and Erin McElroy. 2018. “The Anti-Eviction Mapping Project: Counter Mapping and Oral History toward Bay Area Housing Justice.” *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 108(2): 380-389.
2. Costanza-Chock, Sasha. 2020. “Design Practices: ‘Nothing about Us without Us.’” Pp. 69-101 in *Design Justice: Community-Led Practices to Build the Worlds We Need*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Week 13 (April 5-9). Abolition.

We will conclude this course with two of the most pressing social issues of our time: prison abolition and police violence. We will discuss both how activists are working to build new emancipatory technologies with abolitionist goals while critiquing (and, in some instances, trying to abolish) existing carceral technologies.

Readings

1. Hamid, Sarah T. 2020. “Community Defense: Sarah T. Hamid on Abolishing Carceral Technologies.” *Logic Magazine* 11. [<https://logicmag.io/care/community-defense-sarah-t-hamid-on-abolishing-carceral-technologies/>]
2. Phillips, Stephen. 2017. “Hacking the Carceral State.” *Logic Magazine* 3: 251-263.
3. Benjamin, Ruha. 2019. “Retooling Solidarity, Reimagining Justice.” Pp. 160-197 in *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*. Polity Press: Cambridge, UK.