Social and Political Perspectives on Digital Media
CSPL 317-01 / Fall 2019

Syllabus

with Dr Lauren Rosewarne
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1. Instructor Introduction

Dr Lauren Rosewarne is a Senior Lecturer and Director of Political Science in the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Melbourne, Australia. In 2015, she was a Visiting Scholar at the University of Connecticut, USA and in 2011 was a Visiting Scholar at the University of Massachusetts. She currently teaches in the areas of political science and gender studies and writes, comments and speaks on a wide variety of topics including gender, sexuality, politics, public policy, social media, pop culture and technology. Between July and December, 2019, Lauren is a Visiting Professor at Wesleyan University, Connecticut. Lauren has authored ten books as well as many chapters, essays and articles – more information is available on her website: www.laurenrosewarne.com.

2. Course Overview

This course examines the intersection between social media, politics and society, analyzing platforms like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram to understand their role in our lives, in our political discourse and in shaping our culture. We examine the positives of social media including social activism, the democratization of news, and heightened capacities for community, communication and connectivity. We also delve into the darker side of these platforms, exploring the proliferation of fake news, hate speech, terrorist networks and gendered issues including trolling and cyber-harassment. This is an interdisciplinary course and in it we will draw upon a broad range of social theories including science and technology studies, communication theory, linguistics, cultural studies, and media studies to understand the complex role of digital media in contemporary society.

Class Times: Tuesdays 6.00pm-9.00pm

Class Venue: ALLB304

Office Hours: By appointment (please email)

3. Assessment, Class Participation and Penalties

Summary

The assessment for this subject is written work constituting 80% of the overall mark and classroom participation constituting 20%. Extra credit-options are also available.

Written Assessment

2 argumentative research essays each 2,000 words (i.e., 4 pages single-spaced, 8 pages-double spaced):

Essay 1: Due Monday 14th October, 2019, 5pm (40% of overall mark)
Essay 2: Due Wednesday 5th December, 2019, 5pm (40% of overall mark)

Students can devise their own questions and have them approved by Lauren, alternatively, they can pick one of the Key Questions, alternative from the list of pre-approved questions on Moodle.

All assignments should be submitted to Lauren as a Microsoft Word attachments (.doc or .docx). Please note the 5pm submission time.

You can use any legitimate referencing style – Harvard, APA, Chicago etc – just make sure that whichever style you use adheres to a style manual.
Each essay is expected to draw on 10-12 sources (that are actually referenced in the body of the essay). At least half of these items should be scholarly sources (journal articles, books, etc), the other items can be newspaper articles, opinion pieces, documentaries etc.

Your starting point for extra resources should be the Assigned Readings, the Further Readings (detailed in a separate document available on Moodle), and the bibliographies of both the Assigned Readings and the Further Readings.

**Class Preparation (i.e. Homework)**

Students are encouraged to do the Assigned Readings and to watch one – or more – of the suggested media items. Accompanying the Assigned Readings are a series of Key Questions. These questions are a) to help you take notes as you do your readings, b) to help guide classroom discussions, c) to serve as essay questions and e) to provide guidance on what a suitable essay question for this subject looks like.

The functioning of this seminar relies upon each member’s active preparation for and participation in each class. Please come to class having read and reflected upon the Assigned Readings, and be ready to both read out a prepared question (as discussed in next section) and also participate in discussions.

**Class Participation Assessment**

**Worth 20% of overall mark**

Each week, each student is asked to come to class with one prepared essay question that will contribute the pool of options for essays.

- The question needs to be argumentative and not descriptive (which means your question needs to start with *Is, Do, Does, Can, Should, Could* and not *How, Why, Which, Who*). Please Note the difference. If you’re confused, make sure that any question you propose can be answered with a yes/no/maybe answer – if not, then it’s unsuitable.
- Each week you need to come to class prepared to read out your prepared question and also contextualize it as connected to either one of the readings or one of the suggested media items (i.e., explain where the question came from/what inspired you).

**Penalties**

**Written Assessment**

All assigned work not submitted in by 5pm on the day it is due will be penalized one full letter grade (10%) for each day it is late. Any work submitted more than four days late will receive a zero. No extensions will be granted for assignments except in situations of documented medical emergencies.

**Class Participation**

Students are expected to participate in classroom discussions: at a minimum they need to bring along one prepared essay question for each class (Classes 2-12). For each week that this is not done, students will lose 10% of the class participation component of their mark).
Extra Credit

Worth Up to 10%

Students can earn up to 10% extra credit for completing additional writing assignments. These assignments should take the form of a 500 word (1 page single-spaced / 2 pages double-spaced) summary of one of the suggested media items assigned. These 500 word documents should provide a summary of the main arguments and a discussion as relevant to that week’s material.

Each summary is worth 2% and students are permitted to write up to 5 across the course of the semester.

These summaries can be emailed to Lauren at any time prior to Wednesday 5th December, 2019, 5pm.

4. Class Topics, Assigned Readings and Suggested Media

Please note that there is no assigned textbook for this class. All Assigned Readings are provided as PDFs on Moodle.

Class 1: Tuesday 3rd September, 2019

Introduction to Social Media

Class Overview

In our first class I provide an overview of the subject, including detailed information about assessment. Also introduced in this class is an introduction to social media prevalence as well as some of the key ideas around social media as the fourth (or fifth estate), the concepts of techno and cyberphobia, an examination of how social media has changed the mediascape, and an exploration of the idea of the attention economy.

(No assigned readings)

Suggested Media


Class 2: Tuesday 10th September, 2019

Social Media and Social Activism

Class Overview

This class focuses on the role of social media in social activism. We look at this history of the Internet in the activist space, and then specifically, social media. We examine the role of social media in
activism, explore how it works (including as a tool of agenda setting), explore case studies including the Flint Water Crisis, #SayHerName and #MeToo, and evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of social media in this space.

**Assigned Readings**


**Suggested Media**


**Key Questions**

- Is social media key in social activism?
- Has activism become too reliant on social media?
- Is social media a political echo chamber?
- Is clicktivism negative?
- Can social media hold corporations accountable?
- Can #MeToo* be considered a success? (* As an essay question you can substitute #MeToo for #BlackLivesMatter, #SayHerName or any other hashtag campaign of your choosing)

**Class 3: Tuesday 17th September, 2019**
Social Media and Political Campaigning

Class Overview

In this class we examine the role of social media in political campaigning including as a tool of branding, fundraising and mobilization. The good and bad of such campaigning is examined and the impact is evaluated.

Assigned Readings


Suggested Media


Key Questions

- Has the impact of social media on campaigning been positive?
- Has social media benefited political candidates?
- Are some social media platforms more useful to candidates than others?
• Can a political candidate get elected without an online presence?

Class 4: Tuesday 24th September, 2019

Social Media and the Democratization of News

Class Overview

Not only has the internet changed the way news is distributed and consumed but it has led to conversations around the extent to which our world has been made more (or less) democratic. In this class we examine some of the changes that social media has made on news – including the rise of citizen journalism – and problematize such changes.

Assigned Readings


Suggested Media

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zDdWbStC2VU (58 minutes).


https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wqCEoiQ68i4 (23 minutes).

Cison. (2017). “How social media is changing the way journalists work and communicate”
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XFupE2dTW8s (58 minutes).

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=euguG925MvM (27 minutes).


https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WNP7h4tSL0 (25 minutes).
Key Questions

- Has social media been good for democracy?
- Is the internet killing democracy?
- Has social media positively impacted the media’s fourth estate function?
- Does social media provide an effective fifth estate function?
- Does social media make us better informed about politics?
- Can citizen journalists do things that mainstream journalists can’t?
- Has Facebook* made us dumber? (*As an essay question you can substitute Facebook for any other social media platform)
- Is the Donald Trump presidency a product of social media?

Class 5: Tuesday 1st October, 2019

Social Media and Community Building

Class Overview

In this class we focus on community – something assumed to be a social good and boasting high benefit to participants. Specifically we focus on the role of social media in creating and fostering communities, exploring how this is being accomplished and questioning the positives and negatives.

Assigned Readings


Suggested Media

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aoq8Z4s_oBQ (30 minutes).


Key Questions

• Does social media harm communities?
• Does social media effectively facilitate community?
• Is social media an effective tool of community empowerment?
• Who does social media most benefit?
• Are there unique benefits for diasporas provided by social media?

Class 6: Tuesday 8th October, 2019

Social Media and Intimacy

Class Overview

The Internet has completely changed the way we meet intimate partners and sustain sexual relationships. In this class we examine the ways that the social media (including dating apps) has revolutionized intimacy including the rise of hookup culture. The costs and benefits of this intimacy revolution are also examined.

Assigned Readings


Suggested Media


**Key Questions**

- Has the internet made us shallower?
- Are dating apps harmful?
- Do men benefit disproportionately from dating apps?
- Has social media created a sexual revolution?
- Is it racist to have racial preference on dating apps?
- Is lookism discriminatory?

**Essay 1 Due: Monday 14th October, 2019, 5pm**

**Class 7: Tuesday 15th October, 2019**

**Social Media and Identity Construction**

**Class Overview**

In light of how much time we spend on social media, a key component of our use is the presentation of self. From marketing ourselves politically and sexually to the sharing of memes and photos and news items, this class examines the ways we construct identity online and problematizes the notion of authenticity.

**Assigned Readings**


**Suggested Media**


Marcus Lyon. (2016). “Is your identity given or created?” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-tJKGZ_xSZ0 (13 minutes)


BBC. (2017). “Social Media: Friend or Foe?” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qUgSt0mJ_nc (30 minutes)

Sehal Hussain. (2016). “Selfie the Documentary” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CmR4ClwcoQI (10 minutes)


**Key Questions**

- Is it possible to present an authentic self online?
- Is identity socially constructed?
- Does taking selfies make us narcissistic?
- Are certain platforms better at showcasing identity?
- Do social media influencers have influence?

**Tuesday 22nd October, 2019 – No Classes / Fall Break**

**Class 8: Tuesday 29th October, 2019**

**Social Media and Fake News**

**Class Overview**

Few media issues have dominated attention in recent years more than “fake news”. In this class we look at definitions of the term – from it being a label describing news reports with deliberately deceptive content through to it being used as condemnation of unfavorable content – as well as issues including prevalence, consequences, and questions of who is responsible for prevention.

**Assigned Readings**


**Suggested Media**

Al Jazeera. (2017). “Can fake news on social media be stopped?” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fim1FX8aI_c (25 minutes)


Discoverability Summit. (2016). “Digital media trends are changing the face of journalism” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WK39zrfNIp0 (1 hour, 10 minutes).

International Journalism Festival. (2018). “Fighting back: how should journalists respond against attacks?” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zpQu8eOm5wo (1 hour, 22 minutes)


**Key Questions**

- Is fake news a problem?
- Should we care about fake news?
- Has ‘fake news’ been weaponized?
- Whose responsibility should fake news prevention be?
- Did fake news impact on the 2016 presidential election?

**Class 9: Tuesday November 5th, 2019**

**Social Media and Hate Speech**

**Class Overview**

In this class we explore the toxicity of the internet, examining the means by which hate is made visible, encouraged and exacerbated online. The unique properties of social media in this space are examined, and the role of platforms and government to prevent this is examined.

**Assigned Readings**


Suggested Media

Andrew Torba. (2018). “Why It’s So Hard to Scrub Hate Speech Off Social Media”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y_8S1cuxCiY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y_8S1cuxCiY) (32 minutes).

PBS. (2019). “Facebook moderators battle hate speech and violence”
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AnENsCa8Mc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AnENsCa8Mc) (17 minutes).

Newseum. (2013). “Online Hate and Free Speech: Where Do We Draw the Line?”
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1v_FIXiZDJ-0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1v_FIXiZDJ-0) (1 hour and 45 minutes).

Al Jazeera. (2017). “The Stream - Hate speech v free speech: Where is the line?”
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KWTCsGhK9iA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KWTCsGhK9iA) (25 minutes).

[https://www.newamerica.org/future-tense/events/whos-afraid-online-speech/](https://www.newamerica.org/future-tense/events/whos-afraid-online-speech/) (2 hours).

Key Questions

- Has social media created more hate?
- Is social media a toxic space?
- Can social media platforms stop hate?
- Should hate online be stopped?

Class 10: Tuesday November 12th, 2019

Social Media and Terrorist Networks

Class Overview

In recent years, the electronic footprint of individual terrorists as well as terrorist organizations’ use of social media has been put under greater scrutiny. In this class we examine the role of social media in radicalization and recruitment and question the individual culpability of social media platforms.
**Assigned Readings**


**Suggested Media**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e1VOrjWsD1E](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e1VOrjWsD1E) (1 hour, 20 minutes)

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2xt3wqSbVds](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2xt3wqSbVds) (11 minutes)

Rajya Sabha TV. (2016). “India’s World - Is social media globalizing terrorism?”
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R9S7fh-T0fU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R9S7fh-T0fU) (27 minutes)

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1jTfVO1FGs8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1jTfVO1FGs8) (1 hour, 20 minutes)

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A7Euc9FVIrk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A7Euc9FVIrk) (53 minutes)

**Key Questions**

- Does social media exacerbate the terrorist problem?
- Is social media key in radicalization?
- Does the internet cause terrorism?
- Should racial content be censored online?

**Class 11: Tuesday November 19th, 2019**

**Social Media and Gendered Harassment**

**Class Overview**

The internet is a uniquely hostile place for minorities and marginalized groups. In this class we look at women as a marginalized group who are disproportionately the victims of online hate and harassment. We examine incels, as well as the whys of online misogyny and explore some of the methods used to remedy this situation.

**Assigned Readings**


**Suggested Media**


Hannah Witton. (2015). “What internet trolls taught me” [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j28MD9xHT64](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j28MD9xHT64) (10 minutes)

Mirror Now. (2017). “Twitter acts against sexist trolling” [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H5Bxe8Pkg3U](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H5Bxe8Pkg3U) (58 minutes)

CBC. (2018). “Understanding Incel: The Dark Subculture Explained” [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=weELSTOZA2Q](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=weELSTOZA2Q) (40 minutes)

BBC. (2019). “Inside the Secret World of Incels” [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cmOrkhP4NIY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cmOrkhP4NIY) (50 minutes)

**Key Questions**

- Is online misogyny different to other kinds of hate online?
- Is the internet a different place for women than men?
- Are incels a product of the internet?

**Class 12: Tuesday November 26th, 2019**

**Social Media and Public Shaming**

While public shaming has occurred throughout history, social media has created the opportunity for anybody with access to the internet to shame others. In this class we look at who is shaming and who is getting shamed online. Also examined is the very fine line between shaming and calling out and calling out as a tool of social activism.

**Assigned Readings**


**Media Suggestions**

Lisa Nakamura. (2014). “When internet shaming crosses the lines: racial spectacle and memetic culture” [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AWA8mzeAsQM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AWA8mzeAsQM) (52 minutes).


Listen Conference. (2016). “Pros and cons of modern day ‘call out culture’”. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sllHi_zCAPAY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sllHi_zCAPAY) (1 hour, 9 minutes).


**Key Questions**

- Is calling someone out online the same as shaming?
- Is there a difference between harassment and shaming?
- Is shaming an effective tool of activism?
- Is shaming an effective tool of punishment?
- Are certain people more prone to social media shaming than others?

**Class 13: Tuesday December 3rd, 2019 (Essay 2 Due)**

**Final Class: Essay Workshop**

**Essay 1 Due: Wednesday 4th December, 2019, 5pm**

**5. Attendance**

Please arrive a few minutes early for each class, so that we can begin and end on time. If you have to miss a class, please e-mail Lauren as soon as you are able. Absences will be considered “excused” for religious holidays, family crises, or serious illnesses—please obtain a letter from the Dean or a doctor
for either of the latter two reasons. All other absences will be considered “unexcused.” Should you have more than two unexcused absences, you may be asked to withdraw from the class.

6. Time Commitment

While the exact time commitment for the class will vary individually and over the course of the semester, I recommend that you budget approximately three out-of-class hours for every class hour to complete the reading, assignments, homework, and project. The course has been designed so that it should be feasible to satisfactorily complete the requirements with approximately twelve hours per week of time commitment. If you are spending more time than this on a regular basis I would encourage you to check in with me.

7. Technology Policy

Smartphones: Phones should be away for the duration of class (unless we are undertaking an activity where such going online will be necessary).

Laptops should be put away during discussion and lectures, unless used as a reference with the permission of the class. Everyone should, therefore, bring their own notebook and pen or pencil to each class.

8. Religious Observances

Religious observances require that faculty make every effort to deal reasonably and fairly with all students who, because of religious obligations, have conflicts with scheduled exams, assignments or required assignments/attendance. If this applies to you, please speak with me directly as soon as possible at the beginning of the term.

9. Classroom Behavior

Students and faculty each have responsibility for maintaining an appropriate learning environment. Those who fail to adhere to such behavioral standards may be subject to discipline. Professional courtesy and sensitivity are especially important with respect to individuals and topics dealing with differences of race, color, culture, religion, creed, politics, veteran’s status, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity and gender expression, age, ability, and nationality. Class rosters are provided to the instructor with the student's legal name. I will gladly honor your request to address you by an alternate name or gender pronoun. Please advise me of this preference early in the semester so that I may make appropriate changes to my records. For more information, see the policies on the student code.

10. Discrimination and Harassment

Wesleyan University is committed to maintaining a positive learning, working, and living environment. Wesleyan will not tolerate acts of discrimination or harassment based upon Protected Classes or related retaliation against or by any employee or student. For purposes of this Wesleyan policy, “Protected Classes” refers to race, color, national origin, sex, pregnancy, age, disability, creed, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, veteran status, political affiliation or political philosophy. Individuals who believe they have been discriminated against should contact the Office for Equity and Inclusion at 860-685-4771. The responsibility of the University Members has more information.

11. Honor Code
In accordance with the Honor Code, submitting another person’s work as your own constitutes plagiarism and will not be tolerated. If you have any questions about proper attributions, see pages 4-7 of http://www.wesleyan.edu/studentaffairs/studenthandbook/StudentHandbook.pdf
12. Students with Disabilities

Wesleyan University is committed to ensuring that all qualified students with disabilities are afforded an equal opportunity to participate in, and benefit from, its programs and services. To receive accommodations, a student must have a disability as defined by the ADA. Since accommodations may require early planning and generally are not provided retroactively, please contact Accessibility Services as soon as possible. If you have a disability, or think that you might have a disability, please contact Accessibility Services in order to arrange an appointment to discuss your needs and the process for requesting accommodations. Accessibility Services is located in North College, Rooms 021/022, or can be reached by email (accessibility@wesleyan.edu) or phone (860-685-5581).

13. Extra Resources

Please note that I am unable to read drafts. With this in mind, students are encouraged to make use of the Wesleyan Writing Workshop well ahead of assignment due dates. Should you encounter academic difficulties in the course please consult me directly. You may also wish to consult the Peer Advising Program or the Peer Tutoring Program for additional support. Students with documented physical or cognitive differences that require accommodations should collaborate with Disability Resources to develop pathways to academic accessibility.

14. Title IX

Wesleyan University prohibits all forms of discriminatory harassment and sexual misconduct. Wesleyan University is committed to ensuring that each member of the university community has the opportunity to participate fully in the process of education and development. Wesleyan strives to maintain a safe and welcoming environment free from acts of discriminatory harassment and sexual misconduct. However, when incidents occur, it is the University is committed to respond in a manner that provides safety, privacy and support to those affected.