DPI-658: Social Change in the Digital Age

Spring 2016
Mon and Wed 8:45 a.m. – 10:00 a.m.
Littauer 382

Instructor: Jesse Littlewood. Contact: jesse_littlewood@hks.harvard.edu
Office Hours: Monday and Wednesday 10:00 a.m. – 11:00 a.m. and by appointment
Faculty Assistant: Kristina Mastropasqua

Course Aims and Objectives

Digital media is rewriting the playbook for social change, from the elections of Barack Obama to the 8 million members of MoveOn.org and beyond to the social media power of the #blacklivesmatter movement. Older social change and civic organizations like Greenpeace, the Sierra Club and Common Cause are searching for how to take advantage of the promise of digital media, while “digital native” movements showcase new possibilities to make change without a traditional civic or political organization.

This course will explore the role of digital technology in contemporary U.S. civic engagement and social movement organizing. Course work includes both an examination of the theories behind technology and social change as well as practical examinations of tactics at work online and offline today. Students will leave the course understanding both the “how” and the “why” of digital activism.

This is a practitioner-led course and has a focus on providing contemporary readings on how and why digital media is used for social change. The classroom work and assignments will bring practical examples of the use of digital media by organizations, campaigns, and movements and will train students to become informed users and effective practitioners of digital media for social change. This is a discussion-driven class. Students must come prepared, ready to participate in discussion, and to ask informed questions. We will occasionally do small group exercises in class.

There is a focus on experiential learning, training, and participation in the use of digital media for social change. Each student will have his or her own “beat” -- tracking a set of social change organizations, a movement, an issue or a political campaign that has a significant digital presence. You will become a follower (and participant or activist if you so choose) via available digital channels for the semester. You will have assignments that tie the coursework back to the current practices of your “beat.”

Meeting Schedule and Reading Load

This class meets Monday and Wednesday from 8:45am-10:00am in Littauer 382. Readings will be heavier for the Monday classes (~50-75 pages) than the Wednesday classes (~15-20 pages). Digital media changes quickly (and so do the opportunities for social change) and students should expect updates to the syllabus and readings, just social change practitioners are innovating their use of digital media daily. Mondays will typically focus on lecture and classroom discussion. Short experiential assignments will often be assigned between Monday and Wednesday. Wednesday classes will typically focus on continued discussion and small-group exercises.

Required Book: Micah Sifry, The Big Disconnect: Why the Internet Hasn’t Transformed Politics (Yet). (Available at COOP)
Course Schedule

Week 1: Social change in the digital age: the case for optimism
1/25/2016: Course overview
How to prepare for this class
Required reading:
none

1/27/2016: Social media can change the world
How to prepare for this class
Required reading:
• Clay Shirky, “How Social Media can Make History.”
  https://www.ted.com/talks/clay_shirky_how_cellphones_twitter_facebook_can_make_history
• Clay Shirky, “The Political Power of Social Media.”
  http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67038/clay-shirky/the-political-power-of-social-media
• Max Lewontin, “Five times Internet activism made a difference”

Week 2: What do we mean by “digital social change?”
2/1/2016: Civic engagement and organizing
How to prepare for this class
Required reading:
• Aaron Smith (Pew Research Center), “Civic Engagement in the Digital Age.”
• The Digital CultureSHIFT: From Scale to Power. http://centerformediajustice.org/digital-culture-shift-from-scale-to-power/

2/3/2016: Digital identity
How to prepare for this class
Required reading:
• Jay Rosen, “The People Formerly Known as the Audience” http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jay-rosen/the-people-formerly-known_1_b_24113.html
  https://archive.org/details/TheSocialMediaReader
• Piotr Czerski, “We, the Web Kids” http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2012/02/we-the-web-kids/253382/

Assignments due:
• Students submit the “beat” they will follow. Ungraded. Due 2/3/2016. Details provided in class on 1/27/2016.
Week 3: Technical architecture of the internet
2/8/2016: What is code? Why does it matter?
How to prepare for this class
Required reading:
- Aditya Mukerjee, “I Can Text You A Pile of Poo, But I Can’t Write My Name.” [https://modelviewculture.com/pieces/i-can-text-you-a-pile-of-poo-but-i-cant-write-my-name]

2/10/2016: Web 2.0
How to prepare for this class
Required reading:
Assignments due:

Week 4: Social media as new source of people power
2/15/2016: no class, HOLIDAY
2/17/2016: “New” power
How to prepare for this class
Required reading:
Assignments due:

Week 5: Corporate control
2/22/2016: “Filter bubbles”
How to prepare for this class
Required reading:
2/24/2016: Monetization of public spheres

How to prepare for this class

Required reading:

- Ethan Zuckerman, “Advertising is the internet’s original sin”
- Craig Desson, “An annotated guide to Facebook’s privacy settings (that you’ve never read)”
  http://www.thestar.com/business/2015/02/24/signed-up-for-facebook-this-is-what-you-really-agreed-too.html

Assignments due:

Week 6: Guest Lecturer, TBA
2/29/2016 and 3/2/2016: guest lecturer

Week 7: Clicktivism / slacktivism
3/7/2016: Online activism = slacktivism

How to prepare for this class

Required reading:

- Malcom Gladwell, “Small Change: Why the revolution will not be tweeted”

Assignments due:
- Starting 3/7/2016, in-class Ignite Talks begin: three students per class. Graded.

3/9/2016: Online activism is just a first step

How to prepare for this class

Required reading:


Assignments due:

Week 8: Spring Break
No classes 3/14/2016 and 3/16/2016
Week 9: Big Data, small data
3/21/2016: “Big Data” is data about you
How to prepare for this class
Required reading:

3/23/2016: Small and medium data
How to prepare for this class
Required reading:

Assignments due:

Week 10: Innovation and Tactics
3/28/2016: Framing, storytelling, experimentation
How to prepare for this class
Required reading:
- Peter Murray & Steve Ma, “The Promise of Lean Experimentation.” http://ssir.org/articles/entry/the Promise_of_lean_experimentation
3/30/2016: Tactics
How to prepare for this class
Required reading:
• Saul Alinsky, Rules for Radicals. “Tactics”.

Assignments due:

Week 11: Email
4/4/2016: How organizations use email
How to prepare for this class
Required reading:
• Micah Sifry, The Big Disconnect: Why the Internet Hasn’t Transformed Politics (Yet). Chapter 3 “Big Email: The Politics of Passive Democratic Engagement”

4/6/2016: The A/B test
How to prepare for this class

Assignments due:
• Email review of your beat, advocacy email plan and annotated original email. Due 4/6/2016. Graded. Details provided in class on 3/30/2016.

Week 12: “Digitally native” movements and campaigns
4/11/2016: #blacklivesmatter
How to prepare for this class
Required reading:
• “Our Demand is Simple: Stop Killing Us” http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/10/magazine/our-demand-is-simple-stop-killing-us.html
4/13/2016: Net Neutrality

How to prepare for this class

Required reading:


Assignments due:


Week 13: Online and offline

4/18/2016: Developing leaders, developing civic capacity

How to prepare for this class

Required reading:

- Micah Sifry, *The Big Disconnect: Why the Internet Hasn’t Transformed Politics (Yet)*. Chapter 4 “The Way We Look to Us All”
- Ari Melber, “Year One of Organizing for America: The Permanent Field Campaign in a Digital Age” [http://techpresident.com/ofayear1](http://techpresident.com/ofayear1)

4/20/2016: Mobilizations

How to prepare for this class

Required reading:


Assignments due:

Week 14: Future of social change in the digital age
4/25/2016: Emerging tools and tactics to build power
How to prepare for this class
Required reading:
- Micah Sifry, *The Big Disconnect: Why the Internet Hasn’t Transformed Politics (Yet).* “Coda: The Trouble We Face; The Opportunity We Have”
- Zeynep Tufekci, “Is The Internet Good or Bad? Yes.” https://medium.com/matter/is-the-internet-good-or-bad-yes-76d9913c6011#.84en6mshr

4/27/2016: Funding social change
How to prepare for this class
Required reading:
- Alex Fitzpatrick, “‘Quick Donate’ Transformed Political Fundraising in 2012” http://mashable.com/2012/12/21/obama-quick-donate/#19Af.LPOHaq

Assignments due:

Final paper (as below) due Friday 5/6/2016. Details provided in class on 3/21/2016.

Assignments and Grading Procedures
Students will be evaluated on the following:
Participation, including Response Posts — 30%
In order to be prepared for class discussion, students are expected to have completed the readings. Regular attendance and participation is critical and will count in formulating the final grade. Here are the components of class participation:
- Attendance in class. Missing more than one class may affect your participation grade.
- Weekly Response Posts (20%): Each week you will write and publish a single post on Canvas in that week’s “Discussion” thread that is your reflection on the readings for Monday and the topic for the week. These are not given letter grades, but graded plus-or-minus. These should take you about 30 minutes to complete each, and be 200 - 300 words in length.
  - Summarize in 1-2 sentences what you think the thesis/primary argument of each reading is (“key takeaways”) and one or two critical question(s) you have for discussion.
  - Use your questions/topics to tell me where and how you want to spend our time in class. What are aspects of the readings you found interesting and would like to discuss? What parts of the readings were confusing that you would like to spend more time on?
  - You are also encouraged to share related articles, videos or applications you'd encourage the rest of the class to know about.
These are due Sunday at 5pm ET. You can decide if you want to publish your pieces publicly (e.g. on Medium or your own blog) as well.

You are allowed to skip this weekly post one time during the semester.

- Review Quick Responses: Read your classmates’ Responses before class — and you are highly encouraged to comment on them (Canvas makes comments and replies easy) – it will make classroom discussion that much richer.
- Class discussion (10%): Each week you will be expected to participate in a rigorous classroom discussion of the key concepts and readings. This includes completing any un-graded digital strategy assignments required for the Wednesday class that will be used to inform the Wednesday class discussion.

Digital Strategy Assignments — 30%
At the start of the semester, students will be asked to choose a “beat” to follow -- a civic or social issue, organization or topic they will keep tabs on throughout the semester. Students will be assigned digital strategy based assignments that relate the coursework to their chosen beat. Students are required to complete all digital strategy assignments, but only three of the digital strategy assignments will be submitted and graded. See weekly schedule for assignments.

Ignite Talk — 10%
Taking a page from our friends in the startup/tech space, each student will create and deliver a short presentation to the class on the “beat” you’ve been following and a critical question raised by the topics in this class. These will be “Ignite” style 5-minute presentations, where each presenter must use 20 digital slides, which auto-advance every 15 seconds. These are fun, engaging presentations that are graded on content, not style, and will educate and engage the rest of the class on some of the insights you’ve found over the course of the semester. These will begin 3/7/2016 and three students will present per class at the start of the class.

Final Paper — 30%
The final assignment will be a term paper of 4,000 - 5,000 words engaging on one or more critical questions raised by the class. Students will be encouraged to choose a topic that interests them, including (but not required) the political/civic “beat” they have been following.

On Being a Good Class Participant
Attendance and participation is critical to get the most out of our time together. In order to be prepared for class discussion, students are expected to have completed the readings and any assignments. Here are some additional tips:

- Read your classmates posts and comment on them. That not only gives you a clearer idea of what questions or ideas you can bring to class but also gives your classmates ideas too.
- Your perspective is unique. Do participate, even if you are shy.
- Debate. You don’t have to agree. Your politics may be different: please share your point of view. You might play devil’s advocate.
- Be to the point. Make a quick note about your key points. This keeps from rambling.
- Step up, step back. If you’re someone who talks more readily, wait to give others a chance to jump in first. If you are someone who is shy, or doesn’t participate right out of the gate, challenge yourself to jump in early.
- Get to know your fellow student’s names, and use them in class discussion. It helps make a better class experience for everyone.
**Academic integrity**
I expect that all students understand and will comply with the HKS code of behavior discussed in the academic integrity section of the website here:  
http://www.hks.harvard.edu/degrees/registrar/procedures/integrity

**Accommodations for students with disabilities**
I will strive to make all accommodations for students with disabilities. From the HKS standard syllabus: Students needing academic adjustments or accommodations because of a documented disability must present their Faculty Letter from the Accessible Education Office (AEO) and speak with the professor by the end of the second week of the term, February 5, 2016. Failure to do so may result in the Course Head's inability to respond in a timely manner. All discussions will remain confidential, although Faculty are invited to contact AEO to discuss appropriate implementation.