

# DIGITAL POLITICS\*

## MA Seminar, Winter 2020/21

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**Intro videos will be uploaded on the Monday prior to the live meeting.  
Online Sessions will take place on Wednesdays, 14:00 - 15:00.**

**Instructor:**

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## 1 Course Overview

*“Facebook is killing democracy!”; “YouTube makes conspiracy theorists famous!”; “Everyone’s now in their own online bubbles isolated from different opinions!”*. These are some common things we hear when talking about the political impacts of the ongoing information technology revolution. However, social scientists are only starting to make sense of how the rise of digitalization and social media affects politics. In this course we will review the most advanced academic literature in this area, discussing some of its most pressing topics, from the spread of fake news to the role of social media on protests, and why the most likely right answers to the three statements opening this paragraph are respectively *“Probably not”*, *“Yeah, sort of”*, and *“Nope, not at all, quite the opposite”*.

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\*This is a preliminary syllabus, subject to changes before the course starts.

## 2 How This Course is Structured Online

- 10-15 minutes video lectures introducing the topic of the week, uploaded on Mondays prior to the Wednesdays meetings.
- Weekly 45-60 minutes meetings online through Zoom; the live seminar will not be a lecture, but structured as group-work and discussion around that week's topic.
- Each week, students will be asked in advance to prepare something before the class which we will discuss during the meeting. These may involve, for example, doing a quick research on a topic assigned by the lecturer, or submitting questions related to the readings.
- Throughout the semester, small groups of students will be asked to come in person for the Wednesday sessions, in order to talk about their progress on the class projects.

## 3 Course Requirements

- Participation in **one of the two debates** during the live sessions (30 pts): During the semester, two of the live sessions (on Dec. 15 and Feb 03) will be a debate on a specific proposition related to those weeks' topic. We will form four debate teams, two to debate on each day, and each student must be part of one (and only one) team. The two groups not debating on the day will be the judges. Depending on the number of students registered and feasibility, the debates will happen in person, with a live broadcast through Zoom to the rest of the class (judges).
- **Two reaction papers** (15 pts each): during the semester students should pick any two sessions and write one reaction paper for each. The paper should be a critical evaluation of the readings for that week, to be uploaded up to Wednesday at 13:00 of the week when we discuss those readings. Each reaction paper should be no longer than two pages. **You cannot write a reaction paper for the topic which you are debating.**
- **A final group project** (40 pts). The whole class will be involved in developing a voting-advice application (e.g., *Wahl-O-Mat*) as a group. Students will be divided into groups with specific tasks, such as coding party positions,

elaborating survey questions, or implementing the design in an online survey platform. Each group will present their part for the class during a live session, and the final implementation should be ready by February 28.

Points are converted to final grades as follows:

Points	Grade
100–96	1,0
95–91	1,3
90–86	1,7
85–81	2,0
80–76	2,3
75–71	2,7
70–66	3,0
65–61	3,3
60–56	3,7
55–51	4,0
50–0	5,0

## 4 Schedule

### Communicating

The first half of this course will focus on the supply side of political communication in a digital age: how traditional political actors are adapting to new media, and the new systems, structures, and processes that arise with digital tools.

#### **Week 1 (Nov 4): General Introduction: The Changing Landscape of Politics**

Jungherr, Andreas, Gonzalo Rivero, and Daniel Gayo-Avello (2020). *Retooling Politics: How Digital Media Are Shaping Democracy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, chapter 1 (pp. 1-29).

Tucker, Joshua A., Yannis Theocharis, Margaret E. Roberts, and Pablo Barber. "From liberation to turmoil: Social media and democracy." *Journal of Democracy* 28, no. 4 (2017): 46-59.

#### **Week 2 (Nov 11): How and Why Political Actors Communicate Online**

Feezell, Jessica T. "Agenda setting through social media: The importance of incidental news exposure and social filtering in the digital era." *Political Research Quarterly* 71, no. 2 (2018): 482-494.

Barber, Pablo, Andreu Casas, Jonathan Nagler, Patrick J. Egan, Richard Bonneau, John T. Jost, and Joshua A. Tucker. "Who leads? Who follows? Measuring issue attention and agenda setting by legislators and the mass public using social media data." *American Political Science Review* 113, no. 4 (2019): 883-901.

#### **Week 3 (Nov 18): Data-driven campaigning**

Two days before the Wednesday meeting we'll get together to watch the documentary "The Great Hack" (2019), and that will be the topic of discussion this week.

Hersh, Eitan D., and Brian F. Schaffner. (2013). Targeted Campaign Appeals and the Value of Ambiguity. *The Journal of Politics*, 75(2), 520-534.

Fowler, Erika Franklin, Michael M. Franz, Gregory J. Martin, Zachary Peskowitz, and Travis N. Ridout. "Political Advertising Online and Offline." *American Political Science Review* 2020.

#### **Week 4 (Nov 25): Disinformation, misinformation, and fake news**

Vraga, Emily K., and Leticia Bode (2020). “Defining Misinformation and Understanding its Bounded Nature: Using Expertise and Evidence for Describing Misinformation”, *Political Communication*

Dobber, Tom, Nadia Metoui, Damian Trilling, Natali Helberger, and Claes de Vreese. ”Do (Microtargeted) Deepfakes Have Real Effects on Political Attitudes?.” *The International Journal of Press/Politics* (2020): 1940161220944364.

#### **Week 5 (Dec 02): Countering online misinformation**

Rossini, Patricia, Jennifer Stromer-Galley, Erica Anita Baptista, and Vanessa Veiga de Oliveira. ”Dysfunctional information sharing on WhatsApp and Facebook: The role of political talk, cross-cutting exposure and social corrections.” *New Media & Society* (2020): 1461444820928059.

Walter, Nathan, Jonathan Cohen, R. Lance Holbert, and Yasmin Morag (2019): Fact-Checking: A Meta-Analysis of What Works and for Whom, Political Communication, DOI: 10.1080/10584609.2019.1668894

#### **Week 6 (Dec 09): Algorithmic bias**

Pradel, Franziska (2020): Biased Representation of Politicians in Google and Wikipedia Search? The Joint Effect of Party Identity, Gender Identity and Elections, *Political Communication*, DOI: 10.1080/10584609.2020.1793846

Noble, Safiya Umoja. *Algorithms of oppression: How search engines reinforce racism*. New York: NYU Press, 2018. Chapter 1, pp. 15-63

#### **Week 7 (Dec 16): Policy and Regulation**

On this live session we have our first debate. The topic is:

*Paid political ads in social media networks should be banned.*

Justification: In 2019, Twitter announced that it would globally ban paid political advertising in its platform. The company stated that reach for political messages should be organic, and allowing paid ads would give unfair advantages to rich campaigns. On the other side, Facebook maintained its policy of allowing political ads, stating that private companies should not censor politicians or the news.

One team will be for, and the other against. The sides will be randomly decided.

Readings:

Florian Saurwein & Charlotte Spencer-Smith (2020): Combating Disinformation on Social Media: Multilevel Governance and Distributed Accountability in Europe, *Digital Journalism*, DOI: 10.1080/21670811.2020.1765401

Kreiss, Daniel, and Shannon C. McGregor. "The arbiters of what our voters see: Facebook and Googles struggle with policy, process, and enforcement around political advertising." *Political Communication* 36, no. 4 (2019): 499-522.

**Week 8 (Dec 23) - No meeting**

**NB!** We do not have a live session on December 23. This is to compensate watching the documentary The Great Hack in November.

## Consumers

The second half of this course is dedicated to the demand side of digital politics: voters and citizens. How are new media changing the ways people learn about and participate in politics, and what new can we learn about the public from them?

**Week 9 (Jan 13): Social media, protests, and contentious politics**

Munger, Kevin, Richard Bonneau, Jonathan Nagler, and Joshua A. Tucker. "Elites tweet to get feet off the streets: Measuring regime social media strategies during protest." *Political Science Research and Methods* 7, no. 4 (2019): 815-834.

Jost, John T., Pablo Barber, Richard Bonneau, Melanie Langer, Megan Metzger, Jonathan Nagler, Joanna Sterling, and Joshua A. Tucker. "How social media facilitates political protest: Information, motivation, and social networks." *Political psychology* 39 (2018): 85-118.

**Week 10 (Jan 20): Political information**

Bode, Leticia. "Political news in the news feed: Learning politics from social media." *Mass communication and society* 19, no. 1 (2016): 24-48.

Alvarez, R. Michael, Ines Levin, Peter Mair, and Alexander Trechsel. "Party preferences in the digital age: The impact of voting advice applications." *Party Politics* 20, no. 2 (2014): 227-236.

### **Week 11 (Jan 27): Polarization and echo chambers**

Scharkow, Michael, Frank Mangold, Sebastian Stier, and Johannes Breuer. "How social network sites and other online intermediaries increase exposure to news." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 117, no. 6 (2020): 2761-2763.

Barber, Pablo, John T. Jost, Jonathan Nagler, Joshua A. Tucker, and Richard Bonneau. "Tweeting from left to right: Is online political communication more than an echo chamber?." *Psychological science* 26, no. 10 (2015): 1531-1542.

### **Week 12 (Feb 3): Radicalization and hate speech**

On this live session we have our second debate. The topic is:

*The EU should pass regulation forcing Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to strengthen the moderation of content posted in their platforms in order to curb hate speech and political radicalism.*

Readings:

Massanari, Adrienne. "#Gamergate and The Fapping: How Reddits algorithm, governance, and culture support toxic technocultures." *New Media & Society* 19, no. 3 (2017): 329-346.

Munger, Kevin. "Tweetment effects on the tweeted: Experimentally reducing racist harassment." *Political Behavior* 39, no. 3 (2017): 629-649.

### **Week 13 (Feb 10): Doing Political Research on a Digital World**

This day we'll have a live chat with Federico Vegetti, from the University of Turin, on practical, ethical, and legal aspects of doing research with Facebook data.

Mandatory reading in advance:

Mancosu, Moreno, and Federico Vegetti. "What You Can Scrape and What Is Right to Scrape: A Proposal for a Tool to Collect Public Facebook Data." *Social Media+ Society* 6, no. 3 (2020).