Overview

Course Organiser:
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Lecturers:
- Dr Meredith Hall, mah247@cam.ac.uk
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Aims and objectives of the paper:
- To equip students with the analytical skills and the theoretical and empirical knowledge to understand, navigate and change the rapidly-evolving dynamics between media, culture and societies;
- To critically examine approaches that put culture at the centre in our understanding of societies;
- To develop reflexivity around the intersection of power with media and technology as relates to political communication and everyday life;
- To deepen understanding through developing skills in the use of theory to analyse empirical cases and the use of these empirical cases to advance theory;
- To contribute to the decolonising and greening of media studies;
- To reflect critically on the cultural production that occurs in the academy;
- To build argumentation skills through essay writing, group discussions and collaborations.

Course content:
This paper is concerned with the social analysis of culture, media, symbolic forms and information and communication technologies. This is manifested in a theoretical focus on approaches to the study of media and culture, including their relationships with capitalism; the norms that drive the production and study of media and culture, including technology; audiences; subcultures; visual culture; and storytelling. Lectures and accompanying seminars examine key concepts, theories and debates in these areas and apply them in the empirical areas of digital media and everyday life as well as media, technology and social change. The variety of SOC 7 topics are research-led and benefit from the range of expertise among the paper’s lecturers; reflecting the Department’s pedagogical concern with the climate emergency, literature and ‘thinking and talking’ questions are included to connect topics to the climate emergency. This is an advanced paper which builds on
foundations in the study of media, culture and technologies given in Parts I and IIA, particularly SOC 1, SOC 2 and SOC 3 – though these papers are not prerequisites.

Structure of the paper:

- **Theories and Concepts of Media and Culture**
  - Six two-hour sessions in Michaelmas, weeks 1-3 and 5-7
  - Lecturers: Dr Hall, Dr McPherson, Dr Kurian

- **Digital Media and Everyday Life**
  - Three two-hour sessions in Lent, weeks 1-3
  - Lecturers: Ms Mobayed, Ms Tangeman, and Dr Kurian

- **Media, Technology and Social Change**
  - Three two-hour sessions in Lent, weeks 5-7
  - Lecturers: Ms Saxler, Ms Panievsky, and Dr Kurian

- **Revision**
  - One two-hour Q&A session in Easter
  - Lecturer: Dr Hall

Mode of teaching and supervision arrangements:

- The paper will be administered via its SOC 7 Moodle site, where resources will be organised according to topic.

- Each topic will consist of a **one-hour lecture** and a **one-hour interactive seminar** that will consist of discussion and learning activities as detailed below in each topic description. This seminar activity will almost always be about applying the theory and concepts to a new empirical case to further our understanding of the case, and then, in turn, about applying this new knowledge to further our understanding of the theory and concepts. It is a space for third year students to exercise independent scholarship collaboratively.

- Students should have **six supervisions** over Michaelmas and Lent terms, of which at least four require students to submit essays. These should be sent by email to supervisors at **least 24 hours in advance of the supervision**. Essays should be **no more than 2,500 words**; this allows students to practice writing to wordcount and supervisors to manage their workloads. Students should answer the relevant supervision question in the paper guide and will receive written feedback on these essays from their supervisors ahead of the supervision.

- The remaining **two supervisions can involve alternative preparation** subject to agreement between supervisor and student; this may include a presentation on an empirical case, an analysis of a media artefact or a 500-word blog piece for the Department website. Students taking this option are particularly encouraged to make connections between the topic and the climate crisis.

- The **reading lists** for each topic are a starting point for students and supervisors. Starred readings are the core literature, but students are encouraged to explore beyond these lists as they form their views on these topics. Students are not expected to cover all of the topics, but rather to make a balanced selection in consultation with their supervisors.

- A **revision Q&A session** and two revision supervisions will occur in the first few weeks of Easter term.

- **Supervision is organised centrally** by the supervision coordinator.
Because the paper is research-led, the topics may change year to year according to lecturers’ expertise.

Background reading:

The following texts provide an overview of the sociology of media and culture subfields as well as connect them to the Department of Sociology’s overarching pedagogical theme of the climate crisis.

- R. Williams, ‘Culture is Ordinary’, in *Studying Culture: An Introductory Reader* (Arnold, 1993)

**Thinking and talking question:** Why has the study of the media so often overlooked connections to the climate crisis, and to what effect?

**Series 1: Theories and Concepts of Media and Culture**

**Aims of this series:**

- To provide students with an introduction to some of the key theoretical approaches and concepts in the study of culture and the media;
- To give students a sense of the value and the fruitfulness of these approaches and concepts, while at the same time alerting them to their shortcomings;
- To introduce students to some of the key debates in the field.

**1. Culture and capitalism (Hall) (Week 1, 10 October)**

**Summary:** One of the longest-standing concerns in this subfield of sociology is the connection between culture and capitalism, both with respect to who owns and controls cultural production – from cinema to social media platforms to app design – and with respect to how cultural products reinforce capitalist ideologies. This lecture introduces this critical approach, while also demonstrating how its emphasis on capitalism is just the first step in a broader understanding of media, culture and power that takes into account multiple axes of inequality. This lecture concludes by exploring intersectional, decolonial and environmental approaches to critical political economy.

**Seminar activity:** Choose a social media platform and analyse it using the concepts and critiques of the culture industry thesis.

**Reading list:**

Supervision question: How does capitalism impact the production of culture and how does culture, in turn, influence the operations of capital?

Thinking and talking question: What crucial insights do intersectional, decolonial, and environmental approaches offer to the study of media and cultural industries?

2. Media, design, and morality (McPherson) (Week 2, 17 October)

Summary: Morality is inherent not only to the design of media and technology but also to how we as scholars critically assess them. Yet, the norms that underpin our experience and understanding of media and technology are often so normalised that we fail to critically interrogate them. This topic will provide the tools for this interrogation, through understanding norms not only as moral frameworks but also as binaries and discourses and as fundamentally caught up in power and positionality. We will explore this topic through the conceptual case of the public sphere and the empirical case of algorithmic search engines.

Seminar activity: Identify a technology you relied on during the lockdowns and investigate the norms that shape it. Where do you think these norms come from? How are they built into this technology, implicitly and explicitly? Who is included, and who is excluded by these norms? How do these norms compare to your own normative framework? See, for example, Sachini Perera’s blog post about Zoom.

Reading list:

- R. Benjamin, Race after Technology (Polity, 2019) [Chapter 2: ‘Default Discrimination’]
- S. Costanza-Chock, Design Justice (The MIT Press, 2020) [Chapter 1: ‘Design Values’]
- *C. D'Ignazio and L Klein, Data Feminism (MIT Press Open, 2019) [Chapter Two: ‘On Rational, Scientific, Objective Viewpoints from Mythical, Imaginary, Impossible Standpoints’]
- *J. Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere (Polity, 1989) [‘Introduction’]
• V. Held, The Ethics of Care (Oxford University Press, 2005) [‘Introduction’]
• G. Pough, Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere (Northeastern University Press, 2015) [Chapter 2 – ‘Bringing Wreck: Theorising Race, Rap, Gender, and the Public Sphere’]
• J. Thompson, The Media and Modernity (Polity, 1995) [Chapter 2]

**Supervision question:** How do norms shape media systems? Illustrate with at least one example.

**Thinking and talking questions:** Why has safeguarding the planet not been a core norm of Western societies? Is this changing? If so, why, and to what effect?

### 3. Storytelling and Social Justice (Kurian) (Week 3, 24 October)

**Summary:** Storytelling has been called the oldest form of communication, and human beings have been dubbed the species ‘addicted to story’ (Gottschall, 2012). This lecture focuses on creative and digital media as sites where stories are born, shaped, re-negotiated, and contested. We will discuss narratives of oppression and resistance across both traditional media and more novel and innovative forms (e.g. comics and graphic novels authored by women of colour and digital storytelling archives to reclaim marginalised histories). Throughout, we will explore the transgressive and transformative potential of storytelling, as well as critical perspectives on its risks and limitations.

**Seminar activity:** In small groups, share a story that changed or broadened your perspective on any aspect of social, cultural, political, or economic life, in ways big or small. How was this narrative constructed? What was its medium of communication? What qualities of the story helped make it transformative?

**Reading list:**
• *H. Chute, Graphic women: Life narrative and contemporary comics. (Columbia University Press, 2010) [Chapter: ‘Introduction’]
• D. Dowling, Immersive longform storytelling: Media, technology, audience (Routledge, 2019) [Chapter: ‘Conclusion’]
• J. Hess, “Putting a face on it”: The trouble with storytelling for social justice in music education.’ Philosophy of Music Education Review, 29/1 (2021), pp. 67-87
• N. Matthews & N. Sunderland, Digital storytelling in health and social policy: Listening to marginalised voices (Taylor & Francis, 2017) [Chapter: ‘Introduction’]


**Supervision question:** What possibilities and pitfalls emerge from using storytelling for social change?

**Thinking and talking question:** To what extent has environmental activism relied on storytelling, and with what effects?

4. Subcultures and cultural studies (McPherson) (Week 5, 7 November)

**Summary:** Building on the approach in cultural studies to seeing culture as ‘ordinary’ (Williams, 1993), this topic turns towards the study of subcultures, focusing in particular on their style and how scholars have read subcultural style in relation to the concept of resistance. We start with the early studies that understood subcultures as resisting dominant classes, interrogating these studies using standpoint theory to examine how these mechanisms for coping with exclusion might themselves have been exclusionary. We then turn to more contemporary subcultures and ask if we can still read these as sites of resistance in an era of commodification and consumption – or if, by focusing on resistance, we are overlooking the creativity of these subcultures in imagining alternative futures.

**Seminar activity:** Identify a contemporary subculture and analyse it with the theories and concepts of this topic, paying particular attention to the subculture’s relationship to the idea of resistance.

**Reading list:**

• A. Bennett, ‘Subcultures or Neo-Tribes? Rethinking the Relationship between Youth, Style and Musical Taste’, *Sociology 33/3* (1999): pp. 599–617


• S. Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (Blackwell,1980) ['Deviance and Moral Panics’]


• *S. Hall and T. Jefferson (eds), Resistance through Rituals, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2006) [Chapters 1 and 6]*

• D. Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (Methuen, 1979) ['One’]


• *A. McRobbie, Feminism and Youth Culture* (Palgrave, 1991) ['Settling Accounts with Subculture: A Feminist Critique’]


• S. Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital* (Polity, 1995) ['The Distinctions of Culture without Distinction’]


• R. Williams, ‘Culture is Ordinary’, in *Studying Culture: An Introductory Reader* (Arnold, 1993)

**Supervision question:** Are youth subcultures forms of resistance to mainstream culture?
Thinking and talking question: If we put culture at the centre, how does this help us think about the climate crisis?

5. Visual culture (Hall) (Week 6, 14 November)

Summary: Drawing inspiration from bell hooks’ observation that ‘[t]here is power in looking,’ this topic serves as an introduction to the study of visual culture, a scholarly enterprise dedicated to ‘showing seeing’ as a site of power relations. Our analytical lens, thus, shifts from vision to visuality—sight reconceived as a social fact. From this perspective, we will examine the social construction of subjectivities through visual representations. We will then turn to the cultural codes embedded within different ‘ways of seeing’ and the profound influence diverse media technologies have on the creation, dissemination, and consumption of images. Throughout, the focus will be on structural patterns of privileged looking and blindness within visual culture, specifically in relation to race, gender, sexuality, and colonialism.

Seminar activity: Bring two images from different ad campaigns with contrasting representations of race, gender, and/or sexuality. Be prepared to discuss.

Reading list:
- *R. Barthes, ‘Rhetoric of the Image’ in Visual Culture: The Reader (Sage & The Open University, 1999)
- F. Fanon, Black Skins, White Masks (Paladin, 1986) [‘The Fact of Blackness’]
- S. Hall, ‘The Spectacle of the “Other”’ in Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices (Sage & The Open University, 1997)
- N. Mirzoeff, The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality (Duke, 2011) [‘Introduction: The Right to Look; Or, How to Think With and Against Visuality’]
- C. Pinney, Photography and Anthropology (Reaktion Books, 2011) [‘The Double History of Photography and Anthropology’]
- *Said, E. Orientalism (Vintage 1979) [Introduction]

Supervision question: How has the emergence of new visual media shaped the racialization process and/or the reification of gender/sexuality?

Thinking and talking question: Hall argues that seeing is a cultural practice. What might be some implications of this statement for how we view nature and the environment in the midst of the environmental crisis?
6. Audiences (McPherson) (Week 7, 21 November)

**Summary:** This topic covers how the understanding of audiences has evolved in media sociology, from the passive audiences of mass media to the active prosumer (producing consumer) of the social media era. We will interrogate how much the dominant technology of the time has shaped this understanding. Throughout, we will focus on how views on audiences relate to broader sociological questions around agency and power, and we will interrogate why more passive understandings of audiences are resurfacing just when our media are becoming ever more interactive.

**Seminar activity:** Find some media coverage of the phenomenon of fake news. Which understanding of the audience is represented? Why?

**Reading list:**
- *S. Hall, ‘Encoding/Decoding’ in Culture, Media, Language (Hutchinson, 1980)*

**Supervision question:** Does the active audience approach advance our understanding of media reception?

**Thinking and talking question:** How does how audiences are understood impact how we communicate climate change?
Aims of this series:

- To further students’ understanding of the ways in which digital media affect different aspects of people’s everyday lives, from the conduct of interpersonal relationships to the use of digital technologies to enhance self knowledge;
- To support students in their abilities to describe, compare and evaluate some of the main concepts and theories that have been used to study digital media and everyday life;
- To help students use relevant theories of culture and the media to assess how digital media can be empowering as well as disempowering for people in their everyday lives;
- To encourage students to critically assess the opportunities and threats that arise from digital media for people’s everyday lives.

1. Digital media, everyday life and inequality (Mobayed) (Week 1, 23 January)

Summary: Commencing with an introduction to the sociology of everyday life, this topic will go on to explore the relation between digital media, everyday life and social inequality. Using the concept of ‘labour’ as a lens for critical investigation, we will examine how labour is distributed in and through digital media and will scrutinise how this distribution intersects with old and new inequalities. Focusing on ‘data as a form capital’, we will empirically broach the exploitative consequences of the new ‘datafied’ social order produced by AI, social platforms, and large-scale data collection.

Seminar activity: In small groups, pick a social media platform (or other AI tools, such as ChatGPT) from your everyday life and discuss the labour that your use of this app/platform generates, for whom, and how this labour might feed off/into social inequalities.

Reading list:

- C. Archer, ‘Social Media Influencers, Post-Feminism and Neoliberalism: How Mum Bloggers’ ‘Playbour’ is Reshaping Public Relations’, Public Relations Inquiry, 8/2 (2019), pp. 149–166
- A. Deck, ‘The workers at the frontlines of the AI revolution’, rest of the world (11 July 2023)
*A. Williams, M. Miceli & T. Gebru, 'The Exploited Labor Behind Artificial Intelligence', NOEMA (13 October 2022)

**Supervision question**: What implications do the new forms of labour generated by the digital age have for social inequality? Discuss using examples.

**Thinking and talking question**: Have digital media created new forms of grappling with the climate crises? Discuss using examples.

2. Mediated intimacy (Tangeman) (Week 2, 30 January)

**Summary**: This topic explores the increasing incorporation of digital media into our intimate lives and practices. We will examine how digital media affect practices and experiences of interpersonal closeness and address the opportunities and obstacles to intimacy that these create.

**Seminar activity**: Think of an app or digital platform that you relied on for intimacy during the pandemic. Consider how this app or platform helped you to foster intimacy, its limitations, and how it might mitigate and/or reproduce inequalities and relations of power. Discuss with a partner.

**Reading list**:

- S. Livingstone, *On the Mediation of Everything*, *Journal of Communication*, 59/1 (2009), pp. 1–18
• *M. Niesen, 'Love, Inc.: Toward Structural Intersectional Analysis of Online Dating Sites and Applications', in The Intersectional Internet: Race, Sex, Class, and Culture Online (Peter Lang Publishing 2016)

Supervision question: Does the expansion of digital technologies into the intimate sphere amplify and/or address social inequalities?

Thinking and talking question: How does our turn towards digital media for intimacy relate to consumerism and fast-fashion?

3. The quantified self (Kurian) (Week 3, 6 February)

Summary: Starting with the concept of the ‘quantified self’ and its commercial history, this lecture is focused on the use of digital technology for self-tracking and to enhance self-knowledge. Returning to the classic sociological balance between structure and agency, we will first look at self-tracking technologies as a site of control by focusing both on their relationship with surveillance capitalism and on their normalisation of normative structures around neoliberalism, gender and able-bodiedness. By drawing on literature that takes a more ethnographic approach, we will then explore a more ambivalent view of power in the relationship between technologies and users, one which uncovers opportunities for resistance and new imaginaries.

Seminar activity: In small groups, decide on an app or digital platform that can be used for self-tracking and think about how using this app can inform how we think about ourselves and others.

Reading list:
• *J. P. Elman, ‘"Find Your Fit": Wearable Technology and the Cultural Politics of Disability', New Media & Society 20/10 (2018), pp. 3760–3777
• D. Lupton, 'Australian Women’s Use of Health and Fitness Apps and Wearable Devices: A Feminist New Materialism Analysis', Feminist Media Studies (2019), pp. 1–16

**Supervision question:** What can we learn about the self and society from self-tracking and big data? Discuss using examples.

**Thinking and talking question:** What is the relationship between quantification and the climate crisis?

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**Series 3: Media, Technology, and Social Change**

**Aims of this series:**

• To introduce students to some of the key concepts, theories, and debates around visibility, populism, and ‘ICT4D’
• To encourage students to argue with and apply these concepts, theories, and debates;
• To inspire students to think critically about media, technologies and social change

1. Visibility (Saxler) (Week 5, 20 February)

**Summary:** Mediation has always afforded opportunities for visibility, but these opportunities are also always embedded in power relations that inflect who is seen by whom. In this topic, we will follow the concept of visibility in media sociology as the subdiscipline moves from considering the mass media to thinking about new visibilities in the era of social media and machine learning; we will theorise beyond visibility to think about invisibility and hypervisibility and how these relate to inequality. In so doing, we will not only look at how the status quo vis-à-vis visibility is maintained, including through considering the perils of visibility, but we will also look at how it is being challenged.

**Seminar activity:** Choose a struggle over mediated visibility from current events and investigate the relationships between visibility and power that characterise it, using the concepts and arguments from the topic.

**Reading List:**


**Supervision question**: Who benefits from the new politics of visibility in the digital age?

**Thinking and talking question**: How has who and what are visible as concerns the climate crisis changed in recent years? Why?

2. Populism, Media, and Democracy (Panievsky) (Week 6, 27 February)

**Summary**: This topic introduces the disputed relationship between media, populism, and democracy. Drawing on interdisciplinary literature, it raises questions like what populism actually is? Who are “the people”? How do algorithms and journalists shape populist politics today? Why does the media amplify populist leaders who call it “fake news” and “enemies of the people”? And is there a way to reshape the relationship between exclusionary and polarising politics and different forms of media? A variety of global cases will be used to demonstrate the challenges and opportunities that populism poses to the future of media and society.

**Seminar activity**: Choose a case of populism you are interested in – it can be a politician, a movement, a news organisation, etc – and analyse its relationship with (news and social) media. What are the potential implications/opportunities for the future of democracy?

**Reading list**:  
- *P. Gerbaudo, ‘Social Media and Populism: An Elective Affinity?’ Media Culture & Society 40/5 (2018), pp. 745-753*

• B. Krämer, ‘Populism, Media and the Form of Society,’ Communication Theory 24/1 (2014), pp. 42–60


• G. Mazzoleni, Twenty-First Century Populism: The Spectre of Western European Democracy (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) [‘Populism and the Media’]

• B. Ohm, ‘Organizing Popular Discourse with and against the Media: Notes on the Making of Narendra Modi and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan as Leaders-without-Alternative,’ Television & New Media, 16/4 (2015), pp. 370–7


• J. E. Relly, The Routledge Companion to Media Disinformation and Populism (Routledge, 2021) [‘Online Harassment of Journalists as a Consequence of Populism, Mis/disinformation, and Impunity’]

• G. Sbaraini Fontes, F. P. J. Marques, ‘Defending democracy or amplifying populism? Journalistic coverage, Twitter, and users’ engagement in Bolsonaro’s Brazil,’ Journalism (2022)


**Supervision question:** How does news media advance populist politics, and what may be the implications for democracy, inclusion, and equality?

**Thinking and talking question:** How does the political economy of social media affect populist politics?

3. ICT4D and the Environment (Kurian) (Week 7, 5 March)

**Summary:** We turn to the field of research and practice known as ‘ICT4D’ (Information Communication Technologies for Development) and the more recent version known as ‘Tech for Social Good’. In particular, we will focus on the environmental dimension of ICT4D, assessing the effects of ‘green technologies’ for sustainable development. This includes critical perspectives on the environmental damage caused by seemingly transformative technology, and alternative visions for development. Students will explore the connection between technology, communities and the environment.

**Seminar activity:** Before the seminar: Pick and read one of the ‘transformative initiatives’ in Kothari et al.’s Post-Development Dictionary. In the seminar: discuss in pairs (1) how the initiatives that you chose could provide an alternative horizon for technology development, and (2) how does this alternative horizon compare to that of development. Be prepared to share your thoughts in a plenary discussion.

**Reading List:**

• M. Adas, Machines as the Measure of Men: Science, Technology, and Ideologies of Western Dominance (Cornell University Press, 1989) [Chapter: ‘Introduction’]

• P. Arora, *The Next Billion Users: Digital Life Beyond the West* (Harvard University Press, 2019) [Chapter 5: ‘Slumdog Inspiration’]

• *B. Brevini, Black boxes, not green: Mythologizing artificial intelligence and omitting the environment,* *Big Data & Society,* 7/2 (2020), pp. 1-5


• *T. D. Oyedemi, Digital coloniality and ‘Next Billion Users’: the political economy of Google Station in Nigeria*, Information Communication and Society 24/3 (2021), pp. 329–343

• *P. Peña, Bigger, More, Better, Faster: The Ecological Paradox of Digital Economies* in *Technology, the Environment and a Sustainable World: Responses from the Global South* (Global Information Society Watch, 2019)

**Supervision question:** To what extent can ‘technology for development’ and ‘technology for social good’ programmes facilitate sustainable development?

**Thinking and talking question:** Some countries and international organisations see green technologies as enablers of sustainable development. What are your thoughts on this vision?