Overview

Course Organiser:

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Lecturers:

- Mr Rodrigo Arteaga Rojas, rda29@cam.ac.uk
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- Dr Sazana Jayadeva, sj355@cam.ac.uk
- Dr Mónica Moreno Figueroa, mm2051@cam.ac.uk
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- Dr Jorge Saavedra Utman, jsu21@cam.ac.uk
- Ms Ayala Panievsky, ap2034@cam.ac.uk

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; cultural production; subcultures; visual culture; race and representation; audiences; and intellectuals. 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 political communication. 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**
  - Eight two-hour sessions in Michaelmas, weeks 1-8
  - Lecturers: Dr Saavedra Utman, Dr Moreno Figueroa and Professor Baert

- **Digital Media and Everyday Life**
  - Four two-hour sessions in Lent, weeks 1-4
  - Lecturers: Dr Jayadeva and Dr Philip

- **Political Communication**
  - Four two-hour sessions in Lent, weeks 5-8
  - Lecturers: Ms Panievsky, Dr Jayadeva and Mr Arteaga Rojas

- **Revision**
  - One two-hour Q&A session in Easter, week 1

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 using an online spreadsheet that will be shared at the start of the academic year.

- Because the paper is research-led, the topics may change year to year according to lecturers’ expertise. For new topics, the reading lists below will also include a mock exam question.

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. Maxwell and T. Miller, ‘*Greening Media Studies,*’ *Media and the Ecological Crisis* (Routledge, 2016)
• 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 (Saavedra Utman)

**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 decolonial 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:**
- W. Benjamin, *Illuminations* (Fontana, 1973) ['The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction']
- *D. Freedman, The Contradictions of Media Power* (Bloomsbury, 2013) [Chapter 1]
- *M. Horkheimer & T. Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Verso, 1979) ['The Culture Industry']
- J. Lewis and T. Boyce, ‘Climate Change and the Media: The Scale of the Challenge,’ in *Climate Change and the Media* (Peter Lang, 2009)
- *A. Saha, Race and the Cultural Industries* (Polity, 2018) [Part 1: Chapters 1 and 2]

**Supervision question:** How can we understand the relationship between capitalism and culture?
Thinking and talking question: How does the ownership and control of the media shape coverage of the climate crisis?

2. Media and morality (Saavedra Utman)

Summary: Morality is inherent not only to the design of media but also to how we as scholars critically assess them. Yet, the norms that underpin our experience and understanding of media 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 have been relying on during the pandemic 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?

Reading list:
- R. Benjamin, Race after Technology (Polity, 2019) [Chapter 2: ‘Default Discrimination’]
- N. Couldry, ‘Living Well with and through Media,’ in N. Couldry, M. Madianou, and A. Pinchevski [eds], Ethics of Media (Palgrave Macmillan 2013)
- *J. Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere (Polity, 1989) [Introduction]
- Z. Papacharissi, ‘The Virtual Sphere 2.0: The Internet, the Public Sphere, and Beyond,’ in Handbook of Internet Politics (Routledge, 2008)
- 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. Cultural production (Saavedra Utman)

Summary: We often see cultural production as something apart – something we hold in awe. Yet, sociologists of cultural production argue that it is no different from the production of any other product intended for...
consumption. In this topic, we will demystify cultural production – whether the perceived genius of the art world, the perceived glamour of the modelling industry or the perceived malevolence of the disinformation sector. We will also challenge the naturalised division of high and mass culture, investigating how this division is a social construct. To do so, we will focus on how we can understand all these areas of cultural production through core concepts such as collaboration, competition, convention and capital.

**Seminar activity:** Choose an area of cultural production and analyse it using the analytic lenses of fields and worlds. Compare and contrast these two analytical approaches.

**Reading list:**
- *H. Becker, Art Worlds* (California, 2008) ['Art Worlds and Collective Activity']
- *P. Bourdieu, The Field of Cultural Production* (Polity, 1992) ['The Field of Cultural Production']
- S. Thornton, *Seven Days in the Art World* (Granta, 2008) ['Introduction']

**Supervision question:** What role does power play in cultural production?

**Thinking and talking question:** How can we better incorporate the materiality of cultural products, with their implications for the environment, into our studies of the production of culture?

4. Subcultures and cultural studies (Saavedra Utman)

**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 reading 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 class, we are overlooking the creativity of these subcultures in imagining alternative power relations.

**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:**
- 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. Weinzierl and D. Muggleton, The Post-Subcultures Reader (Berg Publishers, 2003) ['What is Post-subcultural Studies Anyway?']
• 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 (Moreno Figueroa)

Summary: In this topic, we will focus on a particular form of culture – visual culture – and relate it to important aspects of social life, exclusion and organisation. The study of the social history of photography allows us to understand how vision and power play a central role in the control over the bodies of individuals, families, nations and overall social relationships. We will examine the historical and social links between photography (and other forms of images), visual and cultural practices in a variety of contexts. The overall aim is to look for how images circulate and what meanings are inscribed in their trajectories and uses. We will also ask how photographs get ‘entangled’ through political positions, through ‘culture’ and the everyday.

Seminar activity: Bring two pictures to the class: 1) choose a personal picture that is meaningful to you from your everyday life or your family album, and 2) one picture of your birthday or a family/friends trip. Be prepared to show the image and tell their stories.

Reading list:
• *R. Barthes, Camera Lucida (Vintage, 2000) [whole book]
• *R. Coleman, Transforming Image: Screens, Affect, Futures (Routledge, 2013) [Introduction, Conclusion and one chapter of your choice]
• J. Evans & S. Hall, Visual Culture: The Reader (Sage, 1999) ['What is Visual Culture’ (pp. 1-8) and ‘Looking and Subjectivity’ (pp. 309-314)]
• *A. Kuhn, Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination (Verso, 1995) ['Introduction’ and ‘She’ll Always Be your Little Girl’]
• *S. Lalvani, Photography, Vision and the Production of Modern Bodies (State University of New York Press, 1996) ['A Theoretical Framework’ and one chapter of your choice]
• N. Mirzoeff, The Visual Culture Reader (Routledge, 2013) [Chapter 1 and explore the reader, especially Section II: ‘Plug-in Theory’]
• C. Pinney, Camera Indica (University of Chicago Press, 1997) [Preface, Prologue and Chapter 1]
• G. Rose, Doing Family Photography: The Domestic, the Public and the Politics of Sentiment (Ashgate, 2010) [Introduction, Conclusion and Chapter 2]

**Supervision question:** What are the challenges of using photographs as evidence?

**Thinking and talking question:** *Studium and punctum* are key terms in Barthes’ theorization of the photographic image; they help us think about social conventions and creative agency. What are the pros and cons of ‘*studium*’ and ‘*punctum*’ in the production of visual representations of the environmental crisis?

6. Race and representation (Moreno Figueroa)

**Summary:** Deborah Poole observes in her analysis of the circulation of images between Europe and Andean South America one important element of photographs that is easily dismissed: ‘we frequently forget that images are also about the pleasure of looking. Visual images fascinate us. They compel us to look at them, especially when the material they show us is unfamiliar or strange’ (Poole 1997, 17). Following on from the previous lecture, this session explores the links between ideas of race and racism with the compelling and seductive production of identities, difference and the cultural politics of representational practices. We will examine the importance of visual culture in the (re)production and experience of contemporary subjectivities. Analysis of the historical coincidence of the emergence of the notion of ‘race’ and photography will allow us to interrogate the ambiguities of the interpretation of photographs and the pleasures images produce.

**Seminar activity:** Bring two images with contrasting representations of race: one problematic and one critical. Be prepared to discuss.

**Reading list:**
- F. Fernandez Guerra, *Social Advertising and Social Change: Campaigns about Racism in Latin America and Mexico* *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* 15/2 (2020)
- S. Hall, *‘The Spectacle of the “Other”’ in Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices,* (Open University Press, 1997), pp. 223-290
• J. Ryan, *Picturing Empire: Photography and the Visualization of the British Empire* (University of Chicago Press, 1997)
• C. J. Williams, *Framing the West, Race, Gender, and the Photographic Frontier in the Pacific Northwest* (Oxford University Press, 2003) [Introduction, Chapter 5 and Conclusion]

**Supervision question:** What is the role of the visual in racialization processes? Answer with reference to specific contexts.

**Thinking and talking question:** Hall argues that seeing is a cultural practice. What is the implication of this statement to how we see nature and the environment in the midst of the environmental crisis?

### 7. Audiences (Saavedra Utman)

**Summary:** This topic covers how the understanding of audiences has evolved in media sociology, from passive to active – the latter including the digital age’s prosumer or producing consumer. We will look at the relevance for scholarship’s evolving views of audiences of research context, funding and methodology as well as the nature and political economy of prevailing media technologies. Throughout, we will focus on how the question of audiences relates to broader sociological questions around agency and structure, and we will consider the relationship between audience research, on the one hand, and commercial and political power, on the other.

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

**Reading list:**
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?

8. The sociology of intellectuals (Baert)

Summary: This topic introduces the sociology of intellectual life. In the first section, we compare the main theories and methodologies for the study of intellectuals. In the second, we explore how intellectual life has evolved since the beginning of the 20th century and assess its current status today.

Reading list:

1. The sociological study of intellectual life
   - M. Lamont, How Professors Think: Inside the Curious World of Academic Judgement (Harvard University Press, 2009)
   - S. Ponzanesi & A. J. Habe (eds.), Postcolonial Intellectuals in Europe: Critics, Artists, Movements, and their Publics (Rowan & Littlefield, 2018)

2. The changing nature of intellectual life
   - *M. C. Desch (ed.), Public Intellectuals in the Global Arena* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2016)


**Supervision question:** How useful is positioning theory for explaining intellectual innovations and their reception?
Series 2: Digital Media and Everyday Life

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 surveillance by states and corporations;
- 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 (Jayadeva)

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.

Seminar activity: In small groups, pick a social media platform 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
- d. boyd, ‘Social Media: A Phenomenon to be Analyzed’, Social Media + Society, 1/1 (2015), pp. 1-2
- J. Wajcman, ‘How Silicon Valley Sets Time’, New Media and Society, 21/6 (2019), pp. 1272-1289
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 connections between our everyday lives and the climate crises? Discuss.

2. Mediated intimacy (Philip)

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: Choose an app or digital platform that can be used for intimacy and think about how such use of this app/platform can influence how we understand and do intimacy. Think about how inequalities might get reproduced or challenged on the app in novel ways.

Reading list:
- R. Amundsen, ""A Male Dominance Kind of Vibe": Approaching Unsolicited Dick Pics as Sexism’, New Media & Society (2020), pp. 1–16
- D. Chambers, 'Introduction' in Social Media and Personal Relationships: Online Intimacies and Networked Friendship (Palgrave Macmillan 2013)
- D. Chambers, 'Technologically Mediated Personal Relationships' in Social Media and Personal Relationships: Online Intimacies and Networked Friendship (Palgrave Macmillan 2013)
- S. Paasonen, 'Infrastructures of intimacy’ in Mediated Intimacies: Connectivities, Relationalities and Proximities (Routledge 2018)
- M. N. Petersen, K. Harrison, T. Raun et al., 'Introduction: Mediated Intimacies' in Mediated Intimacies: Connectivities, Relationalities and Proximities (Routledge 2018)

Supervision question: Who benefits from the expansion of digital technologies into the intimate sphere?

Thinking and talking question: How does our turn towards digital media for intimacy relate to consumerism and fast-fashion?
3. The quantified self (Jayadeva)

**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:**
- 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?

4. Surveillance and privacy (Jayadeva)

**Summary:** This lecture takes a critical approach to our understandings and experiences of surveillance and privacy by showing how these are intricately linked to capitalism and inequality. We will begin with theoretical approaches to surveillance that allow us to unpack its power and consequences, focusing on two manifestations of contemporary surveillance: the intersection of surveillance and big data as well as the rise of social surveillance. We go on to explore the flip side of surveillance – namely privacy – as a discourse, demonstrating how orthodox Western understandings of privacy are caught up in individualism. The consequence is uneven experiences of privacy inflected by axes of inequality (we will focus on class and race). In this lecture, we will also consider alternative conceptualisations of privacy, ones which understand it as a social good and use it to challenge power relations.
Seminar activity: Pick an organisation that advocates for privacy or a piece of legislation on privacy. In small groups, surface which discourses around technology and privacy inform this organisation/legislation, where these discourses come from, and why?

Reading List:
- *O. Gandy, 'Coming to Terms with the Panoptic Sort', in Computers, Surveillance, and Privacy (University of Minnesota Press, 1996)*
- D. Lupton, *Digital Risk Society*, in Routledge Handbook of Risk Studies (Routledge, 2016)

Supervision question: ‘Privacy is a privilege.’ Discuss.

Thinking and talking question: What implications do the new visibilities of the digital age have for the environment?

Series 3: Political Communication

Aims of this series:
- To introduce students to some of the key concepts, theories, and debates about political communication;
- To encourage students to argue with and apply these concepts, theories, and debates;
- To inspire students to think critically about media, technologies, democracy, power and their own citizenship.

1. Populism, media and democracy (Panievsy)

Summary: This topic introduces the complex and disputed relationship between media, populism and democracy. Drawing on interdisciplinary literature, it presents the dominant (and contested) definitions of populism and reviews several popular claims regarding news media, social media and populism. Finally, it looks into different approaches to the role of media and populism within democratic societies. A variety of global
cases will be used to demonstrate the challenges and opportunities that populism poses to contemporary societies, including populism by the media, through the media, and against the media.

Seminar activity: Choose a case of populism which you are familiar with (a politician, a movement, a news organisation, etc.) and analyse its relationship with media. What are the potential implications/opportunities for democracy?

Reading list:
- P. G. Estella, ‘Digital Populism, Digital Newwork and the Concept of Journalistic Competence: the Philippine Condition,’ Media International Australia 179/1 (2021), pp. 80–95
- 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
- * R. Wodak, The Politics of Fear (Sage, 2015) [‘Populism and Politics: Transgressing Norms and Taboos’]

Supervision question: How can media logic (and social media logic) help us understand the relationship between media, populism and democracy?

Thinking and talking question: Is Extinction Rebellion a populist movement? [See: M. Beeson, ‘Can environmental populism save the planet?’ The Conversation, 21 August 2019]

2. Visibility (Jayadeva)

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?

3. Witnessing (Jayadeva)

Summary: In this topic, we will build on the concept of mediation to take a closer look at the mediated practice of witnessing – a counterpart to the practices around visibility we considered last week. We will consider the kinds of moral engagement and power dynamics that mediated witnessing involves through examining case studies of a range of witnessing in the digital age, including livestream and virtual reality witnessing. We will focus in particular on the epistemological and ethical dimensions of witnessing practice, which influence whom we believe and what actions we take (or do not take) as a result of witnessing.

Content note: The reading list and lecture contain references to incidents of human rights violations and conflict.

Seminar activity: We will critically reflect on this topic through engaging with two projects developed at the University of Cambridge’s Department of Sociology and Centre of Governance and Human Rights. In pairs, and with an eye to the concepts and arguments of this topic, play the ‘Social Life of Data’ game and check out the End Everyday Racism reporting platform.

Reading list:

• S. Engle Merry, The Seductions of Quantification: Measuring Human Rights, Gender Violence and Sex Trafficking (The University of Chicago Press, 2016) [Introduction: ‘A World of Quantification’]
• S. Ristovska, ‘Strategic Witnessing in an Age of Video Activism’, Media, Culture & Society, 38/7 (2016), pp. 1034–1047

**Supervision question:** What does the changing nature of witnessing tell us about the role of media in holding power to account?

**Thinking and talking question:** What role has witnessing played in recent developments in the climate crisis?

**Summary:** In this topic, we will critically examine the knowledge controversies and discursive battles over framing the diagnosis and solution to journalism’s converging ‘crises’. Drawing on historical sociology in the Global South (mostly Latin America), we will put current narratives of emergency and risk in context, by re-examining the formation of the neoliberal doctrines of ‘free flow of information’ and ‘free market of ideas’, which still frame global debates on the protection and professionalization of journalists in individual, private and depoliticised terms. In order to denaturalize the values of ‘liberal journalism’ and ‘freedom of speech’, particular attention will be paid to recent movements for media reform and public service regulation in the UK. These articulate a conceptual repertoire that is often absent in media industry ‘futurism’ and research on ‘journalistic roles and identity’: media ownership concentration, public media, effective statutory regulators, taxing of tech oligopolies, redistributive subsidies, empowering of media workers and victims of press abuse.

**Seminar activity:** Learn about and compare two reports, ‘Who Owns the UK Media? 2021’ by the Media Reform Coalition and ‘More Important, But Less Robust?’ by the Oxford Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, which frame the future of journalism in very different terms. In what ways do their diagnoses and solutions differ or coincide? Who are the main actors responsible for the problems addressed and who are the main agents of change according to both discourses?

**Reading list:**
• *N. Fenton, ‘Media Activism, Media Change?’ in The Routledge Companion To Media And Activism (Routledge, 2018)
• C. Mellado et al. ‘Comparing Journalism Cultures in Latin America: The Case of Chile, Brazil and Mexico’, International Communication Gazette, 74/1 (2012), pp. 60–77
• T. Mills, The BBC: Myth of a Public Service (Verso, 2016) [Introduction, Ch. 6 and Conclusion]
• N. Roudakova ‘Ethics and Accountability in Soviet Journalism’, Center for Media at Risk (2019)

Supervision question: Is effective public regulation of the press possible?

Thinking and talking question: What elements of media reform are a priority for addressing the climate crisis and issues of environmental justice?