University of Toronto, School of the Environment

ENV 361: Social Media and Environmentalism
Winter 2023: Dr. Hanna E. Morris
Friday 10AM – 12PM (Eastern time zone), Room GB 221

Contact Information for Professor:

Professor Hanna E. Morris, email: hanna.morris@utoronto.ca

Office Hours: online Wednesdays 3:30-4:30pm Eastern (please email me ahead of time so I know you will be Zooming-in) and by appointment on Friday afternoons in-person

Class Meetings:

Lectures: Fridays 10am - 12 pm, First lecture is on Jan 13th. All lectures will be held in GB 221.

Tutorials: February 3, February 10, February 17, March 10, March 17, March 24, March 31

- Section 0101: Fridays 12-1pm, Room BF 315
- Section 0102: Fridays 12-1pm, Room BF 214
- Section 0201: Fridays 1-2pm, Room BF 315
- Section 0202: Fridays 1-2pm, Room BF 214

Tutorial Objectives: During tutorials, TAs will facilitate peer writing workshops and group project work. The goal for tutorials is for students to have the time and space to receive peer reviews and to improve their individual written assignments as well as to develop their final group project.

Contact Information for Teaching Assistants:

Sections 0101,0201: Ichha Kohli, ichhakaur.kohli@mail.utoronto.ca
Sections 0102,0202: Emma Bernardo, emma.bernardo@mail.utoronto.ca

All course materials are posted on the Quercus course site.
Course Overview:

Description: This course will examine a range of issues related to the environment and digital technology, with a broad focus on the history, culture, and political economy of social media and its impact on the environment and environmental activism. It is the second of two new courses in the School of Environment, and builds on the ideas explored in ENV360, but does not require ENV360 as a prerequisite.

Contemporary experiences of environmentalism are increasingly mediated through internet technologies. The dynamics of how people engage with social media often determine how they learn about topics such as climate change, environmental policy, and the nature of protest movements. At the same time, the power of governments and corporations to conduct mass surveillance via the internet can have a chilling effect on those who express dissent over social, economic, and environmental policy. The current generation of students has grown up with social media, but rarely gets the opportunity to step back and think critically about its broader consequences, especially in the face of grand societal and environmental challenges. The aim of the course is to engage students in the School of Environment in critical thinking about the history, culture, and political economy of social media, and the ways in which it is used to foster or stifle social change and environmental activism.

Topics include the use of social media as a tool for community-building, online protest movements, economic ownership and control of digital media platforms, digital media infrastructure and technology, mass surveillance and its implications, and the impact of misinformation on climate denialism.

What you will learn in the course:

- Critical thinking skills for analyzing complex socio-technical systems from multiple perspectives, using methods from multiple disciplines.
- Improved technology literacy, cultural analysis, and communication skills, through a deeper understanding of the history, culture, and political economy of social media.

Required Texts: There is no set text for this course. PDFs of all readings are available on the Quercus course site.
Course Evaluation:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grading Component</th>
<th>Due Date</th>
<th>Weighting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assignment 1: Interrogating the Optics of Google Earth</strong></td>
<td>Draft: February 10, 2023</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Final: February 17, 2023</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assignment 2: #activism: Opportunities and Challenges for Activists Organizing Online</strong></td>
<td>Draft: March 17, 2023</td>
<td>5%</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Final: March 24, 2023</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Reading Responses</strong> (9 total)</td>
<td>Due weekly before start of class (except for the first and last day of class)</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reply to at least two other student’s reflections by 11pm Eastern on the following Tuesday</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tutorial Participation and Attendance</strong> (7 total)</td>
<td>In tutorials</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Final Project</strong></td>
<td>Presentation: March 31, 2023</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Final project: April 11, 2023</td>
<td>25%</td>
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</table>

Coursework Assignments and Final (details and instructions are at the end of this syllabus): Each assignment and the final project will be developed in tutorials, and then completed outside of class time. Submit a complete draft of Assignments 1 & 2 before class via Quercus on the first due date, and bring either a digital or hard copy to your tutorial to receive feedback on your draft during a peer writing workshop. You will then have an additional week to make revisions. Drafts will be graded pass/fail. The grading criteria for the final versions of the assignments will include depth of critical analysis, coverage of the literature, coherence and comprehensibility, and presentation. The final will be a group project and will consist of a presentation to be delivered during the last tutorial session and a written component.
**Reading responses.** Each week, you will describe *five insights you gained* from that week’s assigned reading. Due before the start of class in the Quercus reading discussion forum for your tutorial section. You must also reply to at least two other student’s reflections by 11pm Eastern on the following Tuesday. Your reply can consist of a few follow-up questions for the student or a short comment (3 – 5 sentences) – please keep all comments courteous and constructive.

**Tutorial participation:** Seven tutorials, of one hour duration, will be held over the course (February 3, February 10, February 17, March 10, March 17, March 24, March 31). You must attend and participate! This entails attending all tutorials and being prepared for, actively contributing to, and participating in the peer writing and final project workshops. Full attendance and participation will earn you 10%.

During the Fridays without scheduled tutorials, I encourage you to set-up an appointment with me to discuss the course and/or your academic and career goals. Please email me at hanna.morris@utoronto.ca to set a time to meet!

**Submitting coursework:** All assignments should be submitted through Quercus before the beginning of class (Fridays at 10am). The final project should also be submitted through Quercus by one group member on behalf of the entire group by 10am on April 11th.

All assignments and the final project should be double spaced, using 12 point font, and numbered pages. Attach a cover page with the following information:

1) Your name(s);
2) Your student ID(s);
3) Tutorial Section
4) Title of assignment;
5) Instructor’s name;
6) Course title & number

Normally, students will be required to submit their course essays to the University’s plagiarism detection tool for a review of textual similarity and detection of possible plagiarism. In doing so, students will allow their essays to be included as source documents in the tool’s reference database, where they will be used solely for the purpose of detecting plagiarism. The terms that apply to the University’s use of this tool are described on the Centre for Teaching Support & Innovation web site (https://uoft.me/pdt-faq).
Class Policies:

Late penalty for assignments: If you are having difficulty completing your work for any reason, please discuss this with your TA before the due date, to arrange an alternative schedule. If you have not agreed to an alternative plan prior to the due date, work submitted up to one week late will be penalized 10% per day late for up to 7 days; after this, it will not be accepted. Note: If you are unavoidably absent from the university, please self-declare in ACORN and contact your TA as soon as you return to discuss the situation.

If you are unable to attend a tutorial, please complete the ACORN self-declaration form and send your TA a screenshot.

Requests to re-mark an assignment must be submitted in writing to Prof. Morris and clearly state the reason for your request. Prof. Morris will respond within a week as to whether your assignment will be remarked. Your assignment will be remarked by your TA.

Communications policy: We will use Quercus for all announcements about the course, and to respond to questions outside of class time. The TAs will respond to substantial questions within 24 hours (except on weekends). Exception: do not expect responses to questions about assignments within 24 hours of the due date.

Academic integrity:

Very few of us have truly original ideas – we almost always build on ideas and information provided by others. However, it is a serious offense to represent someone else’s words as your own, or to submit work that you have previously submitted for marks in another class or program. Assignments, reading summaries and projects will be reviewed for evidence of these infractions. Penalties for these offences can be severe and can be recorded on your transcript. Trust your own ability to think and write and make use of the resources available at U of T that can help you do so (e.g. professors, TAs, writing centres). See the U of T writing website, especially the “How Not To Plagiarize” document at http://advice.writing.utoronto.ca/using-sources/ and the website of the Office of Student Academic Integrity https://www.artsci.utoronto.ca/current/academic-advising-and-support/student-academic-integrity

The following is a list of examples (not complete) of what constitutes an academic offence:

- Using someone else’s ideas or words without appropriate acknowledgement
- Copying material word-for-word from any source (including lecture and study group notes) without quotation marks and a citation for the author/source
- Submitting your own work in more than one course without the permission of the instructor
- Making up sources or facts, including references to sources that you did not use.
● Obtaining or providing unauthorized assistance on any assignment including:
  o Working in groups on assignments that are supposed to be individual work
  o Having someone rewrite or add material to your work while “editing”
● Lending your work to a classmate who submits it as his/her own without your permission
● Misrepresentation:
  o Falsifying or altering any documentation required by the University, including doctor’s notes
  o Falsifying institutional documents or grades

Communication:
We all need to communicate respectfully. “The University of Toronto is committed to equity, human rights and respect for diversity. All members of the learning environment in this course should strive to create an atmosphere of mutual respect where all members of our community can express themselves, engage with each other, and respect one another’s differences. U of T does not condone discrimination or harassment against any persons or communities.”

Privacy rights and appropriate use of course material:
Course content and materials belong to your instructor, the University, and/or other source depending on the specific facts of each situation, and are protected by copyright. In this course, you are permitted to download course materials for your own academic use, but you should not copy, share, or use them for any other purpose without the explicit permission of the instructor.

Technology requirements:
Please see https://www.viceprovoststudents.utoronto.ca/covid-19/tech-requirements-onlinelearning/Links

Advice for online learning:
https://onlinelearning.utoronto.ca/getting-ready-for-online/Links

Accommodation:
The University of Toronto is committed to accessibility. If you require accommodations for a disability, or have any accessibility concerns about the course, the classroom or course materials, please contact Accessibility Services as soon as possible: accessibility.services@utoronto.ca or http://studentlife.utoronto.ca/as

Additional services and support:
The following are some important links to help you with academic and/or technical service and support
  • General student services and resources at Student Life
  • Full library service through University of Toronto Libraries
  • Resources on conducting online research through University Libraries Research
  • Resources on academic support from the Academic Success Centre
  • Learner support at the Writing Centre
  • Information for Technical Support/Quercus Support
## Course Schedule: Topics and Reading Assignments

All readings are provided on the course site on Quercus. Dates marked in purple & with an (*) are days tutorials will be held.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Lecture Topic and Readings</th>
<th>Tutorial</th>
<th>Hand in</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Unit 1: Foundations: History, Culture, &amp; Political Economy of the World Wide Web</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>1 Jan 13</td>
<td>Course Introduction</td>
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</table>
| 2 Jan 20 | Digital Utopia: The Origins of Cyberculture & Cyberspace  
Readings:  
  [https://www.eff.org/cyberspace-independence](https://www.eff.org/cyberspace-independence)  
| 3 Jan 27 | “As Gods”, part I: Google Earth & the Optics of Planetary Control  
Readings:  
### Unit 2: #activism: Power and Resistance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Readings</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feb 3*</td>
<td>“As Gods”, part II: Surveillance Capitalism</td>
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<td>Readings:</td>
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<td>Close reading skills and notetaking workshop</td>
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<td>Reading Response</td>
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<td>Feb 10*</td>
<td>Social Media and Social Movements: Arab Spring and Occupy</td>
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<td>Readings:</td>
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<td>Peer review writing workshop: Assignment 1</td>
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<td>Draft Assignment 1</td>
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<td>Reading Response</td>
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<td>Feb 17*</td>
<td>#NoDAPL and its Legacies</td>
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<td>Readings:</td>
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<td>Final group project workshop</td>
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<td>Final Assignment 1</td>
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<td>Reading Response</td>
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MORE READINGS CONTD. ON NEXT PAGE


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feb 24</th>
<th>Reading Week - No Lecture</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7 March 3</td>
<td>The Empire Strikes Back: Threats of Silicon Valley Tech-bros and Authoritarian &quot;Strong Men&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Readings:</strong></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
### Digital Media Infrastructure

**Readings:**

  [https://gizmodo.com/how-google-microsoft-and-big-tech-are-automating-the-1832790799](https://gizmodo.com/how-google-microsoft-and-big-tech-are-automating-the-1832790799)


### Unit 3: Imagining the Internet Otherwise

**Retreat or Build Alternatives?**

**Readings:**


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>March 24*</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Readings</th>
<th>Assignment</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td>Internet for the People?</td>
<td><strong>Readings:</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<td>• Barendregt, W., Becker, C., Cheon, E., Clement, A., Reynolds-Cuéllar, P., Schuler, D., &amp; Suchman, L. (2021). Defund Big Tech, Refund Community. <em>Tech Otherwise</em>. <a href="https://doi.org/10.21428/q3b2c832.e0100a3f">https://doi.org/10.21428/q3b2c832.e0100a3f</a></td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>March 31*</td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>Final group project workshop</td>
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<td><strong>Final Assignment 2</strong></td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>March 31*</td>
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<td>Reading Response</td>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>March 31*</td>
<td></td>
<td>Final Presentations</td>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>April 7</td>
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<td><em>University Closed – No Lecture</em></td>
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Assignment 1: Interrogating the Optics of Google Earth

Draft Due: **February 10, 2023**

Final Due: **February 17, 2023**

Length:
~4 page double-spaced paper, 12 point font

Please note: **You must cite at least two course readings.** You are not required to reference any outside texts but may do so if additional sources will contribute to your paper’s analysis and argument.

Instructions:
In our readings and class discussions so far, we’ve learned about the conceptual and cultural roots of Silicon Valley’s visions of the World Wide Web. In particular, we discussed the influence of Stewart Brand’s *Whole Earth Catalog* in shaping a “techno-libertarian” ideology. In this assignment, I want you to reflect on this “techno-libertarian” ideology and examine what a “Whole Earth way of seeing” means?

Anna Wiener (2018) from your week 2 reading assignment writes: “[Stewart] Brand doesn’t have much to do with the current startup ecosystem, but younger entrepreneurs regularly reach out to him, perhaps in search of a sense of continuity or simply out of curiosity about the industry’s origins. The spirit of the [Whole Earth] catalogue—its irreverence toward institutions, its emphasis on autodidacticism, and its sunny view of computers as tools for personal liberation—appeals to a younger generation of technologists. Brand himself has become a regional icon, a sort of human Venn diagram, celebrated for bridging the hippie counterculture and the nascent personal-computer industry. In a 2005 commencement address at Stanford, Steve Jobs described the ‘Whole Earth Catalog’ as ‘Google in paperback form, thirty-five years before Google came along.’”

What does Steve Jobs mean by this, exactly? In this assignment, I want you to draw upon lecture content and course readings to think critically about this and how a “Whole Earth” way of seeing has shaped the optics of Google Earth.

Indeed, Stewart Brand imagines himself (and men like him) “as Gods” – what does this mean, exactly? Drawing upon assigned readings and discussions from lectures, please reflect on how this outlook shared by Brand and his Silicon Valley peers have shaped the design and optics of Google Earth? (Hint: unpack what a “God’s eye view” way of seeing means. What are the dynamics / hierarchies of power associated with looking from above down below at life / “mortals” on Earth “as Gods”?). What do you think of Google Earth’s optics / way of seeing? What are some potential problems / threats / risks associated with this way of seeing?
Assignment 2: #activism: Opportunities and Challenges for Activists Organizing Online

Draft Due: March 17, 2023

Final Due: March 24, 2023

Length:

~4 page double-spaced paper, 12 point font

Please note: You must cite at least two course readings and at least two outside texts.

Instructions:

Drawing upon assigned readings and discussions from lectures, please write a short critical essay reflecting on: (1) the opportunities afforded by social media for building social movements, and (2) the obstacles / challenges for organizing social movements online. Please choose one social movement that we have discussed in class (e.g., Occupy, Arab Spring, Black Lives Matter, Idle No More, NoDAPL) to analyze as a “case study” and to help you build your essay’s argument.
Final Project: Imagining the Internet Otherwise: Envisioning a New Social Media Platform for Climate Justice

Final Presentations: March 31, 2023

Final Project Due: April 11, 2023*

*The final project should be submitted through Quercus by one group member on behalf of the entire group by 10am on April 11th.

Length:

~10-12 page double-spaced paper, 12 point font

Please note: You must cite at least four course readings and at least two additional outside peer-reviewed texts.

The final project will be completed in teams of 5-6 students, all of whom should be attending the same tutorial section.

For the final project, imagine and propose an “ideal” new social media platform for the climate justice “community.” This is a chance to be creative and work together with your peers to imagine how social media could be different and “better” than the current options.

You will have the chance to work on this project with your group during three final project workshops to be held during tutorials on February 17, March 10, and March 24. These tutorials will give you an opportunity to develop your project and coordinate tasks between group members, but you will need to finish your group project outside of class.

You will also need to collaboratively prepare a ~8 minute-long final presentation to be delivered on March 31 during your last tutorial. The presentation can be delivered by one person, a handful of group members, or the entire group – you can decide as a group what you would prefer to do.

Instructions:

Using Project Mushroom’s Manifesto as an example (see below), what would the values, mission, and vision be for a new climate justice social media platform that you are collaboratively building as a group?
Write a 1-2 sentence mission statement, a 1-2 sentence vision statement, and set at least four values with 3 to 4 paragraph-long explanations for your rationale behind each value, drawing upon course readings, lecture content, and relevant outside texts. In addition to detailing the values, mission, and vision please address the following in your proposal:

- What would your social media platform be called? Briefly explain why you chose the name / what it represents or connotates.

- What functions / capabilities would the platform feature? Why?

- Do you plan to moderate the content shared on the platform or set rules of conduct? Why or why not? And how so?

- How would you fund the platform (e.g., would you use an advertiser-based model, investor or donation-based, public, community-owned/crowd funded, etc.)? Briefly explain in 3-4 paragraphs why you chose this funding model.

Example: (Clarifying Note: your proposals should be much longer and with more detail added than the example provided below.)

*Project Mushroom’s Manifesto https://newsletters.projectmushroom.xyz/about/*

*The scorched-earth policies of billionaires on a warming planet are undermining democracy. We are building the world that needs to exist because there is no time to waste.*

**MISSION**

*To cultivate timely and accurate information that supports community resilience and safety during the climate emergency.*

**VISION**

*We help illuminate possible paths toward a liberated, habitable and joyful future for people and the environment alike.*

**VALUES**

- **Community:** We work to build strong long-term relationships with people whose stories we share and those who use our services.

- **Justice:** We recognize that the climate emergency, and the inequality it reproduces, is a symptom of capitalism and colonialism and work to help repair these injustices.

- **Safety:** We amplify community-led systemic change and aim to protect all life, especially that which has been harmed by oppressive systems and left most vulnerable to extreme weather impacts.
• Joy: We embrace our role as stewards of the Earth and center joy, first and foremost, in our reporting and services.

Thread

Eric Holthaus @EricHolthaus - 4h
Replying to @EricHolthaus

Project Mushroom is being built as a decentralized and community-owned platform for people to connect without fear of harassment.

As we grow, we are looking to join forces with other organizations working for justice and a better world.

Sign up here:

tryprojectmushroom.com
Waitlist
A website made with Typedream.

Eric Holthaus @EricHolthaus - 4h

Project Mushroom envisions:

Newsletter creation, including setup, maintenance and discoverability
Live events, including support for creators
Mastodon-based social media network built for safety & joy
Onboarding assistance for all of your followers to join you

Eric Holthaus @EricHolthaus - 3h

Project Mushroom is working with ex-Twitter employees, open-source advocates, and justice champions to build a complete social community ecosystem where people can feel heard, valued, and interact personally with their favorite creators.

Join us:

tryprojectmushroom.com
Waitlist
A website made with Typedream.