Ethics of the Internet:
Data, Algorithms, and Society

Instructor: Joanna Lawson

<u>Seminar</u>: 1:30-3:20 pm, Thursdays

<u>Office hours</u>: TBD

Course Description

What is the basis of the results that come up when you do a Google search, or when you match with someone on a dating app? Who knows what you've looked at online, and what are they using that information for? In this class, we will examine the features distinctive of online environments—including algorithms, behavioral data collection, and social media—in order to examine how they shape the moral landscape. This class is aims to be accessible to any internet user. Topics covered include: algorithmic bias, surveillance capitalism, fake news, echo chambers, and cancel culture.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this class, you will be able to:

- Give a well-reasoned defense of the ways in which you interact with the internet
- Critically evaluate philosophical arguments
- Argue for an ethical stance
- Connect the contents of this course to a discipline of your choosing (this may be philosophy, computer science, political science, sociology, finance, medieval literature, or anything else you're interested in)
- Write a research project in the discipline of your choosing

Course Requirements

Your grade for the course will depend on the following elements:

Reading responses (10%). Before every class period, you should complete a reading response about the class readings assigned for the day. You should also add a comment about ideas for your final project that you had during the week. Your responses don't need to be very long. The goal of reading responses is to help you focus your thinking in productive or critical directions, and to nudge you to think early and often about your final project.

Discussion facilitations (20%). You will facilitate discussion for *two* classes during the semester. Facilitating discussion includes coming to class prepared with an argument concerning how best to approach the text assigned for that day. Facilitations must include a handout. The goal is to begin the discussion by laying out one or two of the central points of the assigned reading, and then raise interesting questions for discussion. Each discussion facilitation is worth 10% of your final grade.

Final project. This is your chance to apply the lessons of this class to your own discipline or an area of interest. You may choose to write a philosophy paper, draft a policy proposal, propose a procedure for a psychological experiment, outline an ethnographical study, or produce scholarship in another discipline of your choosing. You may also consult with me if you wish to do something other than a more traditional paper, such as a podcast or short film. I would be more than happy to brainstorm ideas with you, especially if you're having difficulties figuring out a way to connect your own major or preferred area of interest with the course. This project will be broken up into several steps.

> **Brainstorming (5%)**: You will turn in a five-page document discussing what interests you most about the course material, and about what you would like to do with your final project. You may write more than five pages, but do not write less. The point of brainstorming is not to be poised and polished, but to be rough and ready. Let yourself have ideas, think them through, discard them, have new ideas, and discard the new ideas. This is the time to do all the word-vomiting you like without having to worry about any of it being good enough or measuring up.

> **Individual consultation (5%)**: After writing your brainstorming document, you will meet individually with me to discuss possible directions for your final project.

> **Comparison exemplars (10%)**: Whatever sort of project you choose, you should examine the writing of at least two pieces of writing in the genre you intend to emulate. You will turn in these exemplars to me, along with a cover sheet explaining the main stylistic features of this kind of writing, and how it differs from other writing you have done in the past.

Draft Précis (20%): You will draft a short précis of the essential points that your final project aims to cover. You should write out the introduction and the conclusion of your final project in full, and write an abridged version of what you intend to say in the main body of your paper. The précis should be about 5 pages long. In class, we will workshop these abridged drafts. The workshop should give you a sense for what you need to do going forward in order to make your final paper better, clearer, and stronger. Because we will be workshopping these in class, no extensions will be granted for this assignment. Please manage your time accordingly.

Final product (30%): Your final project should be 10-15 pages long (or equivalent, if not writing a paper). You will be graded on the quality of the writing, how successfully you emulate the style of your comparison exemplars, and the strength of your arguments. You should include a cover letter explaining (1) what elements of the comparison exemplars you intended to evoke in your final project, and (2) what changes you made to your project on the basis of feedback from the in-class workshop.

Course Policies

Academic honesty: You must document all of your source material. If you take any text from somebody else, you must make it clear that the text is being quoted and where the text comes from. You must also cite any sources from which you obtain numbers, ideas, or other material. If you have any questions about what does or does not constitute plagiarism, ask! Plagiarism is a serious offense and will not be treated lightly. Fortunately, it is also easy to avoid and if you are the least bit careful about giving credit where credit is due, you should not run into any problems. Helpful guidelines for understanding appropriate citing techniques can be found here: https://poorvucenter.yale.edu/writing/using-sources/understanding-and-avoiding-plagiarism.

Late work: You are almost always allowed to ask for an extension. (The **one exception** is your Draft Précis. No extensions will be granted for this assignment, because we will be workshopping them in class the next day.) Here are the rules:

Rule 1: If you ask 24 hours in advance of the deadline, you don't need any reason to ask for an extension. Just email me with your plan (see Rule 4).

Rule 2: If you ask fewer than 24 hours in advance, please let me know the reason you need the extension. You don't have to go into detail if it's personal, but do fill me in to the extent you can. If you're not sure if your reason is a good one, try me! It definitely won't hurt you.

Rule 3: Unexcused late work will receive a **late penalty of 5%/day** the assignment is late (this rule doesn't apply if you have an extension—see Rules 1 and 2).

Rule 4: Have a plan. Let me know when you will get the work turned in. Sometimes things happen such that you don't know when you'll plausibly be able to turn in an assignment. That's ok—just be as specific as you can be. If it turns out you need another extension, you can ask again. Rules 1-4 apply to your new self-imposed deadline.

Course Schedule

Topic	Readings	Assignments
Jan. 27: Intro: Welcome to the Future	**Read or listen to at least <u>two</u> of the following short (<30 min) podcast episodes** All of the following were made in the last six months. Unless otherwise noted, episodes are from the *Wall Street Journal*'s podcast, *The Journal*. Longform versions of these can be found at "The Facebook Files", part of the WSJ's website. 1. "The Whitelist" 2. "We Make Body Issues Worse" (teen girls and Instagram) 3. "This Shouldn't Happen on Facebook" (Facebook's response to human trafficking) 4. "The Outrage Algorithm" 5. "The Push to Attract Younger Users" 6. "The Whistleblower" 7. "The AI Challenge" (using AI to eliminate hate speech) 8. "A New Enforcement Strategy" (Facebook discriminates against groups it deems dangerous) 9. NPR segment: "The metaverse is already here. The debate now is over who should own it." 10. *On the Media*: "Cha-Ching" (on non-fungible tokens; a bit longer, ~1 hour)	Please note what you plan to listen to here: https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/15wGyJRf1wNdfYoQpq6CBRyJMHkD-k0b5D5Tp-YIJaII/edit?usp=sharing
Feb. 3: Machine learning, AI, algorithms: the basics	"What exactly is an algorithm? Algorithms explained" *BBC Ideas* (short youtube video) Eda Kavlakoglu, "AI vs. Machine Learning vs. Deep Learning vs. Neural Networks", IBM Blog, (May 2020) Julianna Delua, "Supervised vs. Unsupervised Learning", IBM Blog (March 2021) Cass R. Sunstein, "Algorithms, Correcting Biases", *Social Research*, pp. 499-511 (2019) Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and Joshua August Skorburg, "How AI Can Aid Bioethics", *Journal of Practical Ethics* (2021)	Sign up to facilitate **two** discussions over the course of the semester: https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1ehoNbNPM9-GVfOrcRb56JgMHZ6WWC1QT01liSY1LY6I/edit?usp=sharing
Feb. 10: Algorithmic bias	Gabbrielle M. Johnson, "Algorithmic Bias: On the Implicit Biases of Social Technology" *Synthese* (2021) Safiya Noble, introduction to *Algorithms of Oppression* **Content warning:** *The Noble piece speaks explicitly about the ways that some bodies are racialized and objectified on the internet.*	
Feb. 17: Algorithmic colonialism	Adrienne Lafrance, "Facebook and the New Colonialism" *The Atlantic*, (2016) Olivier Jutel, "Blockchain Imperialism in the Pacific", *Big Data and Society* (2021)	

	Optional: Abeba Birhane, "The Algorithmic Colonization of Africa", Real Life, https://reallifemag.com/the-algorithmic-colonization-of-africa/ (2019) *Optional: Nick Couldry and Ulises A. Mejias, "Data Colonialism: Rethinking Big Data's Relation to the Contemporary Subject",* Television and New Media, *vol. 20, no. 4 (2019)*	
Feb. 24: Surveillance capitalism	Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, Introduction Zuboff Ch. 5, "The Elaboration of Surveillance Capitalism: Kidnap, Corner, Compete" (2019) *(It's a hefty chunk of reading this week. Luckily, Zuboff is very readable, despite her penchant for long-windedness. Much of it is fine to skim, but be sure to pay attention to pp. 1-26 of the Ch. 5 pdf.)*	
March 3: Data privacy	Carissa Véliz, "Privacy Matters Because It Empowers Us All", *Aeon.* (2019) https://aeon.co/essays/privacy-matters-because-it-empowers-us-all Philip Ivanhoe, "How Confucius Loses Face in China's New Surveillance Regime", *Aeon.* (2016) https://aeon.co/ideas/how-confucius-loses-face-in-chinas-new-surveillance-regime *The Washington Post,* "Lawsuits Say Siri and Google are Listening, Even When They're Not Supposed To". (Sept. 2, 2021) *On the Media* (podcast segment, ~6 mins): "The Ethics of Using Legally-Obtained Personal Data in Reporting" (July 2021) *On the Media* (podcast segment, ~18 mins): "The Ethics of Reporting on Data Leaked from Ransomware Attacks" (July 2021)	
March 10: Policing	*Fresh Air* (podcast, ~45 mins): "The Sprawling Capitol Riot Investigation" (December 2021) Daniel Susser, "Predictive Policing and the Ethics of Preemption", *The Ethics of Policing: New Perspectives on Law Enforcement* (2021)	Brainstorming document DUE (11:59 pm)
March 17: Misinformation, disinformation, and fake news	Regina Rini, "Fake News and Partisan Epistemology" *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal* 27(S2): 43-64 (2017) Christopher Blake-Turner, "Fake News, Relevant Alternatives, and the Degradation of Our Epistemic Environment" *Inquiry*, 2020 NPR, "Exploring YouTube and the Spread of Disinformation" (April 13, 2021)	Individual Consultation DUE (i.e., by this date, you should have met with me to discuss your final project)
March 24	No class Spring break	
March 31:	Shoshana Zuboff, Chapter 10, "Make Them Dance" *(Zuboff is, again, a teensy bit long-winded. Feel free to skim the Pokémon Go! subsection, pp. 16-25 of the pdf.)*	Comparison exemplars DUE (11:59 pm)

Echo chambers and mental manipulation	C. Thi Nguyen, "Escape the Echo Chamber", *Aeon* (2018). https://aeon.co/essays/why-its-as-hard-to-escape-an-echo-chamber-as-it-is-to-flee-a-cult *Optional: C. Thi Nguyen, "Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles", Episteme (2018). (This is a longer and more academic version of the Aeon piece.)*	
April 7: Internet shaming, canceling	ContraPoints, "Canceling" (long youtube video, 1 hour 40 mins) (2020) Paul Billingham and Tom Parr "Online Public Shaming: Virtues and Vices" *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 51(3): 371-390 (2020) *Optional: Paul Bloom and Matthew Jordan, "Are We All 'Harmless Torturers' Now?" The Stone (2018)* *Optional: Kathryn J. Norlock, "Online Shaming", Power and Public Reason (2017)*	
April 14:	No new readings. Class time devoted to in-class workshop.	Précis of final project DUE **Wednesday, Apr. 13 by 11:39 pm** (no extensions will be granted for this assignment) Précis workshop (in class)
April 21: Internet and the self	Mark Miller and Ben White, "The Warped Self", *Aeon.* (2021) Jay Owens, "The Age of Post Authenticity and the Ironic Truths of Meme Culture". *Medium.* (2018) *Bo Burnham: Inside.* Streaming on Netflix since May, 2021. (1 hr, 27 mins) **I realize that not everyone has access to Netflix. No one will be left out due to lack of access; contact me and we'll make a plan.** *Optional: Kathryn J. Norlock, "Free and Always Will Be? On Social Media as it Undermines Individual Autonomy". Canadian Journal of Practical Philosophy 5(1): 52-65. (2021)*	
April 28: Where do we go from here?	Merten Reglitz, "The Human Right to Free Internet Access", *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 37(2) (2019) Richard Heersmink, "A virtue epistemology of the Internet: Search engines, intellectual virtues, and education", *Social Epistemology* 32(1): 1-12 (2018) Pak-Hang Wong, "Confucian Social Media: An Oxymoron?" *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 12(3): 283-296 (2013)	Final project DUE **Friday, May 6 by 11:59 pm**