

COM 305 • The Digital World

Spring 2023 | Section A | MW • 12-1:20pm

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Course Description:

Digital communication and information technologies like search engines, social networks, smartphones, and virtual/augmented reality have profoundly changed nearly every aspect of our day-to-day lives. This course systematically examines the development and characteristics of these technologies, as well as the role that they play in shaping our lives. It is designed to prepare students to live and work in our increasingly digital world.

Objectives

1. Students will gain a comprehensive perspective on the impacts of digital media technologies in their daily lives and in the broader world.
2. Students will become informed users of digital media technologies
3. Students will integrate and apply knowledge from the social and behavioral sciences about digital media in interpersonal, mass, and other communication contexts

This class will be a mix of lectures, discussions, and various other activities. It is important that you watch the lecture videos and that you complete all of the readings ahead of time. Your readings will be the launching pad for the discussion and activities you will complete in this course

Digital Tools:

We will be using D2L to manage all assignments, reading materials, and quizzes. If you have not yet logged into D2L, you can do so at d2l.msu.edu. Note that this is one of the first semesters that I will be using D2L, so it's possible that there may be some bumps along the way. I appreciate your patience. Please reach out if you have questions or if something is confusing.

Personal Digital Technology

Personal technologies such as smartphones, laptops, and tablets can be immensely useful tools for learning and for staying connected with one another. They can also be distracting and disruptive to you, your peers, and your instructors. Academic research conclusively shows that: 1) the mere presence of a smartphone can increase distraction and decrease the academic performance of you and your classmates, 2) multitasking with digital devices while learning leads to reduced knowledge retention and greater difficulty understanding course material. With this in mind, I *strongly* encourage you to minimize your use of personal devices in the classroom, and I reserve the right to ask you to put away your device, remove your earbuds, or otherwise alter your use of digital technology to facilitate more effective learning and communication within the classroom.

Readings

There will be no textbook for this course, but there will be assigned readings consisting of chapters/selections from journal articles, book chapters, longform journalism, and other online resources. A link to all of these readings will be posted on D2L.

COVID-19 and our class

COVID-19 is still a rapidly evolving situation, and it is difficult to predict how it will affect our class this semester. Although vaccination requirements will undeniably be helpful in mitigating the spread of COVID-19, it is critical that each of us does all that we can to keep ourselves and the campus community safe. All students are expected to comply with the guidance provided by the university with regard to vaccination, mask-wearing, and other health-related behaviors.

Please note that although this class is scheduled as an in-person lecture, there is always the possibility that we will have to transition to online learning for at least part of the semester if the prevalence of COVID increases and university policies change. If this is necessary, I will communicate any changes to the course structure as quickly and thoroughly as possible.

Course Requirements Overview

Requirement	When?	Worth?
Assignment 1: Bridging the Generation Gap	9/22	10%
Assignment 2: Platform User Study	10/13	10%
Assignment 3: Content Observatory	11/3	10%
Assignment 4: Addressing Digital Challenges	12/13	10%
Discussion Prep and Participation	~ Biweekly	35%
Discussion Reflections	~ Biweekly	15%
Participation	Ongoing	10%
Total		100%

Assignments & Grading

Individual Assignments

These assignments are designed to help you apply important principles and skills discussed in sessions, as well as practice writing in a concise and succinct manner.

Assignments are graded on whether you followed directions and also on formatting, spelling, grammar, and content. Rubrics for each of the assignments can be found on the assignment's page on Canvas. All assignments must be submitted on Canvas and are due by 11:59 pm on the due date.

Assignment Descriptions:

- **Assignment 1: Bridging the Generation Gap** -For this assignment, you will interview someone at least 20 years older than you to understand how digital media and communication have evolved throughout their lifetime. You will explore how these changes have impacted their personal and social lives. After the interview, you will reflect on what you have learned and how it has influenced your own perspective on the role of media and communication technologies in your life.
- **Assignment 2: Platform User Study** - For this assignment, you will choose a digital application or platform that you regularly use and conduct an in-depth analysis of the design and content features of the platform. Your goal is to better understand the “why” behind the design of digital platforms and to examine how design and content considerations influence human cognition, communication, and behavior.
- **Assignment 3: Content Observatory** - In this assignment, you will monitor the digital content that you engage with during the course of a single 24-hour period, noting bits of content or other aspects of your digital environment that you find particularly interesting given the topics that we have discussed in class. The goal of this assignment is for you to take an active role in understanding the forces at play in shaping your digital environment, and to reflect on how these factors may guide your attention in ways that you may not expect.
- **Assignment 4: Addressing Digital Challenges** - In this assignment, you will apply what you have learned throughout the course to describe a “wicked problem” associated with current communication and media technologies and to propose at least two potential avenues for addressing the problem. These problems include (but are not limited to): self control failures in digital environments, social media and psychological/social health, algorithms and social inequalities, surveillance-driven persuasion, and misinformation.

Discussion Prep and Participation

Instead of traditional quizzes or tests, your comprehension of the course material will be assessed through five in-class discussions (one following each unit). These discussions will provide valuable opportunities to delve into course content, and to display your understanding and engagement with the material.

Discussions are currently scheduled for the following dates:

- **September 13th** (Unit 1)
- **October 2nd** (Unit 2)
- **October 25th** (Unit 3)
- **November 13th** (Unit 4)
- **December 4th and 6th** (Unit 5)

By 11:59 pm the evening prior to each discussion, you will submit a ~1 page “discussion memo” containing: 1) a description of a topic from the unit that you would like for us to discuss as a class, 2) a concept or idea from the unit that you don’t feel that you fully understand, and 3) a question that you would like to pose to the class. Your grade for these discussions will be dependent on the depth of your preparedness as well as your attendance and active involvement in the discussion.

Discussion Reflections

Following each discussion, you will submit a ~1 page reflection in which you will reflect on: 1) the aspects of the discussion that you found most interesting, challenging, or illuminating, 2) points that you wish that we

were able to address or dive deeper into, and 3) your personal response to what you experienced and learned during our discussion.

Attendance and Participation

Attendance in this course is strongly encouraged. Being “present” mentally and physically in this class will position you for success. That being said, I understand that sometimes it is not possible to attend due to sickness, personal emergencies, and other reasons.

- **Lectures** - Lecture attendance will be considered as a component of your general participation grade. You will be granted three no-questions-asked absences. Every non-documented absence beyond three will result in a 10% deduction in your participation grade.
- **Discussions** - We will have a total of **six** discussion days this semester—one day following each unit, and a two-day discussion at the end of the course. If you miss a discussion day, your maximum grade for both *Discussion Prep and Participation*, and the *Discussion Reflection* for that discussion will be reduced by 25%.

Participation

Your participation grade will be determined based on in-class activities and weekly discussion prompts on Canvas. To earn full participation credit, you will be expected to participate in class and engage with the discussion prompts and your classmates’ responses.

Grading Scale

Below is the grading scale for this course. Please note that I reserve the right to change the final grading scale based on the distribution of class scores at the end of the term.

< 60	60-62	63-66	67-69	70-72	73-76	77-79	80-82	83-86	87-89	90-92	93-96	> 96
F	D-	D	D+	C-	C	C+	B-	B	B+	A-	A	A+

A Few Notes on Grading

If you have a question or concern about a grade, please contact me. If you have questions about your grade or believe that it should be changed, you must contact me no more than 7 days after the grades are announced or posted. When I re-grade your assignment, your score may go up OR down, and the grade is final. I will not discuss grades after this seven-day period.

There will be no rounding up percentage grades or points. So if you earn 89.4%, that translates into a B+ and will not be rounded up to 90% (A-).

When I grade your work, you will earn points based on the quality of the work. You do not start with 100 points and then lose them based on the mistakes you might make. Your final grade represents the total points earned for that assignment, not the number of points “taken away” for errors or omissions.

Late Work

I understand that extenuating circumstances sometimes prevent turning in work on time. Because of this, I have a relatively generous policy on late submissions. This policy is as follows:

So long as the assignment is turned in within 12 hours of the deadline, it will be graded for up to full credit. After this, there will be a 10% automatic deduction from the maximum possible score for every day after the deadline has passed until the grade reaches zero.

You will be granted one “partial credit pass” per semester. This pass may only be applied to an assignment that is worth 5% of the final course grade or more. The pass can be used to either:

- Submit one assignment that is less than 10 days overdue for up to 90% credit.
- Submit one assignment that is more than 10 days overdue for up to 75% credit.

The partial credit pass cannot be used for assignments that are more than 30 days past due, and cannot be used within two weeks of the last day of the semester.

No other exceptions will be granted for late work in the absence of an officially documented excuse.

Extra Credit

The main way to earn extra credit in this class is by participating in studies on SONA. These studies help faculty and graduate students in our department conduct their research to learn more about media and communication phenomena. You can apply up to 4 SONA credits to this class, each of which will be worth .5 points on your final grade. You will receive instructions near the end of the semester regarding how to apply your SONA credits to this class.

You may have a few additional chances to earn extra credit during the semester, although these opportunities are not guaranteed. If those opportunities arise, I’ll let you know and explain what you need to do to earn it. Extra credit work will not disadvantage the students who choose not to participate.

Reading the syllabus to this point qualifies you for an additional opportunity for extra credit. Please email me before September 1st at 11:59 pm with a picture of your favorite animal. All students who do this before the deadline will get one extra credit point applied to their final grade :)

Email

The main ways to communicate with me is either through D2L or via email. Please follow [professional standards](#) in your email communications. This entails including a subject line that indicates the nature of the message - not “Hi” or (no subject) – and a greeting at the beginning of the email (e.g., “Dear Prof. Fisher”). Subsequent communication in the same conversation may be less formal, but please remember to be respectful.

I will do my best to respond to emails within 24 hours during the week and 48 hours on the weekend, although my typical response time is usually quicker. Please note that I will not respond to email questions about an assignment or project within 12 hours of its due date, or about a grade more than 7 days after it is

posted. If you have a pressing last-minute question during this timeframe, please look over course materials (often the answer is in the syllabus or assignment directives) or seek help from your peers.

Academic Integrity

Michigan State University affirms the principle that all individuals associated with the academic community have a responsibility for establishing, maintaining, and fostering an understanding and appreciation for academic integrity. Academic integrity is the foundation for university success. Learning how to express original ideas, cite works, work independently, and report results accurately and honestly are skills that carry students beyond their academic career.

The Spartan Code of Honor Academic Pledge embodies the principles of academic integrity through a personal commitment to ethical behavior in a student's studies and research. All undergraduate students are expected to uphold the academic pledge throughout their enrollment at MSU. Student conduct that is inconsistent with the academic pledge is addressed through existing policies, regulations, and ordinances governing academic honesty and integrity. Those policies include:

- [Integrity of Scholarships and Grades Policy](#)
- [Student Rights and Responsibilities](#)
- [General Student Regulations \(includes Protection of Scholarship and Grades\)](#)
- [Ordinance 17.00 Examinations](#)

Students are encouraged to review the following websites to learn more about academic integrity, student rights and responsibilities, and the Spartan Code of Honor:

- [Spartan Life Handbook \(Student Affairs\)](#)
- [University Ombudsperson](#)
- [ASMSU](#)

The Spartan Code of Honor was adopted by ASMSU on March 3, 2016, endorsed by Academic Governance on March 22, 2016, and recognized by the Provost, President, and Board of Trustees on April 15, 2016.

Use of AI Tools (ChatGPT, etc)

The use of AI tools can confer a powerful advantage in many contexts. However, transparency, honesty, and understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of these tools is expected from all students who choose to use them. Non-disclosure or misrepresentation of the use (or the extent of use) of AI tools in your work constitutes academic misconduct and will be handled accordingly.

For the purpose of this policy, 'AI tools' refers to any software or digital instrument powered by artificial intelligence designed to assist users in creating, editing, or generating content. This includes, but isn't limited to ChatGPT, Google Bard, Claude, and Bing Chat.

- **Usage:** Unless specifically noted otherwise, students are permitted to use AI tools to aid their research, generate ideas, proofread assignments, or operate other tasks essential to their work in this course.

- **Disclosure:** Any use of AI tools must be explicitly declared by the student in an *AI Disclosure Statement* attached to the submitted assignment. The disclosure should include the following details:
 - The name of the tool
 - The tasks for which the tool was used (i.e., idea generation, proofreading, paraphrasing)
 - The components of the assignment that you contributed without AI assistance.
 - A brief reflection on the effectiveness (or non-effectiveness) of the tool.
- **Responsibility:** Students are responsible for any work produced with the help of such tools. Using AI tools to assist in assignments does not absolve students of the need to understand and be capable of explaining their work in its entirety. I reserve the right to ask you specific questions about assignment submissions if I suspect that an AI tool was used but not disclosed.
- **Consequences:** Failure to disclose the full extent of the use of AI tools for completing an assignment will result in a zero on the assignment, as well as an academic misconduct report that will become a part of your academic file.

Bottom Line: If you think it might be wrong, don't do it. If you're unsure, ask Jacob and he will help guide you in the right direction.

Turnitin

Consistent with MSU's efforts to enhance student learning, foster honesty, and maintain integrity in our academic processes, instructors may use a tool called Turnitin to compare a student's work with multiple sources and detect the use of AI content generators. The tool compares each student's work with an extensive database of prior publications and papers, providing links to possible matches and a "similarity score." The tool does not determine whether plagiarism has occurred or not. Instead, the instructor must make a complete assessment and judge the originality of the student's work. All submissions to this course may be checked using this tool.

Students should submit papers to Turnitin Assignments without identifying information included in the paper (e.g., name or student number), the system will automatically show this information to faculty in your course when viewing the submission, but the information will not be retained by Turnitin.

Student Accommodations

Michigan State University is committed to providing equal opportunity for participation in all programs, services and activities. Requests for accommodations by persons with disabilities may be made by contacting the Resource Center for Persons with Disabilities at 517-884-RCPD or on the web at rcpd.msu.edu.

Once your eligibility for an accommodation has been determined, you will be issued a verified individual services accommodation ("Accommodation Letter") form. Please present this form to me at the start of the term and/or two weeks prior to the accommodation date (test, project, etc). Requests received after this date will be honored whenever possible, but will not be applied retroactively.

Mental Health and Wellness

College students often experience issues that may interfere with academic success such as academic stress, sleep problems, juggling responsibilities, life events, relationship concerns, or feelings of anxiety,

hopelessness, or depression. If you or a friend is struggling, we strongly encourage you to seek support. Helpful, effective resources are available on campus, and most are free of charge.

- If you are struggling with this class, please check-in during office hours or contact me by email (jtf@msu.edu).
- Check-in with your academic advisor if you are struggling in multiple classes, unsure whether you are making the most of your time at MSU, or unsure what academic resources are available at MSU.
- Access CAPS Services for new counseling and psychiatric services by scheduling a consultation.
- **CAPS is providing remote crisis services 24/7/365. Students can call us at 517-355-8270 and press “1” at the prompt to speak with a crisis counselor.** Other prompt options are available for those not in crisis.
- Visit caps.msu.edu for additional information and resources.

Change Statement

Please note that I reserve the right to change course policies, scheduling, assignments, or other content in this syllabus at any time.

Key Dates

Week	Dates	Lecture Topics	Due
1	8/28 - 9/1	M: Media & Messages W: The Changing Media Landscape	
2	9/4 - 9/8	M: NO CLASS (Labor Day Holiday) W: The Digital Economy	
3	9/11 - 9/15	M: Cooperative vs. Adversarial Technologies W: Discussion 1	9/12 - Discussion 1 Memo 9/15 - Discussion 1 Reflection
4	9/18 - 9/22	M: Data is the New Oil W: Privacy and Persuasion	9/22 - Assignment 1
5	9/25 - 9/29	M: From Finding to Filtering W: Hi, I'm an API	
6	10/2 - 10/6	M: Discussion 2 W: The Rise (and Fall?) of Social Media	10/1 - Discussion 2 Memo 10/4 - Discussion 2 Reflection
7	10/9 - 10/13	M: Online Communication & Communities W: Under the Influence(rs)	10/13 - Assignment 2
8	10/16 - 10/20	M: Bot? Or Not? W: Bad Information	
9	10/23 - 10/27	M: NO CLASS (Fall Break) W: Discussion 3	10/24 - Discussion 3 Memo 10/27 - Discussion 3 Reflection
10	10/30 - 11/3	M: Going Mobile W: Everything is Online	11/3 - Assignment 3
11	11/6 - 11/10	M: VR, AR, and Video Games W: Blockchain and the Metaverse	
12	11/13 - 11/17	M: Discussion 4 W: Algorithms & Ethics	11/12 - Discussion 4 Memo 11/15 - Discussion 4 Reflection
13	11/20 - 11/24	M: Attention Merchants W: NO CLASS (Thanksgiving Holiday)	
14	11/27 - 12/1	M: Digital Divide(s) W: Imagining the Future	
15	12/4 - 12/8	M: Discussion 5 (Pt. 1) W: Discussion 5 (Pt. 2)	12/3 - Discussion 5 Memo 12/8 - Discussion 5 Reflection
16	12/11 - 12/15		12/13 - Assignment 4