

Fall 2024 TuTh 11:00AM-12:15PM, Classroom Building 110B

SOC 4454: **DIGITAL SOCIOLOGY**

ZHUOFAN LI

(he/him/his)

Assistant Professor of Sociology

zhuofan@vt.edu

OFFICE HOUR: Tu 2:00PM-3:00PM and by appointment, McBryde Hall 524

SHIH-HAO LIN

(he/him/his)

Graduate Teaching Assistant

shihhao626@vt.edu

OFFICE HOUR: Mon 3:00PM-4:00PM and by appointment, McBryde Hall 555A

I've come up with a set of rules that describe our reactions to technologies:

1. Anything that is in the world when you're born is normal and ordinary and is just a natural part of the way the world works.
2. Anything that's invented between when you're fifteen and thirty-five is new and exciting and revolutionary and you can probably get a career in it.
3. Anything invented after you're thirty-five is against the natural order of things..

Douglas Adams, *The Salmon of Doubt*

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course introduces you to the sociological study of digitality ...not just the technology, but people and their lives behind it.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Appreciate the sociological aspects of digital technologies and the contribution of sociology and sociologists to digital society.
- Grasp theoretical and methodological approaches in sociology that can help you understand and navigate digital society.
- Develop research and analytical skills to critically and accurately evaluate the social origins and consequences of digital technologies.
- Hone oral, written, and digital communication skills to present sociological research about digital society to friends and colleagues.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

There is no required textbook for this course.

You will, however, need access to Marion Fourcade and Kieran Healy's *Ordinal Society* (Harvard University Press, 2024). Multiple digital copies are available through the library, but there is a slight chance that too many people try to access the e-book at the same time and you get blocked out the night before class. Purchasing a hard copy is therefore recommended but not required.

All other required readings will be made available through Canvas.

There is no prerequisite for this course.

Reading Memos (35%)

You will submit 10 one-page reading memos throughout the semester, at least 12 hours before the class meeting for which you sign up to write a memo. Each memo should (1) choose one fact, idea, argument, or perspective, from that day's readings, which you find most intriguing, surprising, convincing, unconvincing, mind-blowing, baffling, or about which you have an urging question that you would like the class to discuss, (2) walk your readers (me and your classmates) through what it is and how it is positioned in or related to the rest of the readings, and (3) explain why you wrote or had question about it. Your memo will also be the basis of our class discussion – but memos cannot speak for themselves – so if your memo shows up to class without the company of its author, the People may deem it not worth any credit without you there to defend it. Your reading memos will contribute 25%, and subsequent in-class engagement, both as authors and discussants, another 10%, of your final grade.

Midterm Exam (15%)

You will complete a take-home midterm exam. The exam will be available to you one week before the due date. Be prepared to reference relevant materials from the first half of the class. Worth 15% of your final grade.

Video Clip (15%)

You will choose a technology/phenomenon/event/industry/issue *unique to digital society* and create a 3-5 minutes video clip explaining to your friends and followers *what is sociological about it*. You can use any software from your smartphone camera to generative AI, and any format from one single 5-minute, YouTube/TED-style presentation to a series of shorter TikTok/Reels clips. The content, however, must be original, and the narrative must come from you (no AI-generated narrative or voice). You will present your video in class the week before Thanksgiving. Don't be a perfectionist! You will get full credit for putting in a good effort to be original, informative, and fun, which will count towards 15% of your final grade.

Research Paper (35%)

You will also write a research paper to present a sociological study that engages (1) critically and accurately with (2) your case, (3) at least five scholarly sources, and (4) some theoretical perspectives and empirical evidence we will study in this class. Guidelines and opportunities will be provided throughout the semester for you to get feedback on your topic, bibliography, argument, and outline. The final submission should (5) be 8-10 pages double-spaced, use a 12pt Times New Roman font, 1-inch margins, and a proper citation style, and show page numbers at the bottom. Worth 35% of your final grade.

COURSE POLICIES*Grading Scale*

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

LATE and MISSED WORK will result in a score of zero unless otherwise arranged with the instructor prior to the deadline. If you are having difficulty keeping up with the course, or you are experiencing significant challenges that interfere with your learning, please do not hesitate to talk to me. If you are experiencing any of the following emergencies or anticipate needs for longer-term accommodation, you should contact the Office of the Dean of Students for professional assistance and proper documentation: illness or death of a family member or friend; off-campus medical appointments or hospital admission; court subpoenas; military orders; and observances of religious, cultural, ethnic, meaning-making, or faith-based beliefs. For more information on institutional support, resources, and policies, please consult the Dean of Students Office, Office of Undergraduate Academic Integrity, Office of Inclusion and Diversity, Cook Counseling Center, Cranwell International Center, Hokie Wellness, and/or Services for Students with Disabilities.

PLAGIARISM and other violations of the Honor Code, including but not limited to (1) copying verbatim from other sources such as Wikipedia and book reviews, (2) paraphrasing other sources without proper citations, (3) fabricating data, sources, or information, (4) having others do the work for you, and (5) disseminating copyrighted course materials and class discussions without prior approval, will result in a zero score on the assignment, a failing grade from the course, and/or disciplinary actions by the Office of Undergraduate Academic Integrity. For additional information about the Honor Code, please visit: <https://www.honorsystem.vt.edu/>. If you are unsure about what constitutes a violation, I strongly recommend the **Academic Integrity Success** and **Understanding the Code** Modules on Canvas.

ANY HARASSMENT, DISCRIMINATION, INCIVILITY, and DISRUPTIONS TO LEARNING will NOT be tolerated and will be immediately reported to the Dean of Students Office.

Any questions about grade should be directed to the instructor before the end of the semester. This syllabus is subject to change.

COURSE SCHEDULE

8/27 **Why Digital Sociology?**

8/29 **Does Technology Have Politics?**

Be prepared to introduce yourself and tell us what you hope to get out of digital sociology.

Be prepared to sign up for at least 10 class meetings for which you'd like to write a reading memo.

Winner, Langdon. 1980. "Do Artifacts Have Politics?" *Daedalus* 109 (1): 121–136.

PART I: DOES TECHNOLOGY HAVE POLITICS?

- 9/3 **Computers**
 Pp.1-12, 21-28, 59-98 from Hicks, Mar. 2017. *Programmed Inequality: How Britain Discarded Women Technologists and Lost Its Edge in Computing*. MIT Press.
- 9/5 **Wikipedia**
 Pp.1-5, 10-28, 85-104 from Jemielniak, Dariusz. 2014. *Common Knowledge?: An Ethnography of Wikipedia*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- 9/10 **Recommendation Algorithms**
 "Understanding Diffusion" and "Designing Social Networks for Diffusion."
 Pp.13-33, 142-154 in Centola, Damon. 2020. *How Behavior Spreads: The Science of Complex Contagions*. Princeton University Press.
- 9/12 **Search Terms**
 Lazer, David et al. 2014. "The Parable of Google Flu: Traps in Big Data Analysis." *Science* 343 (6176): 1203–1205.
 "Searching for Black Girls." Pp.64-109 in Noble, Safiya Umoja. 2018. *Algorithms of Oppression*. New York University Press.
 OPTIONAL: Bail, Christopher A, Brown, Taylor W, and Wimmer, Andreas. 2019. "Prestige, Proximity, and Prejudice: How Google Search Terms Diffuse across the World." *American Journal of Sociology* 124 (5): 1496–1548.
- 9/17 **Platforms**
 Rosenblat, Alex and Stark, Luke. 2016. "Algorithmic Labor and Information Asymmetries: A Case Study of Uber's Drivers." *International Journal of Communication Systems* 10 (0): 27.
 Vallas, Steven and Schor, Juliet B. 2020. "What Do Platforms Do? Understanding the Gig Economy." *Annual Review of Sociology* 46 (1): 273–294.
- 9/19 **Virtual Reality**

“Everyday Second Life” and “Personhood.” Pp. 8-16, 118-150 in Boellstorff, Tom. 2015. *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human*. Princeton University Press.

OPTIONAL: Drax, Bernhard. 2018. *Our Digital Selves: My Avatar is Me*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GQw02-me0W4>.

PART II: CYBERPUNK SOCIETY

9/24 **Social Implications of the Internet**

Winner, Langdon. 1997. “Cyberlibertarian Myths and the Prospects for Community.” *Computers and Society* (New York, NY, USA) 27 (3): 14–19.

DiMaggio, Paul et al. 2001. “Social Implications of the Internet.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 27:307–336.

9/26 **Romance After Online Dating**

Ward, Janelle. 2017. “What Are You Doing on Tinder? Impression Management on A Matchmaking Mobile App.” *Information, Communication and Society* 20 (11): 1644–1659.

Lin, Ken-Hou and Lundquist, Jennifer. 2013. “Mate Selection in Cyberspace: The Intersection of Race, Gender, and Education.” *American Journal of Sociology* 119 (1): 183–215.

Rosenfeld, Michael J, Thomas, Reuben J, and Hausen, Sonia. 2019. “Disintermediating your friends: How online dating in the United States displaces other ways of meeting.” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 116 (36): 17753–17758.

10/1 **Digital Divide**

Pp.22-71 from Rafalow, Matthew H. 2020. *Digital Divisions: How Schools Create Inequality in the Tech Era*. University of Chicago Press.

10/3 **Technically Together**

Turkle, Sherry. 2012. *Connected, but Alone?* https://www.ted.com/talks/sherry_turkle_alone_together.

Hampton, Keith N and Wellman, Barry. 2018. “Lost and Saved . . . Again: The Moral Panic about the Loss of Community Takes Hold of Social Media.” *Contemporary Sociology* 47 (6): 643–651.

Engelhart, Katie. 2021. “What Robots Can—and Can’t—Do for the Old and Lonely.” *The New Yorker*.

- 10/8 **Renter and Screeners**
- Rosen, Eva, Garboden, Philip M E, and Cossyleon, Jennifer E. 2021. "Racial Discrimination in Housing: How Landlords Use Algorithms and Home Visits to Screen Tenants." *American Sociological Review* 86 (5): 787–822.
- 10/10 **Digital Street Corner Society**
- Stuart, Forrest. 2019. "Code of the Tweet: Urban Gang Violence in the Social Media Age." *Social Problems* 67 (2): 191–207.
- OPTIONAL: Hsiao, Yuan, Leverso, John, and Papachristos, Andrew V. 2023. "The Corner, the Crew, and the Digital Street: Multiplex Networks of Gang Online-Offline Conflict Dynamics in the Digital Age." *American Sociological Review* 88 (4): 709–741.
- 10/15 **Big Data Surveillance**
- Brayne, Sarah. 2017. "Big Data Surveillance: The Case of Policing." *American Sociological Review* 82 (5): 977–1008.
- "Broken Records." Pp.37-66 from Lageson, Sarah Esther. 2020. *Digital Punishment: Privacy, Stigma, and the Harms of Data-Driven Criminal Justice*. Oxford University Press.
- 10/17 **Cybercrimes (Guest Speaker: TBA)**
- Reading TBA
- 10/22 **Tweet and Split**
- Bail, Christopher A et al. 2018. "Exposure to Opposing Views on Social Media Can Increase Political Polarization." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 115 (37): 9216–9221.
- Pp.1-53 in Bail, Christopher A. 2021. *Breaking the Social Media Prism: How to Make Our Platforms Less Polarizing*. Princeton University Press.
- 10/24 **Digital Health**
- Liu, Chuncheng. 2022. "Seeing Like a State, Enacting Like an Algorithm: (Re)assembling Contact Tracing and Risk Assessment during the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Science, Technology, & Human Values* 47 (4): 698–725.
- Lupton, Deborah. 2014. "Critical Perspectives on Digital Health Technologies: Digital Health Technologies." *Sociology Compass* 8 (12): 1344–1359.
- OPTIONAL: Ferretti, Luca et al. 2020. "Quantifying SARS-CoV-2 transmis-

sion suggests epidemic control with digital contact tracing.” *Science* 368 (6491).

10/25 **DUE:** Midterm Exam

PART III: SURVEILLANCE CAPITALISM

10/29 **Attention Economy**

Heller, Nathan. 2024. “The Battle for Attention.” *The New Yorker*.

Franck, Georg. 2019. “The Economy of Attention.” *Journal of Sociology* 55 (1): 8–19.

OPTIONAL: Mears, Ashley. 2023. “Bringing Bourdieu to a Content Farm: Social Media Production Fields and the Cultural Economy of Attention.” *Social Media + Society* 9 (3): 20563051231193027.

10/31 **Streaming**

“Home Studios: Transforming Private Play into Public Entertainment.” p.66-104 in Taylor, T. L. 2018. *Watch Me Play: Twitch and the Rise of Game Live Streaming*. Princeton University Press.

11/5 **Clickbaiting**

“Prologue” and “The Multiple Meanings of Clicks.” Pp xi-xiii, 75-101 in Christin, Angèle. 2020. *Metrics at Work: Journalism and the Contested Meaning of Algorithms*. Princeton University Press.

Christin, Angèle and Lewis, Rebecca. 2021. “The Drama of Metrics: Status, Spectacle, and Resistance Among YouTube Drama Creators.” *Social Media + Society* 7 (1): 2056305121999660.

11/7 **Identity Theft**

Brensinger, Jordan. 2023. “Identity Theft, Trust Breaches, and the Production of Economic Insecurity.” *American Sociological Review* 88 (5): 844–871.

11/12 **Ghost Labor**

Shestakofsky, Benjamin. 2017. “Working Algorithms: Software Automation and the Future of Work.” *Work and Occupations* 44 (4): 376–423.

Pp.73-97 from Roberts, Sarah T. 2019. *Behind the Screen: Content Moderation in the Shadows of Social Media*. Yale University Press.

11/14 **Digital Nomads**

“Introduction” and “Not on Holiday.” Pp. 1-11, 113-151 in Woldoff, Rachael A and Litchfield, Robert C. 2021. *Digital Nomads: In Search of Freedom, Community, and Meaningful Work in the New Economy*. Oxford University Press.

Vertesi, Janet. 2014. “My Experiment Opting Out of Big Data Made Me Look Like a Criminal.” *Time*.

11/19 **Ordinal Society**

Excerpts from Fourcade, Marion and Healy, Kieran. 2024. *The Ordinal Society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

IN CLASS:Video Clip Presentation.

11/21 **Ordinal Society**

Excerpts from Fourcade, Marion and Healy, Kieran. 2024. *The Ordinal Society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

IN CLASS:Video Clip Presentation.

PART IV: OUR DIGITAL FUTURE

12/3 **Living with Hyperconnectivity**

Excerpts from Brubaker, Rogers. 2022. *Hyperconnectivity and Its Discontents*. John Wiley & Sons.

12/5 **Taming Artificial Intelligence**

Excerpts from Crawford, Kate. 2021. *Atlas of AI Power, Politics, and the Planetary Costs of Artificial Intelligence*. Yale University Press.

Lanier, Jaron. 2023. “There Is No A.I.” *The New Yorker*.

Hoffman, Steve G. et al. 2022. “Five Big Ideas About AI.” *Contexts* 21 (3): 8–15.

12/10 **Being A Sociologist in A Digital World**

Lee, Monica. 2022. “A Sociologist in Tech.” *Contexts* 21 (1): 72–72.

Greer, Tanner. 2024. *The Silicon Valley Canon: On the Paideia of the American Tech Elite*. <https://scholars-stage.org/the-silicon-valley-canon-on-the-paideia-of-the-american-tech-elite/>.

12/17 **DUE:** Research Paper.

LAND AND LABOR ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Virginia Tech acknowledges that we live and work on the Tutelo / Monacan People's homeland and we recognize their continued relationships with their lands and waterways. We further acknowledge that legislation and practices like the Morrill Act (1862) enabled the commonwealth of Virginia to finance and found Virginia Tech through the forced removal of Native Nations from their lands, both locally and in western territories.

We understand that honoring Native Peoples without explicit material commitments falls short of our institutional responsibilities. Through sustained, transparent, and meaningful engagement with the Tutelo / Monacan Peoples, and other Native Nations, we commit to changing the trajectory of Virginia Tech's history by increasing Indigenous student, staff, and faculty recruitment and retention, diversifying course offerings, and meeting the growing needs of all Virginia tribes and supporting their sovereignty.

We must also recognize that enslaved Black people generated revenue and resources used to establish Virginia Tech and were prohibited from attending until 1953. Through InclusiveVT, the institutional and individual commitment to Ut Prosim (that I may serve) in the spirit of community, diversity, and excellence, we commit to advancing a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive community.