

**Critical Internet Studies**  
MIT CMS.614J / CMS.867 / 21W.791 / WGS.280J  
<https://canvas.mit.edu/courses/25691>

**Instructor:** T.L. Taylor  
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**Office/hours:** Before/after class & by appointment

**Class:** W 2-5  
**Room:** 56-169

### **Description and Learning Objectives**

Focuses on the power dynamics in internet-related technologies (including social networking platforms, surveillance technology, entertainment technologies, and emerging media forms). Theories and readings focus on the cultural, social, economic, and political aspects of internet use and design, with a special attention to gender and race. Topics include: online communication and communities, algorithms and search engines, activism and online resistance, surveillance and privacy, content moderation and platform governance, and the spread of dis- and misinformation. Instruction and practice in written and oral communication provided. After successful completion of the course the student should be able to:

- Analyze major themes in the critical study of the internet & society and situate them with broader disciplinary and cultural conversations.
- Read and evaluate social scientific academic monographs, articles, and reports.
- Carry out an independent, social science-focused, project on a subject related to the themes of the course.

This course is designated communication intensive in the major (CI-M). This means that a major component of the course focuses on “the specific forms of communication common to the field's professional and academic culture” (<https://registrar.mit.edu/registration-academics/academic-requirements/communication-requirement>). We will be spending time analyzing how research in media studies is communicated through books, articles, and reports, as well as focusing on developing your own writing and presentation skills within the discipline.

### **Learning Activities**

The course will be taught via a combination of lectures, class discussions, group exercises, and assignments.

### **Assignments and Grading**

Your final grade will consist of the following components. Graduate students are expected to work at a level commensurate with advanced study. Assignments will be due on Canvas before 2p on the date specified unless otherwise indicated.

- Participation. Including ungraded prep assignments & one thematic in-class presentation: 20%
- Book review. 1000 words, will include one ungraded draft: 20%
- Research paper. 3000 words. Mini-assignments will be attached to this that, if missed, deduct half a grade each from final paper grade: 40%
- Final presentation. 10 minutes, with 150 word abstract required in advance: 20%

### **Policies and Expectations**

Participation & engagement: You should come to our sessions prepped, having done the readings, have them at hand during class, and being ready to be involved in our shared time. Full participation means not simply attending, but being truly engaged; not only speaking, but actively listening to fellow class members and engaging in conversation together. We often discuss complex, even difficult topics and we should all enter those as thoughtful, generous listeners. I strongly encourage you to not check email, social media, etc. and really focus on being present and attentive. If laptop use/distraction becomes an issue, restrictions may be utilized.

Health protocols: If you have flu-like or Covid symptoms, or other reasons to be concerned that you might be contagious, please stay home and rest. Email me when you can so we can make sure we accommodate your absence. I do not record our classes out of consideration for both student privacy and the desire to retain a space of open conversation but if I use a presentation “deck” I will upload the pdf and I will share any links used in the class via Canvas. I also encourage you to reach out to one of your fellow students to check in on any notes, insights, etc. from class they may have to share. Let’s all look out for each other and be as safe as possible!

Late work: I am happy to give you a one day automatic extension for one of the assignments (no explanation needed, just notify me if you need it). Beyond that, extensions without penalty can be granted if I receive a note of support from MIT Student Support Services (S<sup>3</sup> @ <http://web.mit.edu/uaap/s3/>); they are a vital resource to be connected to for help and I encourage you to reach out to them if you need support. I am also happy to make accommodations for religious holidays if notified in advance. Any unexcused late work beyond will be penalized at a full grade per day.

Writing and presentation assistance: The Writing and Communication Center offers free one-on-one professional advice from communication experts with advanced degrees and publishing experience. The WCC can help you learn about all types of academic and professional writing and further develop your oral communication skills. You can learn more about the WCC consultations and access advice about writing and oral presentations at <http://cmsw.mit.edu/writing-and-communication-center/>.

Disability and access services (DAS): Please let me know if you are working with DAS and have accommodations we need to be mindful of during the course. As their page notes, “MIT is committed to providing access to qualified students who have disabilities. One of the pillars of our mission in Disability and Access Services (DAS) is to ensure equal access for students with disabilities while upholding the integrity of MIT’s programs and services. We service all of MIT’s students, both on-ground and on-line.” They are a good source of support; more info at <https://studentlife.mit.edu/das>.

Library and research assistance: The work you do in this course may require social scientific literature searches (well beyond just “googling”) and evaluation of those materials. The libraries offer useful help and advice for how to find relevant materials. See <http://libraries.mit.edu/research-support/> for assistance. You may also find the research resources I link to on my website helpful: <http://ltaylor.com/teaching/research-resources-for-students/>.

Academic integrity: I take academic integrity very seriously and consider it a core foundational principle of the university and research more broadly. Your hand-ins must reflect your sole work and authorship (rather than a group effort). For reasons ranging from privacy to fallibility, you may not submit material generated from AI/LLM tools (please don’t hesitate to talk to me if you have any questions about this). As noted in the CMS/W guidelines on plagiarism, “Plagiarism - use of another's intellectual work without acknowledgement - is a serious offense. It is the policy of the CMS Faculty that students who plagiarize will receive an F in the subject, and that the instructor will forward the case to the Committee on Discipline. Full acknowledgement for all information obtained from sources outside the classroom must be clearly stated in all written work submitted. All ideas, arguments, and direct phrasings taken from someone else's work must be identified and properly footnoted. Quotations from other sources must be clearly marked as distinct from the student's own work. For further guidance on the proper forms of attribution, consult the style guides available in the Writing and Communication Center and the MIT Website on Plagiarism located at: <http://cmsw.mit.edu/writing-and-communication-center/avoiding-plagiarism/>.” Please don’t hesitate to talk to me if you have any questions about this issue.

## Reading Material

Articles will be available via Canvas, books will either need to be purchased or downloaded for free. We may slightly alter our book reading selections so do not buy them all in advance. Don’t hesitate to let me know if you have any financial issues in getting copies of the books. I’ll do my best to help make sure you have access to the material. You must always bring a copy of the readings, either in print or electronic form, to class.

- Alice Marwick, *The Private is Political* (Yale, 2023). Purchase or free electronic copy via MIT library: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/jj.2543560> (make sure you are using the proxy).
- Kishonna Gray, *Intersectional Tech* (LSU, 2020). Purchase or free electronic copy via MIT library: <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/mit/detail.action?pq-origsite=primo&docID=6175136> (make sure you are using the proxy).
- Joan Donovan, Emily Dreyfuss, and Brian Friedberg, *Meme Wars* (Bloomsbury, 2022).
- Tarleton Gillespie, *Custodians of the Internet* (Yale, 2018). Purchase or free electronic copy at [https://tarletongillespie.org/Gillespie\\_CUSTODIANS\\_print.pdf](https://tarletongillespie.org/Gillespie_CUSTODIANS_print.pdf).

**Feb 7 – Introduction and Internet Histories**

**Feb 14 – Technology and the Social**

- Latour – “Where are the missing masses?” (selection, pp 225-234)
- Star – “The ethnography of infrastructure”
- Wellman – “Do net surfers ride alone?”

**Feb 21 – Social Media & Privacy I**

- *The Private is Political*, Ch 1-4 & Appendix: Research Methods

Book review analysis due

**Feb 28 – Social Media & Privacy II**

- *The Private is Political*, Ch 5-7

**March 6 – Race & Technology I**

- *Intersectional Tech*, Intro-Ch 3

Draft book review due

**March 13 – No class**

**March 20 – Race & Technology II**

- *Intersectional Tech*, Ch 4-Conclusion

Final book review due

**March 27 – No class, spring break**

**April 3 – Dis/misinfo and Online Battles I**

- *Meme Wars*, Intro-Ch 4

Paper topic & rationale due

**April 10 – Dis/misinfo and Online Battles II**

- *Meme Wars*, Ch 5-Epilogue

**April 17 – Platforms & Content Moderation I**

- *Custodians of the Internet*, Ch 1-4

Initial annotated bibliography due

**April 24 – Platforms & Content Moderation II**

- *Custodians of the Internet*, Ch 4-8

Abstracts due for first set of presentations

**May 1 & 8 – Presentations**

Abstracts due for second set of presentations May 1

**May 15 - Final paper due**