

# THE DIGITAL DIVIDE AS CULTURAL PRACTICE

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2 CREDITS (4 ECTS)

## COURSE OUTLINE

As each of us takes part in digital networks, digital communication and digital politics in one way or another, we all have become responsible for the way digital governance and community formation are organized. Setting the lines of digital inclusion and exclusion (“the digital divide”) is not merely an issue of political and industrial decision making alone, it has become an integral part of everyday practice. A culture of digital citizens has emerged that alertly controls its outside boundaries and the social rules within - all with implications far beyond the virtual realm alone.

This course will scrutinize these politics and practices of the digital divide, using and refining anthropological and sociological tools to understand social, economic and political agents and their motivations in this uneven development.

## COURSE CONTENT

The seminar builds on three blocks. In a first unit, the debate will focus on the social implications of digital inclusion, track the individual in its digital environment, scrutinize digital social networks and assess the role of digital media in political and social emancipation. We will debate community organization, discuss the ambivalent relation between state and internet, and weigh the costs of a digital democracy against the perils of the non-digital dark. In a second part, we turn to the transformation of economic relations and production systems in the wake of digitization, discussing theories of value, theories of money and investigate the transformation of production systems. The debate will engage with the implications of changing property regimes (the intellectual property debate) on social and political relations as access rights replace property rights. The ‘digital divide’ here refers to the all-decisive difference between *access to* and *control over* digital resources.

The third pillar takes the debate to a global level and looks at the internet as a hegemonic tool. The control of the internet’s legalistic and judicial infrastructure meets the global south’s attempt to restructure global digital governance. Here, hegemonic images of the global south remind of early developmental discourse, and digital technology tears open gaps that seemed to become ever more narrow: Harvey’s shrinking globe turned out to be a deceptive idol. The seminar will take a decisively critically-developmental approach to this process.

## TEACHING AND GRADING

Reading the key texts for each class and preparing notes for the discussion is obligatory. You will also give a presentation on a selected topic in class. The presentation is accompanied by a paper, which shall be circulated at least five days before the presentation. The papers should be 8-10 pages.

Each presentation is complemented by a short (5minute) critical statement by a fellow student: Each participant should prepare at least one such critical contribution in this course. Presentation and papers together count 70% towards the final grade. The critical statement scores an additional 10%, and active participation accounts for a further 20%.

## **1. Introduction**

### **A) digital distinctions: the self, the netizen and the anthropology of virtual worlds**

*From the early 1990s onward, public access to the internet set off a transformative social and political change, unleashing new modes of communication, encouraging new forms of community building and political participation, and offering potentially unlimited access to independent news and academic sources. Social sciences and anthropology have followed this transition and addressed the new forms of social organization, using both existing theories as well as readjusting their methodological and epistemological tools. The academic debate likewise turned to the apparent flipside: control of digital infrastructure as a means of hegemonic domination.*

*The seminar will work with a triangular model of state, capital and civil society to see how the digital debate is anchored in existing political debates of political and economic dominance and counter-hegemony.*

## **2. Promise and perils of digital democracy**

- MacKinnon, Rebecca. *Consent of the Networked: The Worldwide Struggle for Internet Freedom* (2012): Chapters 2+3: 15-50.

## **3. How to be oneself in a virtual community**

- George Herbert Mead. "The Social Self". *Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods* 10 (1913) (not a typo): 374-380.
- Christian, Brian. *The Most Human Human : What Talking with Computers Teaches Us About What It Means to Be Alive*. Chapter 2: "Authenticating" : 16-37.

## **4. Anthropology of virtual communities**

*consensus, and community building from a digital networks from an sociological-anthropological perspective*

- Humphrey, Caroline. "The Mask and the Face: Imagination and Social Life in Russian Chat Rooms and Beyond." *Ethnos* 74, no. 1 (2009): 31-50.
- Boellstorff, Tom. *Coming of Age in Second Life : An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human.*: chapter 7: 179-202.
- Castells, Manuel. Informational Politics in Action: The Politics of Scandal. In *The power of identity* (2004):391-401.

## **5. Digital politics:**

*the ambivalent relation between state and its internet, the challenge to the territorial state, and a redefined role of civil society*

- Morozov, Evgeny. "How Dictators Watch Us on the Web."  
<http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/>

- Pariser, Eli. *The Filter Bubble : What the Internet Is Hiding from You*. 2011). Chapter TBA
- Boellstorff, Tom. *Coming of Age in Second Life*. Chapter 8: 205-236.

## **B) virtual economies: adjusting the way we need to think about money and value**

### **6. *A political anthropology of the digital elite***

- Coleman, Gabriella. "Ethnographic Approaches to Digital Media." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 39, no. 1 (2010): 487-505.

### **7. *Money for nothing ?***

#### *digital means of production*

- Carrier, James. "Gifts, Commodities, and Social Relations: A Maussian View of Exchange." *Sociological Forum* 6, no. 1 (1991): 119-36.
- Dibbell, Julian. *Play Money, or, How I Quit My Day Job and Made Millions Trading Virtual Loot*. Chapter 5: "the gold farmers"

### **8. *...and your clicks for free:***

#### *Immaterial labour, digital commodities and the copyright debate*

- Hutchins, Edwin , and David Tetzlaff. "Yo-Ho-Ho and a Server of Warez: Internet Software Piracy and the New Global Information Economy." 99-126.
- Larkin, Brian and Lawrence Lessig. "Property" 81-173.

### **9. *Anthropology of digital money***

- Carrier, James "Gifts, Commodities, and Social Relations: A Maussian View of Exchange." *Sociological Forum* 6 (1) (1991): 119-136.
- Mosco, Vincent. "Webs of Myth and Power." In *The World Wide Web and Contemporary Cultural Theory* (A. Herman, Th. Swiss, eds) (2000):
- Maurer, Bill "Cyberspatial Properties: Taxing Questions about Proprietary Regimes" In *Property in question : value transformation in the global economy*. (C. Humphrey and K. Verdery, eds) (2004): 297-318

### **C) Global gaps:**

*In the digital core central all aspects of life are impacted by the digitization of social and economic infrastructure and by the control of its digital boundaries. This process extends to the digital semiperipheries, through cell phones or digital payment systems (like Mpesa), which are linked to the core's mainframes. While this partial inclusion may help create digital elites, it renders no control to the digital outbacks. Likewise, digital rule also extends to the old analogue peripheries, where exclusion from digital resources reinforces existing and creates new dependencies. Unsurprisingly, control over this infrastructure is fiercely fought over on a global scale. Restructuring of internet governance it is on top of the agendas of southern states and. We will look at some of these global dependencies, the creation of peripheral digital elites and find anthropological approaches to the appropriation of digital technology.*

#### **10. Digital oligarchies**

- Pariser, Eli. *The Filter Bubble : What the Internet Is Hiding from You* (2011). Chapter TBA:
- Green, Glen and Matthew Rimmer. "Remix Culture: The Creative Commons and Its Discontents." In *Digital Copyright and the Consumer Revolution : Hands Off My Ipod.* (2007).

#### **11. Differential access to digital resources:**

*The politics of inclusion and exclusion*

- Mosco, Vincent. "Webs of Myth and Power." In *The World Wide Web and Contemporary Cultural Theory*, edited by Andrew Herman and Thomas Swiss: 37-60
- Gross, Michael Joseph. "World War 3.0." *Vanity Fair Online Edition.*

#### **12. global hegemonies:**

*digital core and digital periphery*

- Donner, Jonathan , and K. Moran. "Biodiversity Prospecting: Lessons and Prospects." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 30 (2001): 505-26.
- Lessig, Lawrence. *Free Culture : How Big Media Uses Technology and the Law to Lock Down Culture and Control Creativity.* (2004): Conclusion.