PS218: A Political Theory of Algorithms
Bunche Hall, Rm. 4276

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Office Hours: Tuesdays, 9 a.m.-12 p.m.

Course Synopsis:

This seminar asks the following research question: How are algorithms political? The course is designed to approach this question not on the basis of the human use of algorithms, but by exploring the modes of existence of the technical object.

Topics of inquiry include the following:

- media ontology
- political theories of movement
- the differences between mimetic and virtual media
- the nature of algorithmic governmentality
- cybernetics
- dataveillance

Grades:
30% = Weekly Writing Assignment
50% = Final Writing Assignment
20% = weekly, in class, participation

Weekly Writing: Each week you are responsible for keeping a journal entry of your curiosities that will take the following form:

1. Identify 3 passages in the readings that help you formulate some elements of a political theory of algorithms.
2. Offer a close reading of these passages that establishes your contributions to our explorations of a political theory of algorithms.

In other words, for each of the weekly assignments you are expected to reflect on our seminar question: How are algorithms political?

Final Writing Assignment:

Below is a list of works that address contemporary issues of algorithms, science, technology, aesthetics, ecology, race, and political theory (the list is partial and I’m happy to add books to it if you have other works in mind). Now that you have spent a Quarter reading and exploring modes of thinking about the politicity of algorithms, write a review essay (of no more than 9000 words) that assesses 3 works and how they may or may not help address the question of a political theory of algorithms? This will count towards 60% of your final grade.
Cara Daggett: The Birth of Energy
Ruha Benjamin, ed.: Captivating Technology: Race, Carceral Technoscience, and Liberatory Imagination in Everyday Life
Golumbia: Politics of Bitcoin
Knouff: How Noise Matters to Finance
Safiya Noble: Algorithms of Oppression
Ruha Benjamin: Captivating Technology
Neda Atanasoski and Kalindi Vora: Surrogate Humanity: Race, Robots, and the Politics of Technological Futures
Marshall McLuhan: Understanding Media
A. Galloway: The Interface Effect
A. Galloway: Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture
J. Dean: Blog Theory
Pasquale: Black Box Society
Taina Bucher: If ... Then: Algorithmic Power and Politics
David Golumbia: Computational Culture
Ed Finn: What Algorithms Want
Bernard Harcourt: Exposed
Ferguson: The Rise of Big Data Policing
Weapons of Math Destruction
Zuboff: The Age of Surveillance Capitalism
Simone Browne: Dark Matter
Julia Angwin: Dragnet Nation
Cory Doctorow: Little Brother
Lisa Gitelman (ed.): raw data is an Oxymoron
ANY BOOK BY: Wendy Chun
Domingos: The Master Algorithm
Orit Halpern: Beautiful Data
Lev Manovich: The Language of New Media
Ronald Deibert: Black Code
N. Katherine Hayles: How We Became Post-Human
N. Katherine Hayles: My Mother Was a Computer
Mark Hansen: Feed Forward
Mark Hansen New Philosophy for New Media
Grusin/Bolter: Remediation
Grusin: Premediation
Adam Alter: Irresistible
Clarke/Hansen (eds.): Emergence and Embodiment: New Essays on Second-Order Systems Theory
Steven Shaviano: Connected: Or What it Means to Live in Network Society
Jussi Parikka: Insect Media: An Archeology of Animals and Technology
Jussi Parikka: What is Media Archeology?
Lisa Gitelman: Paper Knowledge
Friedrich Kittler: Gramophone, Film, Typewriter
John Durham Peters: Speaking Into The Air
Karen Barad: Meeting the University Halfway
Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka: Media Archeology: Approaches, Applications, and Implications
Yuk Hui: On the Existence of Digital Objects
Patrick Jagoda: Network Aesthetics
Shaviro: Post-Cinematic Affect
Darin Barney (ed.): The Participation Condition in the Digital Age
Tiziana Terranova: Network Culture: Politics for the Information Age
Eyal Weizman: Forensic Architecture: Violence at the Threshold of Detectability
Gregoire Chamayou: A Theory of the Drone
Christopher Kelty: Two Bits: The Cultural Significance of Free Software
Benjamin Bratton: The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty

Helpful Reference Guides:

Readings

Week 1
Aristotle, Physics, Book VII
M. Heidegger: “On the Essence of the Concept of Physics in Aristotle’s Physics, Bk. 1”

Week 2
M. Foucault: “Governmentality”
Foucault: “Society Must Be Defended” 17 March, 1976
Ian Hacking: “Biopower and the Avalanche of Printed Numbers”
François Ewald: “Insurance and Risk”

Recommended:
Canguilhem: Machine and Organism

Week 3
Simondon: On the Modes of Existence of Technical Objects - Part I

Recommended:
*John Guillory: Genesis of the Media Concept

Week 4
M. Norton Wise: Mediating Machines
B.F. Skinner: The Concept of the Reflex in the Description of Behavior
N. Catherine Hayles: Cybernetics

Recommended: Orit Halpern, Ch. 1

Week 5
Wiener: Cybernetics …: Read all of it, but focus on Intro & Chs. 1&4
Wiener, et. al.: “Behavior, Purpose, and Teleology”
Clerk Maxwell: “On Governors”

Week 6
Gillespie - “Algorithm” & “The Relevance of Algorithms”
Goffey - “Algorithm”
Massimo Mazzotti: “Algorithmic Life”
Rodowick: The Virtual Life of Film, Part III (page 89-189)

Viewing: Side By Side (Dir. Kenneally, 2012)

Week 7
Koopman: How we became our Data (all)
Jonathan Sterne: MP3: Theory of a Format (Intro)
Week 8
Amoore: The Politics of Possibility (Part I)

Week 9
Gary Marx: Windows into the Soul (Pages 1-140)

Recommended:

Julia Angwin: “Machine Bias”
Roger Clarke: “Information Technology and Dataveillance”
Rita Raley: “Dataveillance and Countervailance”

Week 10
Jairus Grove: Savage Ecology: War and Geopolitics at the End of the World
Learning Outcomes: This course is designed to address the following learning outcomes as stipulated by the Department of Political Science:

1. Think critically about basic political processes, institutions, and concepts as these operate in different national and cultural contexts. Evaluate arguments in an impartial fashion.
2. Locate, evaluate, and use information and scholarship needed to place particular political events in broader historical, cross-national, and theoretical contexts. Demonstrate familiarity with various approaches to the study of politics, and their application to specific questions, puzzles, and debates.
3. Acquire a knowledge of diverse theories of politics, by engaging critically with texts, media, and contexts. Learn to employ cultural, hermeneutical, normative and historical approaches.
4. Make written and oral arguments about significant political processes, events, and concepts using appropriate evidence, with sensitivity to opposing perspectives.

Academic Integrity: All students must comply with the University’s code of academic integrity, including policies concerning plagiarism. Plagiarism is NOT tolerated in this class. Please familiarize yourself with the University’s Code of Conduct on Academic Integrity (http://www.deanofstudents.ucla.edu/StudentGuide.pdf), (as well as www.library.ucla.edu/bruinsuccess) particularly as these relate to plagiarism, which includes:

- The submission of material authored by another person but represented as the student’s own work, whether that material is paraphrased or copied verbatim or near verbatim form. This includes Spark Notes.
- Improper or lack of acknowledgement of sources (including websites) in essays or papers.
- Best practice is to cite any outside material that you consult, even if you do not use it verbatim.
- If you cite a text, author, or idea, that citation must be documented according to the Chicago Manual of Style, as specified by the American Political Science Association Style Manual available here: http://www.apsanet.org/files/APSAStyleManual2006.pdf

Accommodation for Students with Disabilities: If you wish to request an accommodation, please contact the UCLA Center for Accessible Education (CAE) as soon as possible at A255 Murphy Hall (Ph. 310-825-1501). The CAE website can be found at: www.cae.ucla.edu.

Emergencies. In an emergency situation, please call UCPD by dialing 911 from an on-campus phone or (310) 825-1491. Anonymous Reporting Line: (310) 794-5824.

Title IX prohibits gender discrimination, sexual harassment, domestic and dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking. If you have experienced sexual harassment or sexual violence, you can receive confidential support and advocacy at the CARE Advocacy Office for Sexual and Gender-Based Violence, 1st Floor Wooden Center West, CARFAdvocate@careprogram.ucla.edu, (310) 206-2465. You can also report sexual violence or sexual harassment directly to the University’s Title IX Coordinator, 2241 Murphy Hall, titleix@conet.ucla.edu, (310) 206-3417. Reports to law enforcement can be made to UCPD at (310) 825-1491. Please note that under University policy, all TAs and instructors are mandated Title IX reporters. If any of the teaching team is informed of or witnesses sexual violence or harassment, we are required to report this to UCLA’s Title IX coordinator. The coordinator is committed to maintaining anonymity of victims and so are we. Report incidents of BIAS. UCLA is committed to creating a community free from bias and intolerance. If you have experienced a hostile climate, please file a report at http://www.deanofstudents.ucla.edu/Report-an-incident-of-BIAS. UCLA Students may contact the College Academic Counseling office for help with any academic concerns via http://www.ugeducation.ucla.edu/counseling/contact-us.html. Non-UCLA students should contact http://www.summer.ucla.edu/Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) at UCLA offers a range of services including individual and group therapy, referrals, psychological testing, crisis consultation, and psychoeducational programs and workshops. CAPS is located at John Wooden Center West and can be reached at (310) 825-0768. Learn more at http://www.counseling.ucla.edu. If you need an immediate response after hours or on weekends please call UCLA CAPS 24-hour access line (310) 825-0768 or call the UCPD 24-hour dispatch line at (310) 825-1491 or dial 911 for your local police.

Under FERPA, you have a right to know how you’re doing in the course, but it is a violation of university policy to discuss grades or any private information via email, because legally, email is not private communication. Any discussion of your performance in the course, including your grade, must take place in person.