Digital Platforms and Cultural Production

AMST S365E / EP&E S399 / ER&M S295 / FILM S268
Summer 2025

Meeting Information
Online. TTh 9am-12:15pm

Instructor
Julian Posada (he/him)
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Office Hours: By Appointment
Email Hours: M-F 10am–6pm. Please allow 24-48 weekday hours for a response.

Course Description
This seminar explores the phenomenon of digital platforms – intermediary infrastructures that connect end-users and complementors. These platforms have emerged in diverse socio-economic contexts, including social media (e.g., Instagram), video streaming (e.g., Twitch), digital labor (e.g., Uber), and e-commerce (e.g., Amazon). The course offers a multidisciplinary perspective on studying these platforms, viewed as an amalgamation of firms and multi-sided markets, each with their own distinctive history, governance, and infrastructures. Throughout this course, we will delve into the transformative role of these platforms in areas such as culture, labor, creativity, and democracy. Our discussions will draw upon comparative cases from the United States and abroad. In addition, the seminar aims to facilitate an in-depth dialogue on contemporary capitalism and the process of cultural production. We will engage with pertinent topics like inequality, surveillance, decentralization, and ethics in the digital age. Students are invited to contribute to these discussions by bringing examples and case studies from their personal experiences.

Learning Objectives
Upon successful completion of this course, students will gain a comprehensive understanding of digital platforms through social and humanistic lenses, incorporating insights from diverse fields such as communications, political economy, cultural studies, and information science. They will develop the capability to scrutinize platforms as technocultural and socioeconomic infrastructures, using a variety of analytical tools and case studies. Engaging in various course activities, students will acquire the ability to contextualize and understand the challenges associated with the phenomenon of platformization. Ultimately, they will learn to construct compelling arguments and propose insightful recommendations relevant to issues associated with digital platforms.

Required Materials
Students are not required to purchase books for this course. The main text, *Platforms and Cultural Production*, and all other assigned readings are available at the Yale Library or on Canvas.

Course Requirements

Assignment	Description	Due Date	Subtotal	Total
Journal project	Reading worksheets	Weeks 1, 2, 4	15%	65%
	Midterm essay	Week 3	20%	
Final report	Final version	Week 5	25%	25%
Class participation	Attendance and participation	Ongoing	10%	10%

Assignments

Reading engagements are due on at the end of the day on Friday

- **Class attendance and participation** (10%, ongoing)
  Active engagement in course sessions, including discussions and in-class activities, is expected from all students.
- **Journal project**
  This project involves using an alternative digital platform in place of a mainstream one you typically use, with options provided in Privacy Tools (https://www.privacytools.io). This assignment comprises two parts:
  1. ***Reading worksheets*** (15% each, weeks 1, 2, and 4; 45% total)
     Students will respond to three questionnaires (~6 questions each) related to the weekly readings and their application to the chosen privacy-oriented platform. These questions will prompt students to apply course theories and topics to their case study.
  2. ***Midterm essay*** (20%, week 3)
     Students will submit a 1,500-word essay comparing their chosen alternative platform with a mainstream competitor and exploring one topic or issue of their choice. The essay should draw from theoretical concepts discussed in class and in the readings.
- **Final report** (25%, week 5)
  In this assignment, students will select a platform different from the one used in the journal project and focus on a problem associated with it. They will analyze this problem by considering the platform's market presence, infrastructure, and governance, and propose potential solutions. The report should be >2,000 words in length and consist of three main sections: a contextual overview, a problematization, and a section on suggested solutions.

Format and Course Policies

The sessions will consist of short lectures structured around the week's topic, followed by discussions of the readings and other relevant material. If a session has a guest speaker, their presentation will be followed by a Q&A and discussion. Before assignments are due, I will take the time to discuss the requirements and field questions from students. As a small seminar, students are expected to come prepared, read all the required materials, and participate in the discussions.

Academic Integrity

All Yale students must acknowledge the sources that inform their coursework. Any work a student submits (at any stage) must be their own, and they must adequately document anything they borrow from others (words, ideas, data). Conventions for acknowledging sources vary across disciplines, and, as an interdisciplinary course, I will provide instructions on citation and references in the assignment sheets that I will distribute later. All students are responsible for acting with integrity and encouraged to ask questions if anything about course policies is unclear.

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, & Belonging

Yale University is committed to equity and respect for diversity. All participants of the learning environment in this course should strive to create and maintain an atmosphere of mutual respect. As your course instructor, I will not tolerate or condone behavior that undermines the dignity or self-esteem of any person in this course and creates an intimidating or hostile environment. As a collective, we are responsible for creating an inclusive and welcoming space. Discrimination, harassment, and hate speech will not be tolerated. If you have any questions or concerns, you may contact the Office of Diversity and Inclusion.

Accessibility and Health

The university provides academic accommodations for students with disabilities, including those who have a physical, sensory, or learning disability, mental health condition, acquired brain injury, or chronic health condition, be it visible or hidden. If you have a disability or health consideration that may require accommodations, please reach out to the Student Accessibility Services. Their staff are available to assess specific needs, provide referrals, and arrange appropriate accommodations. You can also access the new Yale College Community Care initiative that provides short-term mental health and wellness services to undergraduates and Yale Well for wellness initiatives.

Academic Supports

The university has a range of resources on campus to support your academic success. These include the Writing Center, Residential College Tutors, and Academic Strategies.

Course Schedule and Readings

See next pages (4–7).

Session 1. Positioning
- Poell, T., Nieborg, D., Van Dijck. (2019). Platformisation. *Internet Policy Review*, 8(4)
- Smyrnaios, N. (2019). *Internet Oligopoly: The Corporate Takeover of Our Digital World*. Emerald Publishing. 15–50
- ***To watch***: Why Big Tech Will Never Be Broken Up, *Business Casual*
- ***News discussion:*** The Internet's Final Frontier: Remote Amazon Tribes, *The New York Times*
- ***Further readings:***
    - Sample, I. (2018). What is the Internet? *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/oct/22/what-is-the-internet-13-key-questions-answered
    - Barbrook, R., & Cameron, A. (1995). The Californian Ideology. *Science as Culture* 6(1)
    - Morozov., E. (2017). Silicon Valley has been humbled. But its schemes are as dangerous as ever. *The Guardian*. https://amp.theguardian.com/technology/2017/sep/02/silicon-valley-humbled-schemes-dangerous
    - Helmond, A. (2015). The Platformization of The Web: Making Web Data Platforms Ready. *Social Media+Society*, 1(2)

Session 2: Multi-Sided Markets
- Barwise, P., & Watkins, L. (2018). The Evolution of Digital Dominance. How and Why We Got to GAFA. In M. Moore & D. Tambini (Eds.), *Digital Dominance. The Power of Google, Amazon, Facebook, and Apple*. Oxford University Press, 21-49
- Zhu, F. & Iansiti, M. (2019). Why Some Platforms Thrive and Others Don't. *Harvard Business Review*. https://hbr.org/2019/01/why-some-platforms-thrive-and-others-dont
- ***To watch***: Why you keep using Facebook, even if you hate it, *Vox*
- ***News discussion:*** Mexico's growing e-commerce infrastructure is built on top of its smallest shops
- ***Further readings***:
    - Poell, T., Nieborg, D., Duffy, B. (2022). Markets. In *Platforms and Cultural Production*. Polity. 25-50
    - Eisenmann, T., Parker, G., & Van Alstyne, M. W. (2006). Strategies for two-sided markets. *Harvard Business Review*, 84(10)
    - Rochet, J-C., & Tirole, J. (2003). Platform Competition in Two-Sided Markets. *Journal of the European Economic Association*, 1(4), 990–1029
    - McIntyre, D. P., & Srinivasan, A. (2017). Networks, platforms, and strategy: Emerging Views and Next Steps. *Strategic Management Journal*, 38, 141–160

Session 3: Digital Infrastructures
- Poell, T., Nieborg, D., Duffy, B. E. (2022). Infrastructure. In *Platforms and Cultural Production*. Polity. 51-76
- Plantin, J-C., Lagoze, C., Edwards, P. N., & Sandvig, C. (2018). Infrastructure studies meet platform studies in the age of Google and Facebook. *New Media & Society*, *20*(1), 293–310
- ***To watch***: How does the internet work? – Glad you ask. *Vox*
- ***News discussion:*** WhatsApp voice notes are revolutionizing farming in Senegal, *Rest of World*
- ***Further readings***:

- Nieborg, D.B. & Helmond, A. (2018). The political economy of Facebook's platformization in the mobile ecosystem: Facebook Messenger as a platform instance. *Media, Culture & Society*.
- Nechushtai, E. (2017). Could digital platforms capture the media through infrastructure? *Journalism*, 1–16
- Rosa, F. R., & Hague, J. A. (2020). GAFA's Information Infrastructure Distribution: Implications for the Global South. *TPRC48: The 48th Research Conference on Communication, Information and Internet Policy*.
- Khan, L. M. (2017). Amazon's Anti-Trust Paradox. *The Yale Law Review*. 712–717, 755-783

Session 4: Platform Governance
- Poell, T., Nieborg, D., Duffy, B. E. (2022). Governance. In *Platforms and Cultural Production*. Polity.
- Gorwa, R. (2019). What is Platform Governance? *Information, Communication & Society*, 22(6)
- Gorwa, R. (2019). The platform governance triangle: conceptualising the informal regulation of online content. *Internet Policy Review*, 8(2).
- **To watch**: Why Spotify's "Grand Strategy" Will Fail
- **Further readings**:
  - Caplan, R. & Gillespie, T. (2020). Tiered Governance and Demonetization: The Shifting Terms of Labor and Compensation in the Platform Economy. *Social Media + Society*
  - Gillespie, T. (2014). The Politics of Platforms. *New Media & Society*, 12(3), 347–367
  - Mazzucato, M., Entsminger, J. and Kattel, R. (2020). Public value and platform governance. *UCL Institute for Innovation and Public Purpo*se, Working Paper Series (IIPP WP 2020-11). https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/public-purpose/wp2020-11
  - Popiel, P., & Sang, Y. (2021). Platforms' Governance: Analyzing digital platforms' policy preferences. *Global Perspectives*, 2(1), 1-13.
  - Lehdonvirta, V. (2022). Cryptocracy: The Quest to Replace Politics with Technology. In *Cloud Empires. How Digital Platforms Are Overtaking The State and How We Can Regain Control*. The MIT Press. 131–154.

Week 3

Session 5: Digital Labor
- Poell, T., Nieborg, D., Duffy, B. E. (2022). Labor. In Platforms and Cultural Production. Polity. 109-131
- Vallas, S., Schor, J. B. (2020). What Do Platforms Do? Understanding the Gig Economy. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 46, 273–294
- Workers Justice Project. (2023). Delivering Justice: A Worker Justice Centered Vision for Street Safety.
- **To watch**: I Delivered Food To Find Out…Can These Apps Survive?
- **News discussion:** Inside Facebook's African Sweatshop, TIME Magazine
- **Further readings**:
  - Irani, L. (2015). The Cultural Work of Microwork. *New Media & Society*, 17(5), 720–739
  - Van Doorn, N., & Badger, A. (2020). Platform Capitalism's Hidden Abode: Producing Data Assets in the Gig Economy. *Antipode*, 52(5), 1475–1495
  - Woodcock, J., Graham, M. (2019). *The Gig Economy: A Critical Introduction*. Polity
  - Miceli, M., & Posada, J. (2022). The Data-Production Dispositif. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 6(CSCW2).
  - Fairwork. (2022). *A Global Manifesto for Fairer Platform Work*. Fairwork.

- Casilli, A., & Posada, J. (2019). The Platformization of Labor and Society. In M. Graham & W. Dutton (Eds.), *Society and The Internet: How Networks of Information and Communication are Changing Our Lives*, 2nd Ed. Oxford University Press, 293-306

Session 6: Datafied Democracy
- Poell, T., Nieborg, D., Duffy, B. E. (2022). Democracy. In Platforms and Cultural Production. Polity. 155–178
- Stigler Committee on Digital Platforms. (2019). Stigler Committee on Digital Platforms: Final Report. *Stigler Center for the Study of the Economy and the State.* **Policy Brief & Exec. Summary**
- ***To watch***: Why every social media site is a dumpster fire, Vox
- ***News discussion:*** Elon Musk Is Spreading Election Misinformation, but X's Fact Checkers Are Long Gone, *The New York Times*
- **Further readings**:
    - Karppi, T., & Nieborg, D. B. (2021). Facebook confessions: Corporate abdication and Silicon Valley dystopianism. *New Media & Society*, 23(9), 2634-2649
    - Rest of World. (2021, November 9). Why the rest of the world shrugged at the Facebook Papers. *Rest of World*
    - Bradshaw, S. & Howard, P. N. (2019) The Global Disinformation Order: 2019 Global Inventory of Organised Social Media Manipulation. *Copyright, Fair Use, Scholarly Communication, etc.*

Week 4

Session 7: Arts and Creativity
Guest Speaker: Dr. Christine Tran, University of Toronto, Canada
- Poell, T., Nieborg, D., Duffy, B. E. (2022). Creativity. In *Platforms and Cultural Production*. Polity. 132-154
- Tran, C. H. (2024). "Twitch spouse: Livestreaming and the legacy of spousal labour in the video game industry." *Global Media and China,* 9(2), 173-187
- Bonini, T., & Gandini, A. (2019). "First Week Is Editorial, Second Week Is Algorithmic": Platform Gatekeepers and the Platformization of Music Curation. *Social Media + Society.*
- ***To watch***: We tracked what happens after TikTok songs go viral, *Vox*
- ***News discussion:*** South Korean streamers struggle with Twitch's sudden exit, *Rest of World*
- **Further readings**:
    - Persaud, C. J., & Perks, M. E. (2022). Beauty From the Waist Up: Twitch Drag, Digital Labor, and Queer Mediated Liveness. *Television & New Media.*
    - Caplan, R., & Gillespie, T. (2020). Tiered Governance and Demonetization: The Shifting Terms of Labor and Compensation in the Platform Economy. *Social Media + Society.*
    - Guarriello, N.-B. (2019). Never give up, never surrender: Game live streaming, neoliberal work, and personalized media economies. *New Media & Society*, 21(8), 1750–1769

Session 8: Data Extractivism
- Curlew, A. (2017). The legend of the Slender Man: The boogieman of surveillance culture. First Monday.
- Lyon, D. (2019). Surveillance capitalism, surveillance culture and data politics 1. In Data politics (pp. 64-77). Routledge.
- Crawford, K. & Joler, V. (2018). *Anatomy of and AI System*. https://anatomyof.ai/
- ***To Watch:*** Why Chile's Lithium Mining Is At A Crossroad, CNBC
- **Further readings**:

- Bender, E. M., Gebru, T., McMillan-Major, A., & Shmitchell, S. (2021). On the Dangers of Stochastic Parrots: Can Language Models Be Too Big? 🦜. In *Proceedings of the 2021 ACM Conference on Fairness, Accountability, and Transparency*
- Dobbe, R., & Whittaker, M. (2019, October 17). AI and Climate Change: How they're connected, and what we can do about it. *AI Now.*
- Ricaurte, P. (2019). Data Epistemologies, The Coloniality of Power, and Resistance. *Television & New Media*, 20(4), 350–365
- Brodie, P. (2020). Climate extraction and supply chains of data. Media, Culture & Society, 42(7-8), 1095-1114.
- Milan, S., & Treré, E. (2019). Big data from the South (s): Beyond data universalism. Television & New Media, 20(4), 319-335
- Zuboff, S. (2015). Big Other: Surveillance Capitalism and The Prospect of an Information Civilization. *Journal of Information Technology*, 30(1), 75-89

Week 5

Session 9: Inequality and Reproduction
Guest Lecturer: Dr. Sebastián Lehuedé, King's College London, United Kingdom
- Lehuedé, S. (2024). An alternative planetary future? Digital sovereignty frameworks and the decolonial option. *Big Data & Society*, 11(1)
- Benjamin, R. (2019). *Race After Technology*. Polity. Chapters 1 & 2
- Taylor, L. (2017). What Is Data Justice? The Case for Connecting Digital Rights and Freedoms Globally. Big Data & Society, 4(2)
- ***To watch***: Are We Automating Racism?, *Vox*
- ***News discussion:*** Machine Bias, *ProPublica*
- ***Further readings***:
  - Hamilton, A. M. (2020). A Genealogy of Critical Race and Digital Studies: Past, Present, and Future. *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, 6(3), 292–301
  - Jarret, K. (2014). The Relevance of "Women's Work": Social Reproduction and Immaterial Labor in Digital Media. *Television & New Media*, 15(1), 14–29
  - Posada, J. (2022). Embedded Reproduction in Platform Data Work. *Information, Communication & Society*, 25(6)

Session 10: Resistance and Alternatives
- de Peuter, G., de Verteuil, G., & Machaka, S. (2022). Co-operatives, work, and the digital economy: A knowledge synthesis report. https://scholars.wlu.ca/coms_faculty/23/
- ***To Watch:*** How We Built a $150 Million Streaming Platform with $100,000, *Wendover Productions*
- ***News discussion:*** The Indian Startup Making AI Fairer—While Helping the Poor, TIME
- ***Further readings***:
  - Winseck, D. (2020). Vampire squids, 'the broken internet' and platform regulation. *Journal of Digital Media & Policy*, 11(3), 241-282.
  - Muldoon, J. (2022). Introduction. In *Platform Socialism. How to Reclaim our Digital Future from Big Tech*. Pluto Press.
  - Popiel, P. (2022). Regulating datafication and platformization: Policy silos and tradeoffs in international platform inquiries. *Policy & Internet*, 14(1), 28–46
  - Sandoval, M. (2020). Entrepreneurial Activism? Platform Cooperativism Between Subversion and Co-optation. *Critical Sociology*, 46(6), 801–817