

COMM 7018: SOCIAL MEDIA THEORY



Fitchburg State University
Communications Media Department
MS in Applied Communication: Social Media Concentration
GCE Online-Accelerated
7 weeks, Mon 19 May—Sun 6 July 2025
Instructor: Dr. Martin Roberts
[Syllabus](#)
[GitHub repository](#)

Introduction

The term **social media** is popularly understood as referring to corporate-owned, advertising-funded communication **platforms** based on **user-generated content**: YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Twitch, Discord, TikTok. It can also be defined more broadly, however, as a set of networked, technologically-mediated **practices** of communication, structured by economic and political forces that both inflect and are inflected by social and cultural identities. These platforms, the social practices that they enable, and the relationship between the two are the objects of **social media theory**. But what does it mean to theorize social media? Why do we need social media theory at all?

To theorize something involves a number of processes

- first, how do we define the phenomenon or object of study itself? How does it differ from previous or other related phenomena?
- how are we to account for it? Why did it happen/is it happening now rather than at some other time? What are its conditions of possibility?
- what is its relation to larger areas of society? What are its implications for those areas?
- how are we to evaluate it, in terms of its implications (political, economic, social, ethical, legal, environmental, aesthetic)? What are its possibilities and limits, its progressive and oppressive aspects? How can we change it for the better?

These processes involve developing analytical frameworks or models comprising concepts that are useful for identifying and analyzing key aspects of and issues raised by the phenomenon/object in question. These frameworks and concepts typically draw from existing ones in different fields of study, but often involve the proposal of new frameworks and concepts specific to the field in question.

Objectives

By the end of the course, students will be able to:

- analyze technologies past, present, and imagined

- describe the ways in which technologies shape our world the ways in which we shape those technologies
- explain how social media is a result of the intersection between technologies and existing human communication dynamics
- discuss how theory of technology and social media can improve the vocational outlook of a student
- play a productive role in and facilitate conversations that tease out the relationships between values and technology.
- through the skills you will refine in writing your research papers, clearly explain how a specific technology shapes the social world that we live in.

Reading Assignments

All weekly reading assignments are linked directly to online sources. Please download and print out PDFs during the first week of the course.

Course Information

Platforms

We'll be using Blackboard for submitting assignments ONLY. For discussion, we will be using [Discord](#).

On Discord, if you don't already have an account, please set one up using your Fitchburg State University email address as ID.

If you already have a Discord account there will be problems setting up an account for the course because each account has to be tied to a different phone number, so you will not be able to use your regular phone number for verification. For this reason, you may use your existing account, but if you use a pseudonym please let me know what this is so I know who you are!

Please be sure to check in to the site at least once daily M-F to check the Announcements page and the Discussion forum for the week.

Assignments / Evaluation

- **Review:** 6, weekly from Week 1, one short post responding to at least one of the readings, 250 words (maximum), due by Sunday (15%)
- **Discussion:** weekly after Week 1, 2-3 responses to other students' posts., due by the *following* Sunday (15%)
- **Commentary:** 2 short papers, 1000 words, due Sunday of Week 3 and Week 5 (20%)
- **Keywords:** 500-750 words on a key concept in social media theory, with bibliography/references, due Sunday of Week 4 (25%)
- **Platform Case Study:** 2,000 words, due Sunday of Week 7 (25%)

Discussion: Agenda, Review, Reply Posts

For Weeks 1-6, each of the weekly topics will be active across a cycle of two weeks.

By **Wednesday** of each week, I will post an Agenda item in the Discussion forum for the topic of the week that discusses the reading assignments for the week, identifying key themes, concepts, and/or issues to look out for as you read. Be sure to read the Agenda post before beginning the reading assignments.

In the first week, complete the reading assignments and make an initial response post called a Review, with question and/or comments on them, by **Sunday** of the week in question.

In the second week, read through the Review posts of the group and post at least one Reply to one of them by Friday of that week.

Commentary Papers

These short papers (750-1,000 words) are due at the end of Week 3 and Week 5 (Sunday). They should consist of close analytical readings of any of the reading assignments for the period Weeks 1-3 or 4-5. You are encouraged to focus in detail on particular sections, arguments, and/or concepts from the readings and develop them.

Platform Case Study

The culminating written assignment for the course (2,000 words) may consist of a research paper or report.

A 1-page preliminary proposal with ideas for your project, with a short bibliography with sources and/or links, should be posted in the Discussion forum for the purpose by the end of Week 5, and you will receive feedback during Week 6.

Journals and other research resources

A very useful reference guide for research:

Anabel Quan-Haase and Luke Sloan, eds., **The SAGE Handbook of Social Media Research Methods**. Second edition. London: SAGE Books, 2022.

Includes large sections on both qualitative and quantitative research methods, as well as chapters specifically on doing research on YouTube, TikTok, and other platforms.

You are recommended to add all of the sources below to your bookmarks bar for easy access.

Creators and Platform Labor Working Group (Cornell University)

Data & Society

e-flux Journal

Invisible Culture: A Journal for Visual Culture

New Media & Society

New Models

Social Media + Society

TikTok Cultures Research Network

Real Life (now discontinued online magazine about technology and everyday life)

Keywords

- Algospeak
- Below the radar
- Digital ethnography
- Imagined audience
- Imitation publics
- Livestreaming
- Parasociality
- Platformization

Research Topics

- Film TikTok
- #Booktok
- Global Labor and the Gig Economy
- Dark Forest Theory of the Internet

Schedule

Week 1 M 05/19

I. Theorizing Social Media

Infinite Content

- Caroline Busta, "Hallucinating sense in the era of infinity-content"¹ (**Document**, 29 May 2024) [Audio]
 - Nicole Lipman, "Super Cute Please Like" (**n+1** 47 (Spring 2024))²
 - Timo Kollbrunner, "Toiling Away for Shein" (**Public Eye**, November 2021)
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Week 2 M 05/26

Our Algorithms, Ourselves

- Sophie Bishop and Tanya Kant, "Algorithmic autobiographies and fictions: A digital method"
- Sophie Bishop, "Algorithmic Experts: Selling Algorithmic Lore on YouTube"
- Kyle Chayka, "Introduction" (**Filterworld**)
- Kyle Chayka, "The Rise of Algorithmic Recommendations" (**Filterworld**, ch. 1)
- See also: Taylor Lorenz, "Internet 'algospeak' is changing our language in real time, from 'nip nops' to 'le dollar bean'" (**Washington Post**, 8 April 2022) [pdf]

¹This text explores how the internet and media are changing how we assign meaning to content, moving beyond traditional text-based communication. It suggests that in a time of infinite content, our ability to sense and interpret non-linear information is becoming essential. The shift towards sensory-based communication may impact how we perceive reality and interact with technology. —GPT3.5

²SHEIN is a popular fast-fashion brand known for its wide range of trendy and affordable clothing. The brand quickly produces garments, capitalizing on micro trends and offering low prices. Despite criticisms of exploitation and environmental impact, SHEIN's unique marketing strategies and expansive catalog make it a prominent player in the fashion industry. —GPT3.5

Week 3 M 06/02

Influencers

- Sophie Bishop, "Influencer Creep"
- Sophie Bishop, "Influencer creep: How artists strategically navigate the platformisation of art worlds"

See also:

- Sophie Bishop, "How to Research Online Influencers"
 - Sophie Bishop, "Influencer Management Tools: Algorithmic Cultures, Brand Safety, and Bias"
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Week 4 M 06/09

II. Platform Cultures

Books

- Jessica Maddox and Fiona Gill, "Assembling 'Sides' of TikTok: Examining Community, Culture, and Interface through a BookTok Case Study"
- José M. Tomasena, "Negotiating Collaborations: BookTubers, The Publishing Industry, and YouTube's Ecosystem"

See also:

- Alysia De Melo, "The Influence of BookTok on Literary Criticisms and Diversity"
 - Michael Dezuanni and Amy Schoonens, "#BookTok's Peer Pedagogies: Invitations to Learn About Books and Reading on TikTok"
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Break (due to instructor bereavement)

Week 5 M 06/23

Music

- David Hesmondhalgh, Ellis Jones, and Andreas Rauh, "Soundcloud and Bandcamp as Alternative Music Platforms"
 - Jeremy Wade Morris, "Music Platforms and the Optimization of Culture"
 - Robin James, "Moving in Stereo"
 - D. Bondy Valdovinos Kaye, "JazzTok: Creativity, Community, and Improvisation on TikTok"
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Week 6 M 06/30

Media

- Sun Sun Lim, "On Stickers and Communicative Fluidity in Social Media"
 - Sunny Yoon, "Webtoons, Desperately Seeking Viewers: Interactive Creativity in Social Media Platforms and Cultural Appropriation of Global Media Production"
 - Kate M. Miltner and Tim Highfield, "Never Gonna GIF You Up: Analyzing the Cultural Significance of the Animated GIF"
 - Luke Stark and Kate Crawford, "The Conservatism of Emoji: Work, Affect, and Communication"
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Week 7 M 07/07

Aesthetics

- Robin James, "New Normal"
 - Paul Roquet, "In the Mood"
 - Guilherme Giolo and Michaël Berghman, "The Aesthetics of the Self: The Meaning-Making of Internet Aesthetics"
 - See also: [Aesthetics Wiki](#) (read all articles in the section called "What Are Aesthetics?" and explore the site)
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Resources

[Sophie Bishop](#) (works on influencer culture)

[Abbie Richards](#) (TikTok researcher, Media Matters)

Bibliography

D. Bondy Valdovinos Kaye, Jing Zeng, and Patrik Wikström, **TikTok: Creativity and culture in short video**. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022.

danah boyd, **It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens** (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).

Amy Bruckman, **Should You Believe Wikipedia? Online Communities and the Construction of Knowledge** (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

Finn Brunton and Helen Nissenbaum, **Obfuscation: A User's Guide for Privacy and Protest** (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016).

Alessandro Caliendo and James Graham, "Studying Instagram Beyond Selfies"

[Kyle Chayka](#), **Filterworld: How Algorithms Flattened Culture**. New York: Doubleday, 2024.

Gabriella Coleman, **Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy: The Many Faces of Anonymous** (London and New York: Verso, 2014).

Claire Dederer, **Monsters: A Fan's Dilemma** (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2023).

Kate Eichhorn, **Content**. Essential Knowledge Series. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2022.

Alysia De Melo, "The Influence of BookTok on Literary Criticisms and Diversity"

Michael Dezuanni and Amy Schoonens, "#BookTok's Peer Pedagogies: Invitations to Learn About Books and Reading on TikTok"

Brooke Erin Duffy, Thomas Poell, and David B Nieborg, "Platform Practices in the Cultural Industries: Creativity, Labor, and Citizenship"

Larissa Hjorth and Natalie Hendry, "A Snapshot of Social Media: Camera Phone Practices"

Sarah J. Jackson, Moya Bailey, et al., **#Hashtag Activism: Networks of Race and Gender Justice** (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2020).

D. Bondy Valdovinos Kaye, "JazzTok: Creativity, Community, and Improvisation on TikTok," **Jazz and Culture** 6 (2) (2023): 92–116.

Christine Lagorio-Chafkin, **We Are the Nerds: The Birth and Tumultuous Life of Reddit, the Internet's Culture Laboratory**. New York: Hachette Books, 2018.

Jin Lee and Crystal Abidin, "Introduction to the Special Issue of 'TikTok and Social Movements'"

Jessica Maddox and Fiona Gill, "Assembling 'Sides' of TikTok: Examining Community, Culture, and Interface through a BookTok Case Study"

Gary Marcus & Ernest Davis, **Rebooting AI: Building Artificial Intelligence We Can Trust** (New York: Pantheon Books, 2019).

Angela Nagle, **Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars From 4Chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right** (Alresford, Hampshire, UK: Zero Books, 2017). * Cathy O'Neil, with Stephen Baker, **The Shame Machine: Who Profits in the New Age of Humiliation** (New York: Crown/Random House, 2022).

David B Nieborg, Brooke Erin Duffy, and Thomas Poell, "Studying Platforms and Cultural Production: Methods, Institutions, and Practices"

Parmy Olson, **Supremacy: AI, ChatGPT, and the Race that Will Change the World**. New York: MacMillan, 2024.

Whitney Phillips, **This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture** (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015).

Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner, **You Are Here: A Field Guide for Navigating Polarized Speech, Conspiracy Theories, and Our Polluted Media Landscape** (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2021).

Nicholas Proferes et al., "Studying Reddit: A Systematic Overview of Disciplines, Approaches, Methods, and Ethics"

Allissa V. Richardson, **Bearing Witness While Black: African Americans, Smartphones, and the New Protest #Journalism**. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020.

Jonathan Schroeder, "Snapshot Aesthetics and the Strategic Imagination" (**Invisible Culture: A Journal for Visual Culture**) 10 (10 April 2013)

Kseniya Stsiampkouskaya et al., "Imagined Audiences, Emotions, and Feedback Expectations in Social Media Photo Sharing"

José M. Tomasena, "Negotiating Collaborations: BookTubers, The Publishing Industry, and YouTube's Ecosystem"

Policies

Late Policy

Assignments that are late will lose 1/2 of a grade per day, beginning at the end of class and including weekends and holidays. This means that a paper, which would have received an A if it was on time, will receive a B+ the next day, B- for two days late, and so on. Time management, preparation for our meetings, and timely submission of your work comprise a significant dimension of your professionalism. As such, your work must be completed by the beginning of class on the day it is due. If you have a serious problem that makes punctual submission impossible, you must discuss this matter with me before the due date so that we can make alternative arrangements. Because you are given plenty of time to complete your work, and major due dates are given to you well in advance, last minute problems should not preclude handing in assignments on time.

Mandatory Reporter

Fitchburg State University is committed to providing a safe learning environment for all students that is free of all forms of discrimination and harassment. Please be aware all FSU faculty members are "mandatory reporters," which means that if you tell me about a situation involving sexual harassment, sexual assault, dating violence, domestic violence, or stalking, I am legally required to share that information with the Title IX Coordinator. If you or someone you know has been impacted by sexual harassment, sexual assault, dating or domestic violence, or stalking, FSU has staff members trained to support you. If you or someone you know has been impacted by sexual harassment, sexual assault, dating or domestic violence, or stalking, please visit <http://fitchburgstate.edu/titleix> to access information about university support and resources.

Health

Health Services

Hours: Monday-Friday 8:30AM-5PM Location: Ground Level of Russell Towers (across from the entrance of Holmes Dining Hall) Phone: (978) 665-3643/3894

Counseling Services

The Counseling Services Office offers a range of services including individual, couples and group counseling, crisis intervention, psychoeducational programming, outreach ALTERNATIVE ECOSYSTEMSs, and community referrals. Counseling services are confidential and are offered at no charge to all enrolled students. Staff at Counseling Services are also available for consultation to faculty, staff and students. Counseling Services is located in the Hammond, 3rd Floor, Room 317.

Fitchburg Anti-Violence Education (FAVE)

FAVE collaborates with a number of community partners (e.g., YWCA Domestic Violence Services, Pathways for Change) to meet our training needs and to link survivors with community based resources. This site also features [resources](#) for help or information about dating violence, domestic violence, sexual assault and stalking. If you or someone you know is in an abusive relationship or has been a victim of sexual assault, there are many places to go for help. Many can be accessed 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. On

campus, free and confidential support is provided at both Counseling Services and Health Services.

Community Food Pantry Food insecurity is a growing issue and it certainly can affect student learning. The ability to have access to nutritious food is incredibly vital. The Falcon Bazaar, located in Hammond G 15, is stocked with food, basic necessities, and can provide meal swipes to support all Fitchburg State students experiencing food insecurity for a day or a semester.

The university continues to partner with Our Father's House to support student needs and access to food and services. All Fitchburg State University students are welcome at the Our Father's House Community Food Pantry. This Pantry is located at the Faith Christian Church at 40 Boutelle St., Fitchburg, MA and is open from 5-7pm. Each "household" may shop for nutritious food once per month by presenting a valid FSU ID.

Academic Integrity

The University "Academic Integrity" policy can be found online at <http://www.fitchburgstate.edu/offices-services-directory/office-of-student-conductmediation-education/academic-integrity/>. Students are expected to do their own work. Plagiarism and cheating are inexcusable. Any instance of plagiarism or cheating will automatically result in a zero on the assignment and may be reported the Office of Student and Academic Life at the discretion of the instructor.

Plagiarism includes, but is not limited to: - Using papers or work from another class. - Using another student's paper or work from any class. - Copying work or a paper from the Internet. - The egregious lack of citing sources or documenting research.

If you're not clear on what is or is not plagiarism, ASK. The BEST case scenario if caught is a zero on that assignment, and ignorance of what does or does not count is not an excuse. That being said, I'm a strong supporter of Fair Use doctrine. Just attribute what you use—and, again, ASK if there's any doubt.

Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA)

If you need course adaptations or accommodations because of a disability, if you have emergency medical information to share with the instructor, or if you need special arrangements in case the building must be evacuated, please inform the faculty member as soon as possible.

Technology

At some point during the semester you will likely have a problem with technology. Your laptop will crash; your iPad battery will die; a recording you make will disappear; you will accidentally delete a file; the wireless will go down at a crucial time. These, however, are inevitabilities of life, not emergencies. Technology problems are not excuses for unfinished or late work. Bad things may happen, but you can protect yourself by doing the following:

- Plan ahead: A deadline is the last minute to turn in material. You can start—and finish—early, particularly if challenging resources are required, or you know it will be time consuming to finish this project.
 - Save work early and often: Think how much work you do in 10 minutes. I auto save every 2 minutes.
 - Make regular backups of files in a different location: Between Box, Google Drive, Dropbox, and iCloud, you have ample places to store and backup your materials. Use them.
 - Save drafts: When editing, set aside the original and work with a copy.
 - Practice safe computing: On your personal devices, install and use software to control viruses and malware.
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Grading

Grading for the course will follow the FSU grading policy below:

4.0: 95-100
3.7: 92-94
3.5: 89-91
3.3: 86-88
3.0: 83-85
2.7: 80-82
2.5: 77-79
2.3: 74-76
2.0: 71-73
0.0: < 70

Academic Resources

[Writing Center](#)

[Academic Policies](#)

[Disability Services](#)

[Fitchburg State Alert system for emergencies, snow closures/delays, and faculty absences](#)

[University Career Services](#)
