

Activism and Social Change in the Digital Era

Lecturer: Vanda Černohorská, PhD

Contact: vanda.cernohorska@cerge-ei.cz

Course Description:

This course explores how digital technologies reshape civil society, activism, and community socialization in the 21st century. Students will critically analyze the evolution of social movements, and the interplay between online and offline activism, and challenge simplistic narratives about "clicktivism" or the transformative potential of digital technologies. Case studies will highlight global and local (CEE) examples of community-building and advocacy, with a particular focus on feminist movements and gender inequalities. **Guest speakers, critical discussions, and applied research projects will provide a bridge between theory and practice, equipping students with the tools to navigate and contribute to a digitally connected civil society.**

Grading Policy:

- **Active Participation (20%):** Includes discussions, working on in-class assignments, and engaged participation.
- **Weekly Reflections (20%):** Weekly one-page reflections on assigned readings, submitted by 8 AM on the day of class. Selected reflections will guide in-class discussions.
- **Midterm Project (30%):**
 - **Policy Brief:** Students work in pairs to create a 3-page policy brief, addressing a digital technology-related issue requiring policy change, intervention, or attention. **Objective:** Conduct desk research to identify a problem, analyze root causes, and propose actionable recommendations. **Deliverable:** A written policy brief and class presentation during Week 7.
- **Final Project (30%):**
 - **Research Proposal:** Students develop a 5-page proposal on a course-related theme, detailing relevance, research questions, literature review, methodology, and potential collaboration partners (NGOs, unions, etc.). **Deliverable:** Final paper and presentation during Week 13.

Mandatory Completion Policy

Note that all mandatory assignments and exams must be completed to the best of your ability in order for your final grade to be issued. Failure to complete a mandatory assignment or exam may result in a failing grade.

Letter Grade	Percentage	Description
A+	97-100	Excellent Work
A	93-97	Outstanding Work
A-	90-92	
B+	87-89	Good work
B	83-86	
B-	80-82	
C+	77-79	Acceptable Work
C	73-76	
C-	70-72	
D+	67-69	Work that is significantly below average
D	63-66	
D-	60-62	
F	0-59	Work that does not meet the minimum standards for passing the course

AEP Academic Integrity Policy

Plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty are not tolerated. The use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) for the development of knowledge and learning is encouraged at many stages of the learning process. While we value technology for educational purposes, we also value originality and the retainment of knowledge, and thus using AI for assignments and examinations, even if rephrased, is strictly prohibited and considered an academic integrity violation, unless the instructor explicitly allows for it in the context of evaluated work

AEP Non-Discrimination/Harassment Policy

The AEP program in Prague promotes a diverse learning environment where the dignity, worth, and differences of each individual are valued and respected. Discrimination and harassment, whether based on a person's race, gender, sexual orientation, color, religion, national origin, age, disability, or other legally protected characteristics, are repugnant and completely inconsistent with our objectives. Retaliation against individuals for raising good faith claims of harassment and/or discrimination is prohibited.

AEP Diversity Policy

AEP is committed to fostering an inclusive and welcoming community that values diversity in all its forms. We believe that one of the most meaningful lessons of studying abroad is learning to navigate and appreciate differences with curiosity and an open mind. While engaging across differences can sometimes be challenging or uncomfortable, these moments are essential for growth and learning. We recognize that every member of our community, even with the best intentions, may occasionally make missteps. Our commitment is to provide a supportive environment where respectful and honest dialogue helps us learn from these experiences, ensuring that every student has the opportunity to thrive and broaden their perspective.

Weekly Schedule

Week 1 - CEE Introductory Lecture Series

AEP CEE Introductory Lecture Series

Week 2 - Introduction to the Course

Topics: Course overview, mutual introductions, and discussion of students' expectations, introduction of key concepts: civil society, networked society, digital technologies, social change, futuro-optimism vs. techno-determinism.

Readings

- Castells, Manuel. 1996. *The Rise of the Network Society, The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture Vol. I*. Cambridge, MA; Oxford, UK: Blackwell. Introduction.

Week 3 - Digital Technology and Social Change

Topics: The Internet as a cultural sphere, the sociology of virtual communities: communality and its challenges, digital activism and political discourse.

Key Questions: What are the distinctive, defining characteristics of the Internet as a cultural sphere? How does the Internet, or digital technology more broadly, affect our understanding and experience of community? What is the sociology of the so-called virtual communities and the precise nature of the communality they claim to embody? How does digital technology shape political discourse and activism?

Readings

- Castells, Manuel. 2012. *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Dahlgren, Peter. 2005. "The Internet, Public Spheres, and Political Communication: Dispersion and Deliberation." *Political Communication* 22(2):147–162.
- Porter, David, ed. 1996. *Internet Culture*. New York: Routledge.

Week 4 - Critical Perspectives on Digital Technology I

Topics: Challenging binary perspectives on technology as salvation or damnation, intersectional critiques of algorithmic neutrality, surveillance capitalism.

Key Questions: How do algorithms reinforce societal biases? What are the implications of surveillance capitalism?

Readings

- Alexander, Jeffrey C. 1990. "The Sacred and Profane Information Machine: Discourse About the Computer as Ideology." *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions* 69(1):161–171.
- Zuboff, Shoshana. 2019. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. New York: PublicAffairs.
- Broussard, Meredith. 2018. "Popular Doesn't Mean Good." Pp. 150–160 in *Artificial Unintelligence: How Computers Misunderstand the World*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Week 5 - Critical Perspectives on Digital Technology II

Topics: Digital divides and inequalities reinforced by digital technologies.

Key Questions: How does access to technology mirror existing inequalities? What interventions address digital inequities effectively? What does the "digital gender gap" mean?

Readings

- van Dijk, Jan A. G. M. 2005. *The Deepening Divide: Inequality in the Information Society*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Warschauer, Mark. 2004. *Technology and Social Inclusion: Rethinking the Digital Divide*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Henshaw, Amber. 2023. "Addressing the Digital Gender Gap." Pp. 42–62 in *Digital Frontiers in Gender and Security: Bringing Critical Perspectives Online*, edited by Amber Henshaw. Bristol: Bristol University Press

Week 6 - Digital Threats to Civil Society: Extremism, Online Hate, and Targeted Attacks

Topics: Online extremism, gender-based violence, and targeted attacks on civil society.

Key questions: How do digital platforms amplify extremism and hate speech? How are activists, particularly in marginalized communities, targeted by online hate campaigns? How can digital rights and freedom of expression be balanced with the need to combat online harm?

Readings

- Henshaw, Amber. 2023. *Extremism and Gender-Based Violence Online*. Bristol: Bristol University Press.
- Czech Public Defender of Rights. 2020. *Hate Speech and Decision-Making of Czech Courts: Survey Report*. Prague: Czech Public Defender of Rights.
- Case studies materials on anti-gender and anti-LGBTQ+ rights mobilizations in CEE.

Week 7 - Midterm Exams - Policy Brief Presentations

Objective: Students present their policy briefs.

Week 8 - Activism vs. Slacktivism: Does Digital Engagement Drive Real Change?

Topics: The concept of clicktivism (a meaningful form of engagement vs. just a superficial gesture), the effectiveness of social media campaigns, and the benefits and drawbacks of online activism in the context of social movements.

Key Questions: Can digital activism create real change, or is it just a superficial gesture? How does clicktivism affect traditional forms of activism and social movements? What are the strengths and weaknesses of online activism in driving social and political change?

Readings

- Morozov, Evgeny. 2009. "The Brave New World of Slacktivism." *Foreign Policy*.
- Dennis, Jessie. 2019. *Beyond Slacktivism: How Clicks, Likes, and Shares Shape Activism*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Week 9 - Feminism and Digital Technology I

Topics: Foundational theories of feminism and technology, including Donna Haraway's Cyborg Manifesto and critical perspectives on cyberfeminism.

Key Questions: How does Donna Haraway's Cyborg Manifesto challenge traditional feminist ideas of gender, technology, and nature? How can feminist theories of technology reshape our understanding of the digital world? In what ways do technology and digital culture both empower and oppress women in contemporary society?

Readings

- Haraway, Donna. 1985. "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late 20th Century." Pp. 149–181 in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge.
- Gillis, Stacy. 2004. "Neither Cyborg Nor Goddess." Pp. 185–199 in *Third Wave Feminism: Critical Exploration*, edited by Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie, and Rebecca Munford. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Week 10 - Feminism and Digital Technology II

Topics: Networked feminism, feminist politics, and digital activism.

Key questions: How do digital platforms shape the way feminist movements organize and engage with the public? In what ways does digital media empower or hinder the pursuit of gender justice? How can vulnerability be mobilized in digital activism to challenge and reconfigure feminist politics?

Readings

- Clark-Parsons, Rosemary. 2022. *Networked Feminism: How Digital Media Makers Transform Gender Justice Movements*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Wiesslitz, Christina. 2023. "Women's Avenues of Digital Activism: Fighting for Their Own." Pp. 1-22 in *Women's Activism Online and the Global Struggle for Social Change*, edited by Christina Wiesslitz. Palgrave Studies in Communication for Social Change. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Recommended:

- Vachhani, Sheena J. 2024. "Networked Feminism in a Digital Age—Mobilizing Vulnerability and Reconfiguring Feminist Politics in Digital Activism." *Gender, Work & Organization* 31(3): 1031–1048.

Week 11 - Activism in the Spotlight: The Role of Influencers in Social Movements

Topics: The impact of influencers on social movements, the blurred line between activism and influence, and ethical challenges in influencer activism.

Key Questions: How do influencers contribute to or challenge traditional social movements? What distinguishes genuine activism from influencer-driven campaigns (and are there any differences)? What role do influencers play in amplifying or diluting the message of activism?

Readings

- Scharff, Christina. 2024. Are we all influencers now? Feminist activists discuss the distinction between being an activist and an influencer. *Feminist Theory*, 25(3), 454-470.
- Heřmanová, Marie. 2022. „Politicisation of the Domestic: Populist Narratives About Covid-19 Among Influencers“. *Media and Communication*. 2022 (10:4).

Week 12 - Digital Technology and Global Crises: Mobilization, Solidarity, and Resistance

Topics: The role of digital technology in global crises, mobilization and solidarity in digital activism, networked resistance and de-colonial design.

Key Questions: How has digital technology facilitated or hindered mobilization during global crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's aggression in Ukraine, or the humanitarian crisis in Palestine? In what ways does digital activism support solidarity and community-building? How can digital platforms contribute to de-colonial design and resistance movements?

Readings

- Costanza-Chock, Sasha. 2020. "Introduction." Pp. 1-24 in Design Justice: Community-Led Practices to Build the Worlds We Need. Cambr., MIT Press.
- Zuckerman, Ethan. 2020. "The Case for a Public Digital Infrastructure." Knight First Amendment Institute.
- Case studies-related readings

Week 13 - Final Research Proposal Presentations – Students present and discuss their research proposals.