

The Anthropology of Social Media

Anthropology 270

Dr. Nell Haynes

nell.haynes@northwestern.edu

1810 Hinman Av. Office 209

Office Hours M/W: 11:00-12:15

(please confirm appointment time on Google Doc)



Course Description

Social media platforms have quickly transformed communication, relationships, identities, education and at times, power relations. These platforms have also become a popular topic for discussion and research, yet most claims made about social media are very general. This course takes an anthropological approach to social media in order to speak about the ways social media use is embedded in and reflective of specific cultural contexts. The course concentrates on content of social media rather than platforms, and also explores social media as a research method for understanding how people's lives converge in both online and offline spaces. This course explores the incredible variation in social media that emerges on different continents, among people of different class and religious backgrounds, for people with different gender identities and sexual practices, and among people who are differently embedded in the global system.

Course Objectives

This course will

1. expose students to the study of human diversity and similarity
2. make course content and class discussion relevant to the students' lives in order to develop students' capacity to "make the familiar strange and the strange familiar"
3. teach students how to read texts and author's arguments critically through class discussions
4. inspire students to think comparatively by asking them how the particular behavior, issue or reality they are reading about or discussing in class compares across countries, regions, and time
5. make students aware of being different from one another, while simultaneously recognizing the obvious fact of our common humanity – that we are more alike than we are different
6. require students to understand the ways that larger anthropological themes such as identity, relations of power, and humans' capacity for creativity are related to course themes.

Requirements

Participation in Class	20%
Participation Online	10%
Class Presentation	15%
Field Note Contributions	15%
Research Proposal	15%
Ethnographic Paper	25%

(more information about each requirement follows the course schedule)

Grading Standards

- A Superior: Student shows excellent critical analysis in oral contributions and writing. 90-100 (A 93-100, A- 90-92)
- B Very Good: Solid work evidenced by careful synthesis of reading, timely contributions to class discussion, and clear, logical writing. 80-90 (B+ 87-89, B 83-86, B- 80-82)
- C Satisfactory: Work demonstrates some understanding of materials and an average performance in written assignments and class discussion. 70-80 (C+ 77-79, C 73-76, C- 70-72)
- D Inconsistent: Meager performance in all assignments and class discussion; late in turning in written work. 60-70
- F Failing: Student makes minimal effort, shows little understanding of assignments, and turns in incomplete or unacceptable work. Below 60

About Attendance and Participation

Participation in class is part of the final grade. One cannot participate without being present, particularly because this course involves several in-class workshops that will be necessary for your final project. However, **not all presence and participation are equal**. Anthropology is a discipline that is constantly in motion, building off of old ideas and incorporating new ones. Thus, class time will not consist of monolithic lectures about concepts that must be memorized. Instead, they will be discussions in which we practice applying ideas of the authors we read to new situations and contexts. The **class will be expected to offer opinions and examples, and pose challenges to some of what we discuss**. This is an important time to explore ideas and learn new ways of understanding the world. Therefore participation is not only part of the final grade, but will also be necessary to building the kind of understanding required to successfully complete other assignments. To make sure you are in the best possible position to get a good participation grade:

1. Complete the required reading. You do not need to worry that you understand absolutely everything you read, but take notes about parts that strike you as especially intriguing, important, or disconnected. Think about how it relates to things you have experienced in different contexts. Think about when it was written and by whom. Think about whether you agree or disagree and why.
2. Be prepared to ask questions. Whether they are about something you don't understand in the reading, or are simply about how other people reacted to a specific detail, questions help move class discussion along.
3. Be open to new ideas. Anthropology often challenges our assumptions about the world. Newer readings in anthropology often challenge older ideas that were common in anthropology. And hopefully, you will even challenge some of the readings that you think miss the point. You don't have to agree with everything that you read or hear, but take the time to think about it carefully before you decide. Or allow yourself to not decide. But most importantly, be respectful to all the opinions offered in class, and think about why someone might agree or disagree with them.
4. Participate in ways that make you comfortable. Some people love to talk in class and others are intimidated. I hope to create an environment where intimidation is minimal, but don't fret if you're not a "talker." Feel free to come to office hours or email me to find out other ways you can make your opinions known. And if you are a "talker" please remember that you may have a funny story related to the class discussion, but unless it advances our thinking on an anthropological topic, your anecdote might not move discussion in a productive manner.
5. Be respectful. Perhaps most importantly, respecting the classroom, your fellow classmates, and the instructor will help you succeed. Spending class time on Facebook, texting, whispering to friends, or doodling excessively in your notebook are not conducive to anyone learning about the topic at hand. Paying attention to the discussion and finding thoughtful ways to contribute will make everyone's experience more pleasant.

If you have a major medical problem or family concern that requires you to miss several classes, please provide documentation and we will do our best to help you stay involved. Additionally, please make every effort to come to class on time so as not to disrupt discussion once it has begun. **Repeated tardiness will have an effect on your participation grade.** Leaving early is also disruptive, so **please limit bathroom breaks. Leave class early only when absolutely necessary**, providing a reason in person or by email before the class begins.

About Laptops

As this is a course about social media, it will be fruitful at times to look at particular online examples during the class period. Therefore, laptops may be a valuable tool, and are not discouraged. However, if they prove to be a problem, I reserve the right to change this policy during the semester. **If certain individuals abuse the privilege of laptop use, their participation grade or overall course grade may be impacted negatively.**

About Assignments

Students are encouraged to use the resources available through the Library and The Writing Place (see writing.northwestern.edu for details).

All students are required to complete written assignments by the due date. **I cannot accept assignments for credit after they are due without a medical reason.** When presenting valid excuse, it is best to do so as much in advance as possible.

Academic Integrity

Plagiarism is strictly forbidden. All work you turn in must be your own. **Any time another person's work is used, it absolutely MUST be cited properly.** Suspected violations of academic integrity will be reported to the Dean's office. For more information on Northwestern's academic integrity policies may be found in the handbook, available online at www.weinberg.northwestern.edu/handbook/integrity. Student work may also be checked using electronic databases.

Academic Accommodations

Any student requesting accommodations related to a disability or other condition is required to register with AccessibleNU (accessiblenu@northwestern.edu; 847-467-5530) and provide professors with an accommodation notification from AccessibleNU, preferably within the first two weeks of class. All information will remain confidential.

All readings for this course are posted on Canvas.

Course Schedule

WEEK 1 FOUNDATIONS

3 April Introduction to the class

4 April An Anthropology of Social Media

- Anna Cristina Pertierra. 2018. "Introduction" in *Media Anthropology for the Digital Age*. London: Polity Press. Pp 1-17.

WEEK 2 SOCIAL MEDIA THEORY AND METHODS

9 April How the World Changed Social Media

- Daniel Miller et al. 2016. "What is social media"; "Our Methods and Approach"; and "Survey Results" in *How the World Changed Social Media*. London: UCL Press. Pp. 1-8; and 25-69.

11 April Social Media Ethnography

- Jolynna Sinanan. 2017. *Social Media in Trinidad*. London: UCL Press. Ch. 1-2. Pp. 1-56.
- Clifford Geertz. 1973 "Thick Description: Toward and Interpretive Theory of Culture" in *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books. Pp. 310-323.

WEEK 3 ETHNOGRAPHY, CULTURE, SELF

16 April Presentation of the Self

- Jolynna Sinanan. 2017. *Social Media in Trinidad*. London: UCL Press. Ch. 3. Pp. 57-107.
 - Erin Taylor. Nd. "Curation of the Self in the Age of the Internet."
- DUE: Thick Description of Social Media Use (Field Notes 1)

18 April Polymedia

- Jolynna Sinanan. 2017. *Social Media in Trinidad*. London: UCL Press, Ch. 4. Pp. 108-136
- Mirca Madianou and Daniel Miller. 2013. "Polymedia: Towards a new theory of digital media in interpersonal communication." *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 16:169-187.

WEEK 4 SOCIETY AND COMMUNITY

- 23 April Social Visibility
- Jolynna Sinanan. 2017. *Social Media in Trinidad*. London: UCL Press, Ch. 5. Pp. 137-168.
 - Daniel Miller. 2011. "The Invention of Facebook" in *Tales from Facebook*. Pp. 158-163.
- DISCUSS: Groups & Presentations

- 25 April Imagined Communities
- Jolynna Sinanan. 2017. *Social Media in Trinidad*. London: UCL Press, Ch. 6-7. Pp. 169-208.
 - Benedict Anderson. 1983. "Cultural Roots" in *Imagined Communities*. New York: Verso. Pp. 9-38.
- DISCUSS: Research Proposal

WEEK 5 DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHY METHODS

- 30 April Digital Methods
- Everyone: Sarah Pink, et al. 2016. "Ethnography in a Digital World" in *Digital Ethnography: Principles and Practice*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- PRESENTATIONS: Experiences, Practices, Things

- 2 May Digital Methods
- PRESENTATIONS: Relationships, Social Worlds, Localities, Events
- DUE: Participant Observation (Field Notes 2) via Discussions

WEEK 6 RESEARCH

- 7 May Ethnographic Research – Interviewing Lab
- DUE: Research Proposal

- 9 May Memes & Hashtags
- Patrick Davison. 2012. "The Language of Internet Memes" in *The Social Media Reader*. Michael Mandiberg, ed. New York: NYU Press. Pp 120-135.
 - Yarimar Bonilla and Jonathan Rosa. 2015. "#Ferguson: Digital protest, hashtag ethnography, and the racial politics of social media in the United States" *American Ethnologist* 42(1):4-17.
- DUE: Commentary on Field Notes 2 via Discussions

WEEK 7 TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

14 May Texts & Discourse Analysis

- Ruth Page, et al. 2014. "Analysing Discourse: Qualitative Approaches," in *Researching Language and Social Media: A Student Guide*. pp 80-103. New York: Routledge.

IN CLASS: Discourse Analysis Workshop-Bring examples from your research

DUE: Field Notes 3 (Interview Write Up) via Discussions

16 May Audience Reception Analysis

- David Mathieu. 2015. "The Continued Relevance of Reception Analysis in the Age of Social Media" *Trípodos* no. 36:13-34.

LECTURE: Stuart Hall and "Encoding/Decoding"

IN CLASS: Audience Reception Workshop- Bring examples from your research

DUE: Commentary on Interview Write Up via Discussions

WEEK 8 IMAGE ANALYSIS

21 May Visual Analysis

- Roland Barthes. 1977. "Rhetoric of the Image" in *Image, Music, Text*. Heath, S., ed. and trans. pp. 32-51. New York: Hill and Wang.

LECTURE: Visualizing Northern Chile

IN CLASS: Visual Analysis Workshop: bring examples from your research

DUE: Write up on Discourse Analysis or Audience Reception Analysis via Discussions

23 May NO CLASS

DUE: Commentary on Discourse Analysis or Audience Reception Analysis via Discussions

WEEK 9

28 May NO CLASS – MEMORIAL DAY

30 May Is Social Media Positive or Negative? Social Inequality

- Daniel Miller, et. al. "Gender" in *How the World Changed Social Media*. London: UCL Press. Pp. 114-127.
- Daniel Miller, et. al. "Politics" in *How the World Changed Social Media*. London: UCL Press. Pp. 142-154.
- Daniel Miller, et. al. "Inequality" in *How the World Changed Social Media*. London: UCL Press. Pp. 128-141.

- Blogs on Social Inequality

DUE: Image Analysis Write Up via Discussions

WEEK 10

4 June

Is Social Media Positive or Negative? Happiness

- Daniel Miller, et al. 2016. “Does Social Media Make People Happier?” in *How the World Changed Social Media*. London: UCL Press. Pp 193-204.

DUE: Commentary on Image Analysis via Discussions

READING WEEK

Office hours by appointment (use Google Docs)

FINALS WEEK

Final Papers due by Wednesday June 13 11:59pm. No exceptions (confusion about the due date/time does not constitute an excuse).

Course Project

Throughout the semester, you will conduct a mini ethnography of social media. This will most likely concentrate on a group of people that allow you to “participant-observe” them both online and offline. If you have done field research with a specific community and are in contact with them through any form of social media, it is encouraged to use this project as part of your larger field research with this group. However, if this is not possible, you are encouraged to choose a group or phenomenon to study which you can study both online and offline. The more specific your topic and research question, the better. We will discuss in class what makes a good topic, and what is difficult or too time-consuming for this class project.

All of the class assignments are related to this larger project, so narrowing your topic early in the quarter is essential. Note that they are listed below in reverse order. It is helpful to have a sense of the final project first, in order to understand how earlier assignments fit into the larger project.

Ethnographic Paper (25%)

The ethnographic paper is the “traditional” deliverable associated with the mini ethnography, and is based on a quarter’s worth of work. They will require several hours of participation, observation, interviewing, and other forms of ethnographic research. This project will work as a culmination of everything learned over the quarter about social media anthropology: theory, methods, and disciplinary concerns. You will use anthropological observation and analysis to examine cultural phenomena.

The paper will be 6-9 pages (double spaced) in length and include:

- historical background and context of the group
- online and offline activities of the group, and the ways they are related
- a specific research question
- a descriptive account of the topic
- an interpretive account of the topic (what is the meaning?)

In order to fulfill these requirements, students should use:

- information from participant observation both online and offline
- information from interviews with at least 2 different people
- 2 other form of data collection online (group messages, analysis of images, etc)

Research Proposal (15%)

In the sixth week of the course, students should submit a 3 page (approx.) research proposal outlining:

- the group or phenomenon to be studied
- relevant context (answer the question: Why is studying this group important, relevant, or timely?)
- specific plan for gaining consent for the project

- specific research methodologies to be used

These proposals serve as a way for the instructor to provide feedback and suggestions, as well as ensuring the project goals are obtainable. In the grand tradition of research proposals, these may need to be rewritten after feedback, in order to ensure the best project possible.

In Class Participation (20%)

This includes both active engagement with class discussions (see above) as well as participation in workshops.

Field Note Contributions (15%)

This includes thoughtful and well-written notes on particular methods discussed in class. Students will post their “notes” to the discussion board for all other students to see. This not only helps the professor track progress on the final project, but also allows other students to learn from others’ successes and mistakes.

While some notes will need to be kept private, any thick descriptions, anonymized information, syntheses, and possible new conclusions should be logged in your page on the class field notes blog. The visibility of this blog helps the instructor follow your progress, but more importantly allows students to see what others are observing, concentrating upon, what methodologies they are using, and what are their initial conclusions.

Online Participation (10%)

This includes thoughtful and well-written commentary on 2 group members’ Field Notes via Discussions. These comments should:

1. point out insightful aspects of the notes that might be useful for other students to think about.
2. pose useful questions that the author has not addressed
3. suggest any other aspects that could be improved for next time

Class Presentation (15%)

Students will work in groups to present a chapter from *Ethnography in a Digital World*. Students will work in groups of 4-5. Presentations should summarize the contents of the chapter in 10-12 minutes (leaving about 5 minutes for questions). Each group should provide a 1-page handout with key features of the methods, as well as present a Powerpoint to the class. Both the Powerpoint file and handout should be emailed to the professor no less than 1 hour before class. The professor will provide copies of the handout for all class members.