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Current reflection on new media

What's beyond the code: civic hacking, governance by design and the « dark side of the Net »

The course proposes an original analysis of what is usually designated in scholarship as « new media », inviting students to deconstruct and question the notions that are often taken for granted, such as « liberation technologies », « hacktivism », « digital revolution », « cyber empowerment », « e-democracy » etc. What's really new about the new media ? What are the limits of their usage in social movements? How are they been developed and built, and what is hiding on the backyard, beyond the lines of code, in developers' offices ?

The course is inspired by the STS (science and technology studies) approach and pays particular attention to the studies of design and coding of new media softwares. This design-oriented approach helps us understand how technologies incorporate political projects and ideologies (Akrich, 1998 ; Simondon, 1952 ; Badouard, 2014 ; Oudshoorn and Pinch, 2005). Deconstructing technical objects can pour light on the invisible mechanisms that operate when we share, like, tweet, film, take pictures of protests, debate on the web. Instead of restricting the analysis only to the users (who and how uses new media ? what are the usage patterns? What are the profiles and socio-professional characteristics of users?) we propose to focus on those who make new media : designers, developers, hackers, activists.

The first part of the course will be dedicated to a brief overview of literature on new media and democracy, in order to get students familiar with the traditional approaches to new media. We will pass then to recent STS analysis of media, with a short introduction to what is STS approach and how studying technical objects can be useful for social scientists. Why design is politics and what can we say about political systems by analysing web interfaces. We will propose a new vision of user and show how, instead of a passive consumer of information, users become active contributors and co-creators of technologies.

We will dedicate a special session to the presentation of our current research project that is focused on civic hacking and the development of mobile applications for social movements in Russia and France. We will give a brief history of « civic hacking » movement and will particularly focus on « civic *hackathons* » (marathons of coding), this new format of collective innovation where civic activists, NGOs, politicians meet geeks and designers in order to create new software and hardware solutions for political and social challenges. We will focus on such important notions as « citizen expertise » (Collins) and « technical democracy » (Callon et al., 2001) to explain the dynamics of collaboration within these hybrid networks of actors, both technical and non-technical (Galison).

This session, largely based on fieldwork and empiric data (interviews with developers, designers and activists, observations of testings, webethnography...), will help students

to get acquainted with the notions of citizen science, crowdsourcing and crowdmapping, the particularities of « locative media », mobile or nomad media (Greenfield, 2006 ; Farman, 2012). We will give an overview of case studies where mobile technologies are used in emergency cases, natural disasters, mass protests. We will present our findings on several civic applications that we've been studying since 2012, such as applications against corruption, electoral fraud, illegal parkings, urban anomalies in Russia, application against police violence, ethnic profiling and discrimination in France. The theory of « citizens-sensors » (Goodchild, 2007) will be proposed to describe the transformation of civic participation through using mobile technologies. While using mobile apps for solving public problems seems to be a mass phenomena, isn't there a danger of « slacktivism », of a certain « gamification » and thus of a depoliticization of activism?

Another problem of this new media concerns privacy and data protection. Where is the borderline between what we call « aptivism » (civic participation through crowdsourcing applications) and a practice of mass surveillance and denunciation? While more and more citizens are involved in this activity of permanent data-production, transmitting data via applications and collaborative mapping tools, where is the guarantee that this data will not be used against them? The movement towards a better transparency, is it also a movement towards total surveillance, where the famous panopticon of Betham and Foucault turns inside out. We will thus also touch an important topic of « Big data and privacy », especially actual after the Snowden revelations. We will propose a brief overview on the web governance : who rule the Net? What is behind Google's and Facebook algorithms? What are the alternatives to the Internet as we know it. We will talk about projects of alternets, decentralized web architectures and cryptography. While more and more people think of data protection and encryptions, what are the limits and paradoxes linked to the cryptography? Along with the « Cute Cat Theory of Digital Activism » of Ethan Zukermann, that states that using mainstream web platforms is better for activists than shifting to specialized tools, we will also speak of the « digital migration » paradox. We will watch some videos, present several softwares and organize a collective discussion on this very important controversial topic of the « right to be forgotten » (also known as « digital death »), anonymity on the web and dangers of surveillance. We will invite students beforehand to search on the web, read articles and posts in blogs and identify main arguments in the debate. We will organize a « role game » in order to represent different agents of web governance (for example, Google, Facebook, European Commission), users, developers, businesses and public administrations, each of them having their arguments in this important controversy on « web and privacy ».

EVALUATION

Though we will propose readings and a detailed bibliography will be provided for every session, the readings are not obligatory. Instead, we will ask students to create groups (if we are 30, than 6 groups of 5 students are the best format) before the course begins. Each groupe must choose any social movement they are inspired with (from recent history or from the past, or using this website: <http://beautifultrouble.org/case/>) and make an analysis of the ways new media are used by this movement, paying attention to the notions and theories given during the sessions. The last day of the course will be dedicated to the presentation of your analysis, that can be in a form of a PowerPoint, infographics, video, drawings, theater play... Your presentation should give us an idea of

what's the movement about, what strategies and repertoires of contention does the movement use and how new media are or are not integrated in the movement. But the essential is not to describe the movement, but to propose a critical reflection on how the campaign is designed. In which ways do new media tools limit or, on the contrary, empower activists ? We will propose you to be « campaign designers » and to imagine a «better campaign », optimizing the uses of new media, proposing your ideas of mobile or web applications, websites, web campaigns, software and other digital tools and forms of action. Though no media is a universal solution, the course invites students neither to idealize nor to be completely discouraged with the new media.