Communication Technologies and Politics

COM 407 / PolSci 451

Department of Communication, University of Washington
Monday and Wednesday 1:30pm – 3:20pm
CMU 104
Spring 2013

Dr. Fenwick McKelvey
Office Hours: Wednesday 3:30 pm – 5pm or by appointment over Skype
fenwick@uw.edu
Twitter hashtag: #UWCOM407

The day after now-President Obama won the 2012 election, talked shift from one campaign to the next: the fiscal cliff. Even though Obama had won a decisive victory and leveraged one of the most powerful campaign machines in history, the motor of political life propelled onward without a pause. The drive of campaign gave no life to pause for a victory. How could the President Obama lobby Republicans to avert the fiscal cliff suffocated any coverage of the election as a lasting statement of political will. This example is one of many ways politics now resembles a permanent campaign.

The use of the term campaign provokes questions about the natures and goals of political activity. What is democratic politics? How do communication technologies fit within democratic politics? How do certain technologies relate to different political practices? What are the tactical advantages of certain media? This course seeks to understand the nature of democratic politics amidst changing communication technology.

Where campaign questions the nature of politics, calling politics permanent raises another question: what drives this campaign onward? How does political activity occur in this new media environment. This course develops concepts and perspective to analyze contemporary political activity. In this course, we will develop the concepts of platforms, issues and actors to understand the hybrid and constant political process.

Here are some of the questions that the course will prepare you to answer:
• How are ICTs currently being employed in democratic politics in the U.S. and internationally?
• How are power relations between political actors and the political playing field shifting due to ICTs?
• What opportunities for civic engagement do current ICT practices afford?
• In what ways do ICTs expand or diminish the power/role of the citizen?
• How might ICTs alter relationships between citizens and government?
• What are the implications of current ICTs practices for democracy?

Learning Objectives
The course has the following learning objectives:

• Summarize key case studies about the use and design of communication technology for political activity.
• Analyze the relationship between communication technologies and democratic politics with an emphasis on the United States.
• Describe complex current media events through the concepts of actors, platforms and issues.

Assignments
Grades will be determined by the number of points earned (up to 100 points possible) through the following:

• 20 points for 10 randomly assigned short assignments. Either at the end or during class, I will assign a question that you will be responsible for sending me your response over Canvas. Each assignments will be worth two points each.

• 15 points for submitting discussion questions for two of the readings of your choice. By the end of the first week of class, you will sign up to submit discussion questions for two readings of your choice. You will be responsible for submitting these questions the night before the class of the reading.

• 15 points for submitting three events on a class timeline. This timeline seeks to create a global history of the relationship between communication technology and politics. Each event will require an explanation of its significance, a description of why you selected this event and a discussion of its democratic function. This will be explained more in class. 300 words per event. Due 29 April 2013.

• 15 points for creating a company profile of a major political firm or communication technology company. Each review should be 4-5 pages in length. Due 20 May 2013.

• 35 points for a major group project analyzing a major political event. You will form groups of 4-5 people based on your shared interests. You will have class time to form these groups and discuss your topics. This assignment has two parts:
  ▪ 5 points for a proposal and work schedule to explain to me your chosen topic and to distribute work load. Due 17 April 2013.
  ▪ 30 points for a final paper detailing your chosen subject. The paper should be 3500 words in length. Due 12 June 2013
## Course policies

### Grade Scale

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Grading

• All grade concerns should be addressed either during office hours, an appointment, or if it is a very quick matter, just after class. I will not discuss grading over email. If you believe you have been graded unfairly or incorrectly, you must bring this to my attention within one week of the assignment being returned in class. After that week, I will not review grades that have been assigned.

• Late assignments will not be accepted without prior approval.

• Incompletes will be granted only when all these conditions are met: there is a serious emergency and the extension is cleared with me before the final class period.

Class Room Conduct

• All students are expected to come to class on time, having finished the assigned readings and prepared with questions, viewpoints, or examples to contribute to the discussion. Everyone should pay attention and participate fully in discussions, neither dominating nor allowing others to carry the intellectual load.

• The classroom is a Safe Zone. Students are expected to be respectful, patient and use inclusive language. For more details, see: http://depts.washington.edu/qcenter/wordpress/q-services/safe-zone/.

• If you are rude or consistently behave in ways that interfere with others’ ability to learn, you will be asked to leave the classroom. Serious or repeated violations are grounds for academic misconduct charges.

• Cell phones should be turned off.

• Laptops and/or tablet computers should be used only to enhance your engagement with the class. If you are not taking notes, referring to the digital readings, or looking up things immediately relevant to what is being discussed and then contributing your findings to discussion, laptops and/or tablet computers should be turned off and put away.

• Do not be a distraction in class. Texting, chatting online or offline, checking Facebook, doing work for other courses, watching YouTube, etc. are distractions not just to you but to everyone else in the room.

Communications Outside of Class

• Your full name must be included in any correspondence.

• Add [COM407] to the subject line to make sure I read it promptly.

• I will try to respond to all emails within 48 hours, but understand I often do not check my email during the evenings and weekends.

• For questions requiring a long response, please schedule a meeting with me where we can discuss details in person.

• All rules regarding academic integrity extend to electronic communication.
Academic Honesty

- Students must abide by the University’s standards for Academic Conduct. These Standards expressly prohibit plagiarism and cheating. To learn more about plagiarism and how to avoid it, please visit: http://www.washington.edu/uaa/advising/help/academichonesty.php.

Accommodations

- Students with disabilities should register with UW’s Disability Resources for Students Office and meet with the instructor about accommodations. http://www.washington.edu/students/drs/.

Readings

The class has two required texts. They are both available on Amazon.


Other readings will be facilitated through Canvas. Suggested readings usually will be discussed in class and have been provided for reference purposes. They are not required.

Class Schedule

Introduction

Monday, April 01, 2013


Wednesday, April 03, 2013


Platforms for Politics

Week Two: Whither the Public Sphere 2.0?

Learning Objective: Define key approaches to the democratic function of media such as the public sphere. Assess how communication technology participate to realize different democratic visions.

Monday, April 08, 2013 – Class will include a discussion of potential topics for group project.


Suggested Readings:


Wednesday, April 10, 2013


Eli Pariser: Beware online "filter bubbles" http://on.ted.com/dUUW

Week Three: Social Media Platforms

Learning Objective: Describe social media platform and compare them to other communication technologies. Analyze the technical structure of social media functions and this structure influences the circulate of political information.

Monday, April 15, 2013


Wednesday, April 17, 2013 – Group Project Proposal Due


Suggested Readings:
Week Four: Alternative Media Platforms

Learning Objective: Discuss the influence of hacker culture on communication technology. Assess how political actors encode their views into technologies and platforms.

Monday, April 22, 2013


Wednesday, April 24, 2013


Suggested Readings:


Actors, Some Old, Some New

Week Five: Publics?

Learning Objective: Explain the debate over slacktivism. Assess the role of the public in political life and the influence of communication technology on this role.

Monday, April 29, 2013 – Timeline Events Due


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Wednesday, May 01, 2013


Suggested Readings:


Week Six: Political Parties

Learning Objective: Give examples of how political parties have adapted to digital communication technology. Assess how political parties develop communication technologies to their advantage and opponents disadvantage.

Monday, May 06, 2013


Wednesday, May 08, 2013


Suggested Readings:
Week Seven: Organizations with Different Organizing

Learning Objective: Give examples of contemporary political organizations. Assess if communication technologies have afforded once marginal political actors new advantages.

Monday, May 13, 2013


Suggested Readings:


Wednesday, May 15, 2013


Suggested Readings:


**Political Issues, Objects and Opinions**

**Week Eight: Constructing or Igniting Public Opinion**

*Learning Objective: Contrast definitions of public opinion. Evaluate how party data and voter profiling mediate public opinion*

**Monday, May 20, 2013 – Company Profile Due**


Suggested Readings:


**Wednesday, May 22, 2013**


Suggested Readings:


**Week Nine: Cycles of the Campaign**

*Learning Objective:*

**Monday, May 27, 2013 – No Class**

**Wednesday, May 29, 2013 – To Be Determined**

**Week Ten: Updates from the Field**

**Monday, June 03, 2013 – Report Back from Data-Driven Democracy Conference**

Wednesday, June 06, 2013 – No Class