Human Rights and Digital Culture

Overview:

For many of us, life in the digital age is all about increasing our connections: to distant friends or relatives, to products we want to buy, and of course, to information. However, we forget how this rapid and widespread access to people, products, and information are changing the very structure of social, political, economic, and cultural life.

In these units, we will look at how new media are transforming our engagement with the world and how this affects our rights and responsibilities in the digital age.

Objectives:

Through a discussion of new media, digital culture, and artificial intelligence, students first ask “what does it mean to be human?” By distinguishing what makes us human, we open the discussion of what basic human needs are.

Once we determine that not everyone has equal opportunity to meet those needs, we discuss the UNDHR as a means of protecting every human's fundamental rights. Students learn about gender discrimination, violations against privacy, and the dilemmas that arise in the digital age concerning freedom of expression and freedom of participation in cultural life. Students also learn about conflict minerals in electronics production and the human and environmental impacts of electronics disposal.

After examining some human rights violations in the digital age, students are given the research paper prompt, which gives them two options

1) Pick one website or app and research how it has impacted one aspect of society (social, political, economic)

2) Pick one Article from the UNDHR and research a new app or website, not discussed in class, that protects the right(s) from their chosen UNDHR article.
**Unit 1: Humans vs. Machines**

**Readings for this unit:** Nicholas Carr, “The Church of Google” from his book *The Shallows.*

In this chapter, Carr argues that Google's main goal is to increase efficiency in the way we access knowledge. The whole purpose of increasing efficiency, however, is to make more money. According to Carr, Google's business model is designed to make us hop quickly from one piece of content to the next in order to show us more advertisements. Therefore, we need to think critically about whether this increased access to information is really in our best interests, or if it is making us more superficial readers and thinkers while creating profit for large corporations.

Furthermore, by making it faster and easier to access knowledge, Google knows what we want before we can even finish our sentences. In that way, it acts like artificial intelligence. Students are left wondering: are we better off by having our brains supplemented by super-computers? What do we lose in the process?


The radio piece consists of three main segments that explore:

1) To what extent can machines, or more specifically software programs, convincingly simulate human conversation? If a machine says “I understand,” is it a lie?

2) To what extent can machines (in this case a Furby) simulate real life emotion? When we hold a Furby upside-down and it says, “Me scared!” why does that make us uncomfortable?

3) Are we on the path toward sentient robots? What would happen if a machine took on a life of its own?

Follow up discussion questions after listening to the piece: what is the difference between a human and a machine? What makes us human?

**Written Homework:** Students will write up their answers to the following questions:

--What, as a human, do you need to survive?
--What do you need to live a good life?
--Which of those things do you think should be provided by your government (local, federal)? Your job? Your school? Your community in general?
--Which of those things do you think you have a right to, just because you're human?
Unit 2: Dignity is what makes us human

Readings for this unit: United Nations Declaration of Human Rights

Students will first break up into groups and share their homework answers. Groups will list them all on the board, then everyone will turn to the UNDHR. Students will make connections between specific articles and the rights they wrote up on the board.

In class exercises: Historicizing and Close Reading

→ Whole-class discussion: Understanding the UNDHR as a historical document
  What do you know about the 1940's? What was happening at the time? What were the social, political, and economic conditions that brought this document into being?

→ Discuss the Preamble of the UNDHR
  What assumptions about humans does the Preamble make? Have you ever thought about your rights as a human being?
  To better understand the language of the UNDHR, students will closely analyze certain words in the preamble.
  
  The word we will analyze in class is dignity: What is dignity? What does it mean to have dignity? What does the lack or absence of dignity look like?

  Activity: Students break up into groups to discuss their understanding of dignity. They will brainstorm definitions, use the word in a sentence, and try to find images (in a classroom with computer/internet access) they associate with dignity.
  
  This is scaffolding for their homework, in which they will do the same work for other key terms in the UNDHR Preamble.

Written Homework: Schema Activation Handout, see Handout 1. Students will present their terms at the next class meeting.
Unit 3: Participation in Public Life

Readings for this unit: Evgeny Morozov, “The Perils of Algorithmic Gatekeeping” from his book To Save Everything, Click Here

This chapter explores how Google and other big data algorithms enforce a kind of (shallow) participation in the public sphere. Despite the illusion of being a democratic medium, the internet is still governed by profit motives and in many ways retains the gatekeeping function of previous media. Even though everyone is supposedly able to participate in the open forum on the internet, not all voices are given equal weight, especially when filtered through Google's algorithms. As a result, more internet users get their information from a sort of “echo chamber” that simply feeds them the information they are already likely to agree with. Furthermore, they have decreased exposure to more professional, educated opinions in exchange for what is trending. The article looks at other web-based services/apps, such as Twitter and Yelp, which filter information based on consumer rankings, or what's “trending.”

In-class discussion: what does it mean to effectively participate in public life? In democracy? In cultural production? In the production of knowledge? How have new media/technology changed the way that people participate in public life? Is public participation through social media simply about clicking a thumb up or down? Are there deeper implications for the ways that individuals participate in their local or global community via social media?

In-class exercise: Students watch #TwitterRevolution, a documentary by CNBC, http://www.hulu.com/watch/521894 The documentary addresses some questions already discussed, such as how does one effectively participate in public life in the digital age. Furthermore, the video brings up important topics like:

--citizen journalism
--hate speech and cyberbullying
--free speech and censorship
--the role of social media in the Arab Spring

Introduce the role of Twitter in the Arab Spring and introduce other civic engagement apps, such as Textizen by codeforamerica.org

Students will also be given the research paper prompt, see Handout 2.
Unit 4: Sexism and Digital Culture


I group these readings together as examples of misogyny in the digital age. In the first example, we see how women's voices are left out of the internet-based production of knowledge. 85% of Wikipedia contributors are male, while only 15% are female. Given that most students believe that the information in a Wikipedia page is common knowledge, fact, or “reality,” what does this gender disparity mean for the social construction of reality?

In the second example, we read about a woman whose Instagram account was closed because she posted a picture of herself in a bikini with pubic hair showing at the sides of the bikini bottom. She argues that Instagram censored her because she did not conform to current beauty standards, and the article raises important questions about the ways we police gender through social media.

The third article examines one woman's fight against the founder of a “revenge porn” website. The revenge porn site's main goal is to allow ex-partners to post naked photos or videos of their previous partners along with identifying information, such as their name, phone number, home or work address, and family members' names. The site's founder, Hunter Moore, is a misogynist whose goal is to provide a space in which angry ex-boyfriends and hackers can ruin the lives of the women they post onto the site.

In-class exercises: “Wikiality” and Google's Social Construction of Gender

→ Colbert on “Wikiality” http://thecolbertreport.cc.com/videos/z1aahs/the-word---wikiality

Discuss the social construction of reality and how often what is on the internet gets taken as “common sense.” Even though students are told that Wikipedia is not a reliable source, how often do they use it to get “basic information,” and how does that basic information inform their view of the world? Also, since the majority of Wikipedia's contributors are male, what does that say about the role of men in writing their (the students') view of reality?

This lesson will teach students that Wikipedia is not “objective,” nor is all the information found there “common knowledge.” Therefore, they should think critically about using it as a source. All of that information has to come from somewhere, so they should analyze whose values are represented by the scattering of information on Wikipedia.

At this stage students will also be given the prompt for the Annotated Bibliography and the Wikipedia Article, see handouts 3 and 4.

→ Google Autocomplete and Sexism, UN Ad project http://www.unwomen.org/ca/news/stories/2013/10/women-should-ads

Discuss the role of Google autocomplete in shaping public opinion. Major questions to ask:
What affect does it have on your perception of the world to see that one of the top Google Autocomplete results for “women should...” is “women shouldn't vote”?
What do you think that says about the world in which you live?
What affect would it have if the top Autocomplete result was “women should...have equal pay for equal work”?
Like Wikipedia, students often think that information on the internet is unfiltered and we all have equal access to whatever information that exists “in the cloud.” However, search engines like Google and social networks like Facebook and Yelp choose their content via algorithms based on user interaction. These sites need constant input from everyday users in order to provide information that users will then find “relevant.” As a result, they often reproduce a lot of the stereotypes and injustices that are present in our everyday lives.

Since we talked about Wikipedia and the social construction of reality, we want to think about other ways in which media shape our understanding of reality. More specifically in this section, we look at the ways that gender is consciously or unconsciously policed through the internet.
women shouldn't have rights
women shouldn't vote
women shouldn't work
women shouldn't be

women shouldn't suffer from discrimination anymore

UN Women
unwomen.org
Unit 5: Where Does this Technology Come From?

Readings for this Unit: Enough Project, “From Mine to Mobile Phone”

In this unit, we shift from software to hardware, from the apps that mediate our everyday lives to the actual devices through which we access those apps. In this reading by Enough Project, students learn how the minerals that go into our everyday electronics fuel a war in eastern Congo. It is the deadliest war since World War II. The reading outlines six different steps in the journey of a conflict mineral: the mines; the trading houses; the exporters; the transit countries of Rwanda, Uganda, and Burundi; the refiners; and finally the electronics companies.

As the students read for homework, they should list some of potential human rights violations they see along the supply chain outlined in the article. These will be discussed at length in class, and we will ask: why do you think conflict happens around resources like these?

In-class exercise: Watch Vice's “Conflict Minerals, Rebels and Child Soldiers”
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kYqrflGpTRE

This documentary follows three Vice reporters as they attempt to understand the history of Coltan, one of the conflict minerals in cellphone production. It gives a brief outline of Congo's colonial history as well as the civil war in Rwanda between Hutus and Tutsis that led to much of the conflict in Congo. The reporters visit a mine in which it appears some progress has been made in ending the conflict. However, the reporters are also quick to point out that the mining town was alerted about their visit and thus took necessary steps to hide child miners. This short documentary also points out some of the violence against women that has happened as a result of the conflict.

After the reporters spend a week in the Congo, the video ends with a thought-provoking message about the country's conflict: “There are no easy answers.”

Follow-up discussion questions:
--What do you think would happen if we demanded all conflict-free electronics? Would it be that simple to end the war in Congo?
--What are the benefits and drawbacks of having a country with a wealth of desired resources?
Readings for this unit: Keira Butler, “Your Smartphone's Dirty, Radioactive Secret” and Jon Mooallem “The Afterlife of Cellphones”

Both of these readings follow discarded cellphones to the factories and villages, such as Guiyu China, where they are recycled. The articles explore the impacts on people in these communities as they are exposed to radioactive materials and other toxic electronics waste. They also explore how these toxic conditions are fueled by businesses that profit from the constant flow of e-waste.

In-class exercises: Warm-up discussion, short video, and follow-up questions after the video

→ Warm up discussion:
  --Ask students how many cellphones they have had in their lifetime.
  --How often do they buy a new phone? What motivates them to upgrade?
  --What messages do they get in their everyday lives that convince them to upgrade?
  --How many cellphones have they recycled?
  --Where do they think the phones go when they recycle them?

→ Watch Story of Stuff Project's “Story of Electronics”
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sW_7i6T_H78

In this short clip from the successful “Story of Stuff” series, students learn about the electronics supply chain. They also learn important concepts, such as “externalized costs” and Moore's law. Moore's law of technological advancement predicts that the processing power of computer hardware doubles approximately every two years. While this might be exciting to computer scientists and engineers, other key players like business CEOs have found ways to profit from this growth.

The most important take-away from the video is that electronics are essentially “designed for the dump.”

Follow up questions after the video:
  What is the relationship between capitalism and e-waste? In what ways does the drive for profit lead to excessive waste?
  What do they think they can do about it?
Overview:
Throughout these past units, students should have been working on their research projects. During the final days of class, they will have a chance to present their work to the rest of the class. The presentations invite them to reflect on their research by thinking about the most important and the most surprising things they learned.

See the prompt for the Final Research Presentation, handout 5

Objective:
The purpose of in-class presentations is to get students in the habit of speaking in class and also to begin inculcating the academic model of presentation. Students can create boards, powerpoints, or even do a creative project to showcase their research.

Perhaps the most important benefit of these presentations is that students will have a chance to hear multiple viewpoints on the ways that digital media have impacted society and/or protected human rights.

Follow-up: All of the research will culminate in a Final Research Paper, see handout 6. This research paper is different from the Wikipedia article because students will have a chance to take a position on their research topic. Whereas the Wikipedia article was supposed to be a “neutral” presentation of the different positions they found in their research, the final paper will allow them to develop their own argument and an appropriate tone and style.