†THE POLITICS OF DIGITAL PLATFORMS - FALL 2024

Dr. Blake Hallinan

The field of platform studies responds to the growing social, political, and economic centrality of digital platforms in public life. Like other large corporations, commercial platforms have the resources to conduct massive lobbying campaigns and the cultural appeal to attract advertisers and consumers. However, they also have unique forms of platform power, which include the ability to set standards, form networks, employ automated agents, create information asymmetries, and operate across domains. This class provides an introduction to platform studies research, adopting a sociotechnical approach to understanding the role of platforms in society. The first part of the course examines forms of platform power expressed, for example, through the design of technical infrastructures or content moderation practices. The second part of the course examines forms of platform counterpower, or how users and intermediary actors resist platform interests by, for example, circumventing policies or reappropriating platform tools to novel ends.

Requirements
- Attendance & active participation

Grading
- Reading quotes (10%)
- Reading presentation (20%)
- Final paper meeting (10%)
- Final paper presentation (20%)
- Final paper (40%)

Course Topics

04.11.24   Introduction

Platform power
11.11.24   Classification
18.11.24   Recommendation
25.11.24   Evaluation
02.12.24   Moderation
09.12.24   Monetization
16.12.24   Public relations

Platform counterpower
23.12.24   Circumvention
30.12.24   Appropriation
06.01.25   Publicity
13.01.25   Boycotts & blocking
20.01.25   Innovation

27.01.25   *Final paper presentations*

Readings

To facilitate discussion, you are expected to be familiar with the **required reading** assigned for each class. All required readings are available on Moodle. The syllabus also includes **optional readings** connected to the theme of each class. Optional readings will be incorporated into class lectures and featured in student reading presentations.

Reading quotes (10% of grade)

You are expected to post **one** quote from the **required reading** and a sentence explaining why you found the quote interesting to the Moodle forum before the start of each class. These posts are graded on completion and you are welcome but not required to engage with the posts from your classmates. I will ask you to share your quote during class to facilitate discussion.

Reading presentation (20% of grade)

Students will sign up to present **one** of the optional readings for the semester. This presentation should be **~5 minutes** and address the following points:

- The main argument of the reading
- Key concepts, findings, and/or quotes
- Connection to the required reading

Your presentation should have a visual aid to help organize your points (e.g., slides, a printed handout), but you will not be graded on its design.

Final paper meeting (10% of grade)

Schedule a meeting by **23.12.24** to discuss your plans for the final paper where you will select a platform and analyze one aspect of the politics surrounding it (e.g., moderation, monetization, circumvention). Please have an idea of what you would like to write about before the meeting. I will ask questions, sign off on the topic, and offer suggestions. This assignment is graded on completion.

Final paper presentation (20% of grade)

On the last day of class, you will present the topic and setup of your final paper where you will select a platform and analyze one aspect of the politics surrounding it (e.g., moderation, monetization, circumvention). Your presentation should be **~5 minutes** and address the following points:

- What platform are you analyzing?
- What aspect of platform politics will you focus on?
- How does your case study relate to what we've learned in the class?
- 2 academic sources (one from the class, one external source)

Your presentation should have a visual aid to help organize your points (e.g., slides, a printed handout), but you will not be graded on its design. After the presentation, your classmates will have the opportunity to ask you questions about the topic.

Final paper (40% of grade)

Option 1: Essay

Choose a digital platform and make an **argument** about its politics, focusing on one of the topics from the class (e.g., moderation, monetization, circumvention). Your paper should be **~3000 words**, including references. You should engage with at least **6 academic references**, including **at least 3 readings** from the syllabus, and use **evidence** to support your argument. This evidence could be from the academic references you cite but may also include social media posts, journalistic coverage, platform policy documents or transparency reports, personal observations, court documents, and so on. You will be graded on the following points:

- Clarity of the writing
- Originality of the argument
- Use of evidence
- Connection to course topics and concepts

There is no required structure for the paper, but please feel free to use sections and headings if you find they help you organize your writing. All papers must be submitted on Moodle **five weeks** after the last class session (**03.03.25**) as a Word document (.doc or .docx). If for some reason you cannot submit the proposal on time, you must ask for an extension before the deadline and provide an explanation.

Option 2: Seminar paper proposal

If you plan to write a seminar paper for this class, you should submit a proposal for a research study investigating the politics of platforms for the final assignment. Your proposal should be **~3000 words**, including references. Your proposal should include 1) an introduction section; 2) a literature review section with at least **6 academic references**, including **at least 3 readings** from the syllabus; 3) a research question (or questions); and 4) a tentative proposal of research methods that outlines the kind of data you plan to collect, how you plan to analyze it, and what you expect to learn from doing so. You will be graded on the following points:

- Clarity of the writing
- Originality of the proposal
- Suitability of the methods
- Connection to course topics and concepts

All seminar paper proposals must be submitted on Moodle **five weeks** after the last class session (**03.03.25**) as a Word document (.doc or .docx). If for some reason you cannot submit the proposal on time, you must ask for an extension before the deadline and provide an explanation.

Seminar paper (Optional)

Seminar papers should:
- Have a clear argument connected to topics or concepts from the class
- Use evidence to support the argument
- Be around 7,500 words (25 pages double spaced)
- Cite at least 10 academic sources
- Written in English

For most papers, I recommend the following format:
- Introduction [Introduce topic, establish the stakes, preview the paper]
- Literature review (with subsections) [Lay out the academic conversation]
- Methodology [Research questions, method for answering them]
- Findings [What you found]
- Discussion [How you make sense of those findings]
- Conclusion [Summary and "so what"]

Final seminar papers must be submitted by **30 September 2025**.

04.11.24   Introduction: Platform studies

➔ Syllabus
➔ What are "platforms"?
➔ Types of platform power
➔ Platformization as a process

<u>Optional Readings</u>:
- Gillespie, T. (2010). The politics of 'platforms.' *New Media & Society*, *12*(3), 347–364. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444809342738
- Nielsen, R. K., & Ganter, S. (2022). The rise of platforms. In *The power of platforms: Shaping media and society* (pp. 1–26). Oxford University Press.
- Helmond, A. (2015). The platformization of the web: Making web data platform ready. *Social Media + Society*, *1*(2), 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115603080
- Nieborg, D. B., & Poell, T. (2018). The platformization of cultural production: Theorizing the contingent cultural commodity. *New Media & Society*, *20*(11), 4275–4292. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818769694

11.11.24   Classification

➔ Classification as politics
➔ The role of policy
➔ The role of design
➔ Participatory classification

<u>Required Reading</u>:
- Blackwell, L., Dimond, J., Schoenebeck, S., & Lampe, C. (2017). Classification and its consequences for online harassment: Design insights from HeartMob. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, *1*(CSCW), 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1145/3134659

<u>Optional Readings</u>:
- Bivens, R., & Haimson, O. L. (2016). Baking gender into social media design: How platforms shape categories for users and advertisers. *Social Media + Society*, *2*(4), 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305116672486
- John, N. A., & Nissenbaum, A. (2019). An agnotological analysis of APIs: Or, disconnectivity and the ideological limits of our knowledge of social media. *The Information Society*, *35*(1), 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1080/01972243.2018.1542647
- Stegeman, H. M., Velthuis, O., Jokubauskaitė, E., & Poell, T. (2023). Hypercategorization and hypersexualization: How webcam platforms organize performers and performances. *Sexualities*, online first, 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1177/13634607231170174
- Crawford, K., & Gillespie, T. (2016). What is a flag for? Social media reporting tools and the vocabulary of complaint. *New Media & Society*, *18*(3), 410–428. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814543163

18.11.24   Recommendation

→ Ranking cultures

→ Visibility

→ Cross-platform differences

→ Cross-cultural differences

<u>Required Reading:</u>
- Jokubauskaitė, E., Rieder, B., & Burkhardt, S. (2023). Winner-Take-All? Visibility, Availability, and Heterogeneity on Webcam Sex Platforms. *Social Media + Society*, *9*(4). https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231214807

<u>Optional Readings:</u>
- Hernández, A. (2019). "There's something compelling about real life": Technologies of security and acceleration on Chaturbate. *Social Media + Society*, 5(4). https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119894000
- Rieder, B., Matamoros-Fernández, A., & Coromina, Ò. (2018). From ranking algorithms to 'ranking cultures': Investigating the modulation of visibility in YouTube search results. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 24(1), 50–68. https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856517736982
- Moe, H. (2019). Comparing Platform "Ranking Cultures" Across Languages: The Case of Islam on YouTube in Scandinavia. *Social Media + Society*, 5(1). https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305118817038

25.11.24   Evaluation

→ Evaluation as politics

→ Optimization

→ Reactivity

<u>Required Reading</u>:
- Hallinan, B., & Brubaker, J. R. (2021). Living with everyday evaluations on social media platforms. *International Journal of Communication*, 15, 1551–1569.

<u>Optional Readings:</u>
- Morris, J. W., Prey, R., & Nieborg, D. B. (2021). Engineering culture: Logics of optimization in music, games, and apps. *Review of Communication*, *21*(2), 161–175. https://doi.org/10.1080/15358593.2021.1934522

- Gaudette, T., Scrivens, R., Davies, G., & Frank, R. (2021). Upvoting extremism: Collective identity formation and the extreme right on Reddit. *New Media & Society*, 23(12), 3491–3508. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820958123
- Orlikowski, W. J., & Scott, S. V. (2014). What happens when evaluation goes online? Exploring apparatuses of valuation in the travel sector. *Organization Science*, *25*(3), 868–891. https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.2013.0877

02.12.24   Moderation

→ Platform governance

→ Automation

→ Labor

→ Transparency

Required Reading:
- Gillespie, T. (2018). All platforms moderate. In *Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, content moderation, and the hidden decisions that shape social media* (pp. 1–23). Yale University Press.

Optional Reading:
- Gorwa, R., Binns, R., & Katzenbach, C. (2020). Algorithmic content moderation: Technical and political challenges in the automation of platform governance. *Big Data & Society*, *7*(1), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1177/2053951719897945
- Pinchevski, A. (2023). Social media's canaries: Content moderators between digital labor and mediated trauma. *Media, Culture & Society*, *45*(1), 212–221. https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437221122226
- Suzor, N. P., Myers West, S., Quodling, A., & York, J. (2019). What do we mean when we talk about transparency? Toward meaningful transparency in commercial content moderation. *International Journal of Communication*, 13, 1526–1543.
- Haimson, O. L., Delmonaco, D., Nie, P., & Wegner, A. (2021). Disproportionate removals and differing content moderation experiences for conservative, transgender, and Black social media users: Marginalization and moderation gray areas. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, *5*(CSCW2), 1–35. https://doi.org/10.1145/3479610

20.12.24   Monetization

→ Governing through incentives

→ Inequality

→ Intermediaries

→ Platform capture

<u>Required Reading</u>:
- Caplan, R., & Gillespie, T. (2020). Tiered governance and demonetization: The shifting terms of labor and compensation in the platform economy. *Social Media + Society*, *6*(2), 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120936636

<u>Optional Reading</u>:
- Kingsley, S., Sinha, P., Wang, C., Eslami, M., & Hong, J. I. (2022). "Give everybody [..] a little bit more equity": Content creator perspectives and responses to the algorithmic demonetization of content associated with disadvantaged groups. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, *6*(CSCW2), 1–37. https://doi.org/10.1145/3555149
- Christin, A., & Lu, Y. (2023). The influencer pay gap: Platform labor meets racial capitalism. *New Media & Society*, online first, 1–24. https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448231164995
- Siciliano, M. L. (2023). Intermediaries in the age of platformized gatekeeping: The case of YouTube "creators" and MCNs in the U.S. *Poetics*, *97*, 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2022.101748
- Partin, W. C. (2020). Bit by (Twitch) Bit: "Platform capture" and the evolution of digital platforms. *Social Media + Society*, *6*(3), 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120933981

16.12.24   Public relations

→ Gaslighting

→ Promotional campaigns

→ Policy changes

→ Apologies

<u>Required Reading</u>:
- Cotter, K. (2023). "Shadowbanning is not a thing": Black box gaslighting and the power to independently know and credibly critique algorithms. *Information, Communication & Society*, *26*(6), 1226–1243. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2021.1994624

Optional Readings:
- Highfield, T., & Miltner, K. M. (2023). Platformed solidarity: Examining the performative politics of Twitter hashflags. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, *29*(6), 67. https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565231199981
- He, R., & Tian, H. (2023). Social media influencer and source credibility: Endorsing content moderation on Douyin. *International Journal of Communication*, *17*, 5760–5780.
- Barrett, B., & Kreiss, D. (2019). Platform transience: Changes in Facebook's policies, procedures, and affordances in global electoral politics. *Internet Policy Review*, *8*(4). https://doi.org/10.14763/2019.4.1446
- Hall, K. (2020). Public penitence: Facebook and the performance of apology. *Social Media + Society*, *6*(2), 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120907945

23.12.24   Circumvention

➔ Tactics vs. strategies

➔ Ideological justifications

➔ The role of disconnection

➔ Self-censorship

Required Reading:
- Gillett, R., Gray, J. E., & Valdovinos Kaye, D. B. (2023). 'Just a little hack': Investigating cultures of content moderation circumvention by Facebook users. *New Media & Society*, online first, 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221147661

Optional Reading:
- Bucher, E. L., Schou, P. K., & Waldkirch, M. (2021). Pacifying the algorithm – Anticipatory compliance in the face of algorithmic management in the gig economy. *Organization*, *28*(1), 44–67. https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508420961531
- Ferrari, F., & Graham, M. (2021). Fissures in algorithmic power: Platforms, code, and contestation. *Cultural Studies*, 35(4–5), 814–832. https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2021.1895250
- van der Nagel, E. (2018). 'Networks that work too well': Intervening in algorithmic connections. *Media International Australia*, *168*(1), 81–92. https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X18783002
- Steen, E., Yurechko, K., & Klug, D. (2023). You can (not) say what you want: Using algospeak to contest and evade algorithmic content moderation on TikTok. *Social Media + Society*, *9*(3), 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231194586

30.12.24   Appropriation

→ Weaponization

→ Gaming as "ethical work"

→ Protests and fandom

→ Data activism

<u>Required Reading</u>:
- Meisner, C. (2023). The weaponization of platform governance: Mass reporting and algorithmic punishments in the creator economy. *Policy & Internet*, *15*(4), 466–477. https://doi.org/10.1002/poi3.359

<u>Optional Reading</u>:
- Ziewitz, M. (2019). Rethinking gaming: The ethical work of optimization in web search engines. *Social Studies of Science*, *49*(5), 707–731. https://doi.org/10.1177/0306312719865607
- Medeiros, B. (2019). Picketing the virtual storefront: Content moderation and political criticism of businesses on Yelp. *International Journal of Communication*, 13, 4857–4873.
- Zhao, A., & Chen, Z. (2023). Let's report our rivals: How Chinese fandoms game content moderation to restrain opposing voices. *Journal of Quantitative Description: Digital Media*, *3*, 1–35. https://doi.org/10.51685/jqd.2023.006
- Beraldo, D., & Milan, S. (2019). From data politics to the contentious politics of data. *Big Data & Society*, *6*(2), 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1177/2053951719885967

06.01.25   Publicity

→ User-generated accountability

→ Callouts

→ Hashtag campaigns

<u>Required Reading</u>:
- Reynolds, C. & Hallinan, B. (Forthcoming) User-generated accountability: Public participation in algorithmic governance on YouTube. *New Media & Society*.

<u>Optional Reading</u>:
- Lewis, R., & Christin, A. (2022). Platform drama: "Cancel culture," celebrity, and the struggle for accountability on YouTube. *New Media & Society*, 24(7), 1632–1656. https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221099235

- Leybold, M., & Nadegger, M. (2023). Overcoming communicative separation for stigma reconstruction: How pole dancers fight content moderation on Instagram. *Organization*, online first, 1–28. https://doi.org/10.1177/13505084221145635
- Berge, P. (2023). #Answerusyoutube: Predatory influencers and cross-platform insulation. *Feminist Media Studies*, online first, 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2023.2231655
- Han, C., Seering, J., Kumar, D., Hancock, J. T., & Durumeric, Z. (2023). Hate raids on Twitch: Echoes of the past, new modalities, and implications for platform governance. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, *7*(CSCW1), 1–28. https://doi.org/10.1145/3579609

13.01.25   Boycotts & blocking

→ Collective action

→ Community migration

→ Leaving as a process

→ Blocklists

Required Reading:
- Matias, J. N. (2016). Going dark: Social factors in collective action against platform operators in the Reddit blackout. *Proceedings of the 2016 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, 1138–1151. https://doi.org/10.1145/2858036.2858391

Optional Reading:
- Reynolds, C., & Hallinan, B. (2021). The haunting of GeoCities and the politics of access control on the early Web. *New Media & Society*, *23*(11), 3268–3289. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820951609
- Fiesler, C., & Dym, B. (2020). Moving across lands: Online platform migration in fandom communities. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, *4*(CSCW1), 1–25. https://doi.org/10.1145/3392847
- Brubaker, J. R., Ananny, M., & Crawford, K. (2016). Departing glances: A sociotechnical account of 'leaving' Grindr. *New Media & Society*, *18*(3), 373–390. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814542311
- Jhaver, S., Ghoshal, S., Bruckman, A., & Gilbert, E. (2018). Online harassment and content moderation: The case of blocklists. *ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction*, *25*(2), 1–33. https://doi.org/10.1145/3185593

20.01.25   Innovation

→ Networking strategies

Required Reading:

- Larson, C., & Ready, E. (2024). Networking down: Networks, innovation, and relational labor in digital book publishing. *New Media & Society*, 26(5), 2659–2678. https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221090195

11.03.24   Final paper presentations

→ Student presentations

→ Class wrap-up