

Course manual *

Digital Activism 2023

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1. Teachers and contacts

- Maxigas <maxigas@criticalinfralab.net> (coordinator)
- Stefania Milan <s.milan@uva.nl>
- Niels ten Oever <niels@criticalinfralab.net>

For general and administrative questions about the course, contact Maxigas. For questions regarding a particular session, please contact the teacher of that week. You can also make use of office hours:

Maxigas has office hours on Mondays from 14:30 to 16:00. You can book online or offline sessions. You will get a confirmation and notified if anything changes:

<https://maxigas.youcanbook.me/>

2. Content and educational objectives

Civil engagement, activism, social movements, political participation and advocacy have dramatically changed since the diffusion of the internet. The way people come together, mobilize, and protest have progressively embedded various elements of the ‘digital’—often at the pace of technological innovation, and sometimes even anticipating it. This course will work with both real-world case studies and theory from, e.g., media studies and sociology of social movements, to explore activism in the digital age through the lens of technology and technology-enabled collective action. It will provide a socio-cultural and socio-technical perspective to digital activism from the 1990s to today. It will take media (including social movement sites, alternative news and citizen journalism, online campaigning...) and technology (social media platforms, mobile apps...) as starting point, to investigate social and organizational dynamics such as the individual/collective tension and tactical repertoires as they evolve in interaction with software and information. With the support of invited activists, the course will investigate also contemporary challenges to digital activism like filtering and online surveillance, and forms of resistance such as circumvention tools.

At the end of the course the student is able to:

- demonstrate a critical understanding of historical and contemporary debates on digital activism, including citizen media, social media, participatory media practices, the impact of new technologies on social and political change
- gain insights into key concepts such as participation, civil society, active citizenship, public sphere, media power
- academically analyze digital activism, taking into account not only form and content but also the technical infrastructure, its design and the sociotechnical dynamics it animates
- apply interdisciplinary thinking (from media studies to sociology to science and technology studies) to examine instances of digital activism, their outputs and formats

- design, plan, and carry out a research project, from library and online research to written presentation
- present ideas in verbal and written mode in conformity to the conventions of academic presentations, and participate in discussion and peer activities being mindful of others.

3. Study material

3.1 Get ready for the course

- a. Students are expected to create a (free) Zotero account ¹ and apply to join the group “Digital Activism 2023”. ² Please note the instructors must approve your request, which might take a few days.
- b. Students are expected to review this “Course manual” and refer to it before asking questions about the course. New versions may be published in the next weeks. New versions can be found on Canvas and announced through the Canvas Announcements function.
- c. Students are expected to sign up to make a podcast in the shared OneDrive document “Sign up for Podcast” ³. If someone cannot find a spot, please ask. The course manual gives an impression of what each topic entails. A worksheet on making podcasts is available on Canvas.

3.2 Material

- Compulsory readings are posted on the Zotero group “Digital Activism 2023”.
- Additional (“to know more”) readings are listed on Zotero only, and, whenever possible, made readily available.
- Send materials and suggestions to the course coordinator (Maxigas) to be added to the library.

4. Assessment

4.1 Assessment components

1. A podcast (20%). In this audio file, you set up a conversation (together with your peers assigned to this particular week) in which you discuss the readings (or a selection of), the most interesting insights and establish a connection to current affairs (or interesting cases of the past, if applicable). You can bring up questions for theory as well. The podcast should enable further discussion in class. Specific directions can be found on Canvas under the assignment ‘podcast’.

¹<https://www.zotero.org/user/register>

²https://www.zotero.org/groups/4940018/digital_activism_2023

³https://amsuni-my.sharepoint.com/:x/g/personal/p_dunajcsik_uva_nl/EcGVvbr1NZ1GiS89o9y4M7EBMWAnIPFf8wpV8dIr-aCN0g?e=rk0u4H

2. A two-pager in preparation for the mini-conference (COMPLETE / INCOMPLETE). The two pager gives a summary of your final paper. Specific directions will be posted on Canvas. Refer to Maxigas for questions on the mini-conference.
3. Participation in the mini-conference (COMPLETE / INCOMPLETE). Participating means acting both as a presenter and a respondent. Specific directions will be posted on Canvas. Refer to Maxigas for questions on the mini-conference.
4. Final exam: An academic study into Digital Activism (80%). The final exam is conducted by (preferably) a collaboration between 2 students.
 - a. You may choose to write a collaborative **paper** in the format of a journal article. The final exam consists of max 5,000 words (+/-10%), which is a standard minimum amount of words for a publication in our field. If conducted individually, papers or projects may contain max 3,000 words (+/-10%).
 - b. design or conduct a digital activism **project**. This may be a more hands-on project, a technological experimentation, or a digital activism project proposal Specific directions (including deadlines) will be posted under Assignments on Canvas.

Refer to Maxigas for questions about assessment.

4.2 Assessment criteria

- Assessment criteria for the grading of each component will be posted on Canvas.
- The final exam must receive at least a 5.5 for the student to be able to conclude the course.
- A failing grade for the podcast may be compensated with a sufficient passing grade for the final research paper.
- Given the nature of the assignments, there will be group grades, yet the instructor can, as he/she sees fit, administer individual grades.
- The lecturers will inform students of the feedback and inspection arrangements after the results have been posted.
- Not completing one of the assessment components will disqualify the student from receiving the final grade.
- A resit for assessment components 1, 2 and/or 3 will consist of an *oral exam*.

The resit for the research paper or project consists on either a revised version of the originally submitted piece, or a new version, following a discussion with the teachers. You can find more information about the regulations for exams and resits in Part A of the Teaching and Examination Regulations (OER), Article 4, Assessment and examinations.

Final results will be posted on Canvas no more than 15 working days after the exam (and at least 5 working days before the resit).

4.3 Fraud and plagiarism

Plagiarism is a serious offense and will not be tolerated. The University of Amsterdam Fraud and Plagiarism regulations apply to the assessment of this course. These regulations can be consulted at student.uva.nl/en/home > [programme] > A-Z > Plagiarism and fraud.

5. Course overview by week

The course is divided in three parts, exploring respectively the foundations of digital activism, a selection of digital activism genres, and emerging movement dynamics. Note: The literature might change (further information will be provided in class). Scanned copies, whenever possible, are accessible in the dedicated Zotero folder.

Place and time of the classes

These below are the allocated slots for the course according to the Rooster. ⁴ In case you see changes/discrepancies between these places and times and the Rooster, ask the course coordinator to clarify. We start the class at 09:00 but might finish earlier than planned. Please listen to the week's podcast (if there is one) before coming to the class!

Classes are on Wednesdays 09:00-12:00 at the OHMP building in room A0.08:

1. February 15th: Roots (Stefania Milan)
2. February 22nd: Theory (Stefania Milan)
3. March 1st: "Other" epistemologies (Stefania Milan)
4. March 8th: Social media activism (Niels ten Oever)
5. March 15th: Data activism (Niels ten Oever)
6. March 22nd Hacking & Hacktivism (Niels ten Oever & Maxigas)
7. April 12th Counter-surveillance (Niels ten Oever)
8. April 18th CONFERENCE (Niels ten Oever & Maxigas)
9. April 26th Refusal of the digital imperative (Maxigas)
10. May 10th Object conflicts & consumer activism (Maxigas)
11. May 17th Wed> Technological sovereignty (Maxigas)
12. May 24th ROUNDTABLE (Niels ten Oever & Maxigas)

Part I. FOUNDATIONS

This part of the course is designed to expose students to a set of key readings, in view of building strong conceptual and theoretical foundations to understand digital activism.

Class 1. Roots (Stefania Milan)

To understand present-day digital activism, we take a historical approach that situates contemporary uses of digital technology for social change within technological innovation, in view of harnessing both continuity and change in the field. We look at two examples: the Independent Media Centers (Indymedia) and the Zapatista struggle (Mexico since 1994).

Froehling, Oliver. 1997. "The Cyberspace "War of Ink and Internet" in Chiapas, Mexico." *American Geographical Society* 87 (2): 291–307. <https://doi.org/10.2307/216010>.

Lievrouw, Leah A. 2011. "The Roots of Alternative and Activist New Media." In *Alternative and Activist New Media*, 28–71. Digital Media and Society Series. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Milan, Stefania. 2016. "Liberated Technology: Inside Emancipatory Communication." In *Civic Media: Technology, Design, Practice*, edited by Eric Gordon and Paul Mihailidis, 107–24. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9970.003.0007>.

Pickard, Victor W. 2006. "Assessing the Radical Democracy of Indymedia: Discursive, Technical, and Institutional Constructions." *Critical Studies in Media*

⁴<https://rooster.uva.nl/>

Communication 23 (1): 19–38. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07393180600570691>.

Class 2. Theory (Stefania Milan)

In the week dedicated to “Theory”, we explore some of the main ways in which scholars have conceptualized the relation between digital technology and political participation. Alongside with the popular notions of “acting on” and “media ecology”, we look at the work of Latin American thinkers Paulo Freire (“pedagogy of the oppressed”) and Jesús MartínBarbero (on “mediation”).

Kubitschko, Sebastian. 2017. “Acting on Media Technologies and Infrastructures: Expanding the Media as Practice Approach.” *Media, Culture & Society* 40 (4): 629–35. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443717706068>.

Scolari, Carlos A. 2015. “From (New)media to (Hyper)mediations: Recovering Jesús Martín-Barbero’s Mediation Theory in the Age of Digital Communication and Cultural Convergence.” *Information, Communication & Society* 18 (9): 1092–1107. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2015.1018299>.

Suzina, Ana Cristina, and Thomas Tufte. 2020. “Freire’s Vision of Development and Social Change: Past Experiences, Present Challenges and Perspectives for the Future.” *The International Communication Gazette* 82 (5): 411–24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1748048520943692>.

Treré, Emiliano, and Alice Mattoni. 2015. “Media Ecologies and Protest Movements: Main Perspectives and Key Lessons.” *Information, Communication & Society* 19 (3): 290–306. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2015.1109699>.

Class 3. “Other” epistemologies (Stefania Milan)

In an effort to “decolonize” the way we approach and investigate today’s digital activism, we explore other epistemologies and worldviews, with a focus on Latin America. We delve into the notion of data universalism to understand the situated nature of all of our observations.

Note: this section includes additional readings that engage with the notion of “otherness”.

Select three among the following readings:

Barranquero Carretero, Alejandro, and Chiara Sáez Baeza. 2017. “Latin American Critical Epistemologies Toward a Biocentric Turn in Communication for Social Change: Communication from a Good Living Perspective.” *Latin American Research Review* 53 (3): 431–445. <https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.59>.

Escobar, Arturo. 2001. “Culture Sits in Places: Reflections on Globalism and Subaltern Strategies of Localization.” *Political Geography*, no. 20: 139–74. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0962-6298\(00\)00064-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0962-6298(00)00064-0).

Milan, Stefania, and Emiliano Treré. 2019. “Big Data from the South(s): Beyond Data Universalism.” *Television & New Media* 20 (5): 319–35. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476419837739>.

Rodríguez, Clemencia. 2017. “Studying Media at the Margins: Learning from the Field.” In *Media Activism in the Digital Age*, edited by Victor Pickard and

Guobin Yang, 1st edition, 49–61. *Shaping Inquiry in Culture, Communication and Media Studies*. Oxon: Routledge.

“Other” readings—select one amongst the following:

Asher, Kiran. 2013. “Latin American Decolonial Thought, or Making the Subaltern Speak.” *Geography Compass* 7 (12): 832–42. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12102>.

Couldry, Nick, and Ulises Ali Mejias. 2021. “The Decolonial Turn in Data and Technology Research: What Is at Stake and Where Is It Heading?” *Information, Communication & Society*, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2021.1986102>.

Suzina, Ana Cristina. 2013. “English as Lingua Franca, or the Sterilisation of Scientific Work.” *Media, Culture & Society* 43 (1): 171–79. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443720957906>.

Waisbord, Silvio, and Claudia Mellado. 2014. “De-Westernizing Communication Studies: A Reassessment.” *Communication Theory* 24 (4): 361–72. <https://doi.org/doi:10.1111/comt.12044>.

Part II: GENRES OF DATA ACTIVISM

In the second part of the course students will get closer to a selection of artifacts and dynamics of contemporary digital activism, focusing on specific “genres”.

Class 4: Social media activism (Niels ten Oever)

The advent of social media has radically changed digital activism, to the point that some observers claimed that a new era characterized by “connective action” and “cloud protesting” rather than collective action has started. In this section we explore this claim, focusing on the role and impact of social media on contemporary mobilizations.

Gerbaudo, Paolo. 2018. “Social Media and Populism: An Elective Affinity?” *Media, Culture & Society* 40 (5): 745–53. <https://doi.org/MCS0010.1177/0163443718772192>.

Lupien, Pascal. 2020. “Indigenous Movements, Collective Action, and Social Media: New Opportunities or New Threats?” *Social Media + Society*, 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120926487>.

Milan, Stefania. 2015. “When Algorithms Shape Collective Action: Social Media and the Dynamics of Cloud Protesting.” *Social Media + Society* 1: 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115622481>.

Treré, Emiliano. 2015. “Reclaiming, Proclaiming, and Maintaining Collective Identity in the #YoSoy132 Movement in Mexico: An Examination of Digital Frontstage and Backstage Activism Through Social Media and Instant Messaging Platforms.” *Information, Communication & Society* 18 (8): 1468–4462. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2015.1043744>.

Class 5: Data activism (Niels ten Oever)

Data activism embraces sociotechnical practices taking a critical approach to datafication by resisting surveillance or appropriating data for social change. In this session we focus on the latter approach, by looking at how people have mobilised digital data for social justice.

D’Ignazio, Catherine, and Lauren F. Klein. 2016. “Feminist Data Visualization.” IEEE Vis conference on Feminist Data Visualization. <https://vis4dh.dbvis.de/papers/2016/Feminist%20Data%20Visualization.pdf>.

Gray, Jonathan. 2019. “Data Witnessing: Attending to Injustice with Data in Amnesty International’s Decoders Project.” *Information, Communication & Society* 22 (7): 971–91. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2019.1573915>.

Gutierrez, Miren. 2019. “Maputopias: Cartographies of Communication, Coordination and Action — the Cases of Ushahidi and InfoAmazonia.” *GeoJournal*, no. 84: 101–20. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10708-018-9853-8>.

Kazansky, Becky, and Stefania Milan. 2021. “‘Bodies Not Templates’: Contesting Dominant Algorithmic Imaginaries.” *New Media & Society* 23 (2): 363–381. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820929316>.

Milan, Stefania, and Lonneke van der Velden. 2016. “The Alternative Epistemologies of Data Activism.” *Digital Culture and Society* 2 (2): 57–74. <https://doi.org/10.14361/dcs-2016-0205>.

Class 6. Hacking and hacktivism (Niels ten Oever and Maxigas)

In week 6 we explore radical uses of technology by tech-savvy activists such as early-day digital disobedients, political hackers, and hacktivist groups, and we reflect upon how hacking and hacktivism has evolved over the years.

Coleman, Gabriella. 2012. “Introduction: A Tale of Two Worlds.” In *Coding Freedom: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Hacking*, 1–24. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. <https://gabriellacoleman.org/Coleman-Coding-Freedom.pdf>.

Follis, Luca, and Adam Fish. 2017. “Half-Lives of Hackers and the Shelf Life of Hacks.” *Limn*, no. 8. <https://limn.it/articles/half-lives-of-hackers-and-the-shelf-life-of-hacks/>.

Tanczer, Leonie. 2015. “Hacking the Label: Hacktivism, Race, and Gender.” *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media and Technology*, no. 6. <https://doi.org/10.7264/N37S7M22>.

Toupin, Sophie. 2016. “Gesturing Towards ‘Anti-Colonial Hacking’ and Its Infrastructure.” *Journal of Peer Production*, no. 9. <http://peerproduction.net/issues/issue-9-alternative-internets/peer-reviewed-papers/anti-colonial-hacking/>.

Class 7. Counter-surveillance (Niels ten Oever)

The datafied society is intensely connected to mechanisms of surveillance. We look at responses to surveillance by hackers and activists, citizens and users.

Responses unfold on the level of tactical tools, critical approaches to consumer surveillance, and anticipatory practices by human rights defenders.

Collier, Ben. 2021. “The Power to Structure: Exploring Social Worlds of Privacy, Technology and Power in the Tor Project.” *Information, Communication & Society* 24 (12): 1728–44. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2020.1732440>.

Kazansky, Becky. 2021. “‘It Depends on Your Threat Model’: The Anticipatory Dimensions of Resistance to Data-Driven Surveillance.” *Big Data & Society*, 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053951720985557>.

Liu, Chuncheng. 2021. “Seeing Like a State, Enacting Like an Algorithm: (Re)assembling Contact Tracing and Risk Assessment During the COVID-19 Pandemic.” *Science, Technology, & Human Values*, 1–28. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01622439211021916>.

Poster, Winifred R. 2019. “Racialized Surveillance in the Digital Service Economy.” In *Captivating Technology Race, Carceral Technoscience, and Liberatory Imagination in Everyday Life*, edited by Ruha Benjamin, 133–69. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781478004493-009>.

Raley, Rita. 2013. “Dataveillance and Countervailance.” In *“Raw Data” Is an Oxymoron*, edited by Lisa Gitelman, 121–47. Infrastructures Series. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Class 8: Student mini-conference (part of the assesment!)

Part III: EMERGING MOVEMENT DYNAMICS

Class 9. Refusal of the digital imperative (Maxigas)

The digital imperative is the idea that everybody should use digital technologies. It comes with the assumption that the same technologies and use patterns are beneficial for everybody. “Refuseniks” are people who do not adopt technologies because of ideological reasons. Refusal of the digital imperative may lead to questioning some of the core mythologies of modernity, such as that technological progress goes hand in hand with social progress.

Maxigas. 2017. “Hackers Against Technology: Critique and Recuperation in Technological Cycles.” *Social Studies of Science* 47 (6): 841–60. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306312717736387>.

The Invisible Committee. 2015. “Fuck Off Google.” In *To Our Friends*, 35–44. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press; Semiotext(e).

Wyatt, Sally. 2008. *Challenging the Digital Imperative: Inaugural Lecture*. Maastricht: Maastricht University. <http://www.virtualknowledgestudio.nl/staff/sally-wyatt/inaugural-lecture-28032008.pdf>.

Class 10: Object conflicts and consumer activism (Maxigas)

Object conflicts are a type of industrial conflict where consumers want something other than what is offered in the form of commodities on the market. Activists in technology- and product-oriented movements are dependent on capital (rather

than solely on themselves or the state) to realise their demands. Such demands are often implemented in a way that undermines their original rationale.

Barron, Anne. 2013. “Free Software Production as Critical Social Practice.” *Economy and Society* 42 (4): 597–625. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03085147.2013.791510>.

Hess, David J. 2005. “Technology- and Product-Oriented Movements: Approximating Social Movement Studies and STS.” *Science, Technology and Human Values* 30 (4): 515–35. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0162243905276499>.

Söderberg, Johan, and Maxigas. 2022. “Open-Source 3d Printing: Reproducing Machines and Social Relations.” Chapter 4. In *Resistance to the Current: The Dialectics of Hacking*, 87–122. Information Policy. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/13466.001.0001>.

Class 11: Technological sovereignty (Maxigas)

We close the course with opening up the perspective on the long-term, ultimate goals of data activism. Technological sovereignty, derived from food sovereignty, is about the capacity of communities to provision culturally and politically appropriate technologies for themselves. Problems in technological sovereignty include questions such as “Who controls technology, and why?” and “Who makes technology, and how?”, and, ultimately “Who or what does technology serve?”. Technological sovereignty is also a real movement that can be studied empirically through the practices of communities in struggle.

Bravo, Loreto. 2017. “A Seed Sprouts When It Is Sown in Fertile Soil.” In *Technological Sovereignty*, 2nd volume:98–110.

Couture, Stephane, and Sophie Toupin. 2019. “What Does the Notion of ‘Sovereignty’ Mean When Referring to the Digital?” *New Media & Society* 21 (2): 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819865984>.

Haché, Alex. 2014. “Technological Sovereignty.” *Passarelle*, no. 11: 165–71. <http://www.coredem.info/rubrique48.html>.