From Twitter to TikTok: Exploring Transnational Cybercultures

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The internet and other digital artifacts now mediate our interactions with the world and society to a considerable degree. While the influence of these artifacts are both praised and decried in equal measure, it is more useful to conceptualise the realm of cybertulture as a means and medium for cultural production engaged in critical debates regarding the nature of ‘humanity’ itself. Cybercultures also carry within them older institutional matrixes of identity and power – gender, race, caste, and class – that continue to influence both technical aspects like platform design as well as issues around regulation of free speech, political dissent, bullying, and harassment.

The purpose of this course is therefore to approach the study of cyberspace and cyberculture from a series of critical entry points including historical texts, pop-cultural imaginings and theoretical interrogations. The other guiding principle of the course will be to take a postcolonial approach to the categories of cyberculture discussed so far. While the discipline of Digital Humanities remains largely anglocentric and invested in race-blind analyses, there is much potential in challenging this view and engaging Indian students in these discussions will potentially be very fruitful for future research in the area.

In terms of structure, the course will proceed chronologically. It will chart the origins of the ideas of cyberspace from when it was seen as a utopian construct in the 1970’s-1990’s and trace the ways this construction has been questioned in recent years. Building on these discussions, the course will then examine key early texts, both critical and creative, that shaped the way cyberculture was theorized in the 1970-90’s. This will include discussion of literary genres such as cyberpunk and their effects on the material digital artifacts that form the basis of modern technoculture. We will then dive deeper into the issues raised by these historical texts to see how issues that were considered “outside” the concerns of cyberculture – race, gender, sexuality, caste etc – have emerged to challenge early formulations of cyberpunk utopia.

The course will also consider some pressing contemporary concerns in our everyday cyberlives, including issues like “big data,” debates concerning net neutrality, the rise of extremism online and possibilities and pitfalls of web-based activism. These will build on and incorporate discussions of critical and postcolonial digital theory as covered in the previous weeks. Further, we will discuss meta-issues such as the digitalisation of conflicts between nation states, as well as the operations of pan-national bodies such as Anonymous and Wikileaks. This is an especially urgent topic with the rise of such political forces as the ‘alt-right’ and rightwing mobilization through trolling in India.

This will be a class that requires a strong level of interactivity as students will be encouraged to apply the concepts they learn in a classroom context to the digital world throughout the semester.
Course Aims:

1. To understand the historical roots and contemporary manifestations of notions of cyberspace and its attendant cybercultures.
2. To gain an introduction to basic research methods and ethical issues in digital humanities and execute research projects incorporating those skills. Students will be introduced to digital research methodology including data scraping, visualisation tools, and content analysis. We will also discuss ethical issues in digital environments. This will prepare students to undertake internal assessment projects.
3. To identify the operation and intersection of historical axes of ‘offline’ identity in online contexts including gender, sexuality, caste, race, and class.
4. To discuss both technical and communitarian aspects of cyberculture to come to a nuanced understanding of today’s technosocial age.

Prospective Bibliography:

Films:

- *Ghost In The Shell* (1995)
- *Ex Machina* (2014)
- *CitizenFour* (2014)
- Youtube: All India Bakchod. “Save the Internet.” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mfY1NKrzqi0&vl=en

Novels:


Critical Readings: