

Unlearning the Internet | Course Review (21 Mar)

Unlearning the internet means considering how we:

- Imagine it. Where's the place in space? What are the politics of "what if"?
- Materialize it. Where's the land? The bodies? The servers? What's mediated, and how?
- Historicize it. Who gets the credit? Who's ignored? Who + what are rendered obsolete?
- Socialize it. When is tech change also social change? When is it business as usual?
- Design it. Why do people stay? Bounce? Toggle? What steals their focus?
- Talk about it. Why "raw"? "Source"? "Control"? "Navigate"? "Tool"? "Interactive"?
- Write for it. What's encoded? What's the storymap? How is creativity structured?
- Depend on it. Which standards and platforms dominate the market? What's filtered?
- Use it. What are the default settings of platforms? What habits do they enable?
- Consent to it. What's given? When can we opt out? Opt in? How does trust happen?
- Believe in it. What's automated? What values are baked in? What data is missing?
- Empower it. When is it the subject? What does it determine? Extend? Assist?
- Work it. Are projects microtasks? Are workers compensated? Do they own their data?

The internet is often treated as a **monolithic structure** that recently emerged. But how is it an assemblage of "old" parts? How do those parts and their histories shape knowledge today?

We often inherit tales of **lone male inventors** and technological revolution that not only ignore labour histories but also reinforce gender norms and unequal working conditions. What are the risks of assuming technological changes will always bring about social good? Who gets the credit? Who is ignored? Who and what are rendered obsolete?

People usually want their **interfaces to be immediate**—invisible, user-friendly, and free of glitches and buffering. But under what assumptions? When should interfaces interrupt us? When should they be transparent? How do they guide us and steal our focus?

Researchers, designers, and developers routinely invest in the **ostensible neutrality of instruments**, often through appeals to standards. But how are standards biased, what do they normalize, and how do they produce errors? How can standards be changed through research, cultural work, and participation in communities and systems?

The **rhetoric of raw data** abounds, but all data is cooked. How do we attend to data as a system? What systems and datasets are missing, and why? What do we learn from prototyping what's missing? What activities resist, or should resist, becoming data?

The internet is a haystack of forms, and its **appeal is apparently interactivity**. But interactive media are highly structured, and they shape interpretation and even curb possibilities. Instead of asking how to make things interactive, we might ask, "what if?" How is engaging what hasn't happened (the subjunctive) also a way to imagine what we want to see in the world?

You can **choose your own adventure** on the internet, but responsiveness is designed. How is movement through responsive content structured? What can people see and not see as they make their way through structured content? What are the storymaps? Where are they?

Algorithms may be considered autonomous, but they are entwined with social and cultural activities, not to mention human decision-making. They are not exactly self-ruling, either. How,

then, do we determine who or what is accountable for the decisions algorithms make? Or how they shape decisions? What's the difference between transparency and accountability?

The **belief in sourcery** is the belief in code as cause. But code becomes source only after the fact (once everything is working), and not everyone needs to know how to code to approach the internet critically. What can we learn from low-tech approaches? How are design and development processes involving multiple components irreducible to code and programming?

The internet is frequently treated as a space without place—a **landless territory**. This treatment has a colonial legacy in exploration, discovery, and terra nullius (“nobody’s land”). How do land and infrastructure affect internet access? Development? How do people address, resist, and correct claims that the internet is landless?

Digital labour may involve play and games, but the play is productive of value: data for businesses, attention for platforms, capital for avatars. While this labour may appear immaterial (online, performed remotely, dependent on information instead of tangible stuff), it's embodied and affects working conditions (e.g., gigs compared with salaried employment). How do large projects become individual microtasks? How do people accumulate data through microtasking platforms and games? Do they own that data? How are they compensated for their labour?

For decades if not centuries, technologies have been described as **extensions of man**. But this rather masculine formation of tech as power ignores how technologies also make us vulnerable; they also assist us in performing tasks. In fact, assistive technologies are sites of innovation. What happens when we design assistive technologies for one person? Or let technologies ask questions instead of solve problems? Does tech need to be a tool?