This course will look at the impact of social media on politics, broadly speaking. We will be examining both how social media can be used to answer existing questions about political behavior of masses and elites, and look at how social media impacts politics. Several aspects of social media generally stand out: it facilitates information flow, it eliminates gatekeepers of information (traditional media), and it can facilitate coordination. Social media also provides amazingly rich data with which to test theories of politics. We will be covering existing research on the impact of social media and politics, with a focus on how existing empirical work relates to long-standing political science research questions, and we will be dealing with issues of how future empirical work can test for causal inference with what must very often be observational data. Each week's class will generally be a mix of: 1) critically reading the existing literature on social media, and related political science work informing the topic being discussed; and 2) discussing current empirical work being carried out on social media. Students enrolled in the course will have the opportunity to work with data collected by the Center for Social Media and Politics (CSMaP) lab.

Instructors

Jonathan Nagler, Professor of Politics, Co-Director of NYU Social Media and Political Participation (SMaPP) lab. 19 West 4th Street, REMOTE, 2-9676, jonathan dot nagler at nyu dot edu, @Jonathan_Nagler

Joshua A. Tucker, Professor of Politics, Co-Director of NYU Social Media and Political Participation (SMaPP) lab. 19 West 4th Street, Room 430, 8-7598, joshua dot tucker at nyu dot edu, @j_a_tucker

Requirements

Grading is based on class participation (20%), presentations during the semester (20%) and a term paper (60%). Auditors are welcome.

Class Participation: This is a graduate seminar, and all students will be expected to have done the required reading before each week's seminar and to contribute to the class discussion.

Class Presentations: Students will be required to make presentations on readings as well as research in progress. Students will be asked to sign up on the online syllabus for which readings they want to present. Contingent on class enrollment - each student will sign up
to present in two separate weeks. THE PRESENTATION SHOULD BE NO MORE THAN 15 MINUTES.

I. INTRO SLIDE: What is the topic/research question of the week?

II. 2-slide summary of each article
   A. Main Research Question
   B. Data/Methodology
   C. Finding

III. For (all readings, subset):
   A. Do you believe it?
   B. Interesting extensions?
   C. When would it apply and not apply in other settings?
   D. What would be the next paper that should be written to advance this topic?

IV. If it is 2 people,
   A. Split papers
   B. coordinate on the part II slides

Class Format: Other than the first and last two classes, each of the remaining 11 weeks will be split into two parts. The first half of the class will take the format of a normal graduate seminar, with brief presentations on readings followed by seminar style discussion. The second half of the class will feature a presentation on ongoing research by either a member of the class, a member of the SMaPP lab, or an outside speaker.

Term Paper: Each PhD student enrolled in the course is required to write a term paper for this course that will take the form of a research proposal or a research paper utilizing social media data. A research proposal will look like an empirical journal article, only without the actual analysis. Thus it will include a statement of a research question or puzzle, a review of the literature related to the topic, theoretical arguments that can be used to provide an answer to the question, hypotheses drawn from these theories that can be tested empirically, and a description of what empirical evidence and methods will be used to test these hypotheses (including how the hypotheses could be falsified); it can of course also contain some initial analysis of the data. Writing a research proposal gives you a chance to really explore the important questions in writing a paper (a good question, relationship to the literature, research design, appropriate and available data) without the pressure of also having to complete the data analysis. Research proposals will be between 18-20 pages. A research paper will include the complete analysis, as well as discussion and directions for future analysis. Research papers will be between 20-30 pages. If you have previously written a research proposal for the course in a prior semester, you will be encouraged to turn that proposal into a research paper.

In an ideal world, you will then be able to turn the proposal or paper into a publishable paper that can be sent out to a journal. This is of course not a requirement of the course – you can walk away from your paper when the class is done if you want - but should be seen as a potential additional benefit of the course.
MA students and undergraduates will have the option of writing an 18-20 page literature review instead of the research proposal.

Regardless of whether you are writing a research paper, proposal, or literature review, you are required to meet with one of the course instructors no later than October 31st. A week prior to this meeting, you should email the instructor with whom you are meeting a one-page summary/outline of your planned paper. You should schedule these meetings by emailing Tasha Gordon <ng64@nyu.edu>.

Papers are due Monday, December 14th by Midnight.

Oral Presentation of Term Paper: This will take place the last week (or two weeks, depending on how many students enroll) of the course. The idea here is to mimic giving a conference presentation on your own research.

Readings

As this is a Ph.D. class, we will assume you can download readings yourself. However, we will also set up a Google Drive to facilitate the sharing of readings for the class.

Office Hours

Nagler will hold office hours on Tuesdays from 6pm to 7pm. Sign up Office-Hour-Spreadsheet

Tucker will hold office hours on Mondays from 10:45 – 12:15. You can sign up here: https://calendar.google.com/calendar/selfsched?sstoken=UVBGa1FDYzJVdFVWfGRIZmF1bHR8MTk3ZjEyZjlxN2U4YTgxNGI0YzQ5NmJjNDNjZmViZTc

To schedule meetings with either outside of office hours, please email Natasha Gordon (ng64@nyu.edu).

Course Schedule, Weekly Topics, and Assigned Readings

Note: Readings here are Subject to Change (and you should feel free to make suggestions). Anyone in the class can add relevant readings to the “Additional Readings”, please put your initials before the reading so we can follow up with you; also please put a copy of the reading in the Google Drive if you add it.
Week 1, Sep 7, Intro and Some Logistics

a. Introductions
b. Introduction to the SMaPP Lab
c. Course logistics
d. Sign up for class presentations
**Week 2, September 12th: What makes social media distinct for information flow in politics?**

We want to talk about what social media is, and what characteristics it has. For instance, it lowers the barriers to broadcasting information (mainstream media or even fringe media are longer gatekeepers of information). It can facilitate coordination among masses. And it lets us measure opinion via topics talked about and via responses to posts by elites.

**READINGS:**

a. Persily “Can Democracy Survive the Internet” (JoD)

b. Tucker et al. “From Liberation to Turmoil (JoD)

c. Barberá, P and Steinert-Threlkeld “How to Use Social Media Data for Political Science Research” forthcoming chapter in *The SAGE Handbook of Research Methods in Political Science and International Relations*


e. Pew, In Emerging Economies, “Smartphone and Social Media Users have Broader Social Networks”,

**ADDITIONAL READINGS:**

- Persily, Nate “*The Internet’s Challenge to Democracy*”, forthcoming in *Social Media and Democracy.*
Week 3, Sept. 21: Networks & Ideology

Users of social media reveal much about themselves by their online behavior (their creation of ‘digital trace’ data). They choose which accounts to follow, what stories or pages to like and/or share, etc. Since Barbera 2015, assuming homophily in following behavior has been a common way to estimate ideology. Such annotation of individuals greatly enriches our ability to learn about political behavior and opinion on social media as we can now observe behavior of millions of people whose ideology can be identified (though remember, identified with error!!).

READINGS:


Additional Readings:

- Measuring ideology using different techniques on social media

- Using other data to measure political orientation

- Using social media as a tool of measurement

Week 4, Sept 28: Causal Inference in Online Data

Since most work on social media data is done with observational data, drawing causal inferences can be challenging. It is difficult (some would say impossible) to conduct a field experiment where people are randomly assigned either to engage with social media at all, or to engage in particular ways. We will read some attempts at field experiments, as well as attempts to use instruments to deal with self-selection, and a paper arguing that valid inferences can be drawn with neither.

READINGS

- Muller, Karsten and Carlo Schwarz, “From Hashtag to Hate Crime: Twitter and Anti-Minority Sentiment”, (SSRN-2019)

Additional Readings
Week 5, October 5: Text and Images

Social media messages include text and images that can convey information. Typically analysts look at text to try to determine the object of the text, the sentiment or stance of the text towards that object (favorable or unfavorable), and the topic of the text. But images also include information that can be extracted. Images can convey information about events, and may present that image in a particular tone. This week we look at some papers making use of topic modelling with text and image analysis.

Readings

- Zachary C. Steinert-Threlkeld and Jungseock Joo: “Event Data from Images”
- Casas, Andreu and Nora Webbe Williams “Images that Matter: Online Protests and the Mobilizing Role of Pictures”

Additional Readings

- Casas et al. Images as Data for Social Science Research: An Introduction to Convolutional Neural Nets for Image Classification
Week 6: Monday, October 12: Linking survey data and social media data

Social Media provides us the opportunity to get a wide set of data with many respondents giving us unfiltered views. But we do not necessarily know much about who is saying what we observe. By linking social media data with survey data we can find out what types of people are engaging in different production and consumption behaviors on social media. And we can try to observe the impact of those social media behaviors on political attitudes and actions.

READINGS:


Additional Readings:
Week 7, Oct 19: Protest and social media

Social media can be used to coordinate protest activity. But in addition to providing information about planned activities, it can change incentives to participate as participants may have different benefits and costs to attending as attendance (or failure to attend) will be more likely to be public.

READINGS:

- Gonzalez-Bailon et al. (2011) "The Dynamics of Protest Recruitment through an Online Network", Scientific Reports 1:197.
- Casas et al. (CSMaP): The Mechanisms of Protest Recruitment through Social Media Networks

Additional Readings:

Week 8, October 26: Non-protest Political Participation and Social Media

As with protest activity, social media can help with coordination, and makes participation, or failure to participate, more public. It also provides information about activities of elites, friends, peers, etc..

READINGS:


Additional Readings:

- Other types of political participation
Week 9: November 2: Echo Chambers, Media Bubbles, Extremism and Polarization

One of the biggest questions about social media is whether it changes the sources of information people have in ways to bias those sources towards their own ideological predispositions, and/or to severely restrict the range of viewpoints they read about. This extends to a host of issues of whether people find information shared by known entities, and in particular friends, to be more believable than information they receive via other means.

READINGS:

- Messing and Westwood, 2012, “Selective Exposure in the Age of Social Media; Endorsements Trump Partisan Source Affiliation When Selecting News Online,” Communications Research
- Barbera chapter 3 on political polarization from Persily/Tucker book (Full .pdf of book is now in folder -- read Chapter 3.
- Eady, et-al (SMaPP), “Are People on Social Media in Bubbles”, Sage Open

Additional Readings

- Vaccari et al, 2016. “Of Echo Chambers and Contrarian Clubs: Exposure to Political Disagreement Among German and Italian Users of Twitter.” Social Media + Society [NA]
- Add Kate Starbird new paper about BLM + IRA accounts
Week 10: November 9: Online Advertising

Facebook and Google have become huge platforms for advertisers to target users with specific interests or characteristics. Here we look at how political actors take advantage of this.

READINGS:

  - AND, see accompanying website: Online-Political-Ads-Analysis}
Week 11: November 16: (Correcting) Misinformation Online:

There really is such a thing as ‘Fake News’: one definition is that it is content produced for profit that is known by the creator to be false, but is claimed to be true. Unfortunately, categorizing other items along the ‘truthiness’ scale is harder. But it is a topic of major interest, as is the issue of how to minimize its impact.

READINGS:

- Grinberg, Lazer, et-al, “Fake News on Twitter During the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election”, *Science*
- Pennycook, Epstein, Mosleh, Arechar, Eckles, Rand, “Understanding and reducing the spread of misinformation online “ [https://psyarxiv.com/3n9u8](https://psyarxiv.com/3n9u8)

Additional Readings:

- “Do tabloids poison the well of social media? Explaining democratically dysfunctional news sharing” (Chadwick, Vaccari, O’Loughlin 2018) [MR] [https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818769689](https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818769689)
  - Sharing tabloid news on social media is a significant predictor of democratically dysfunctional misinformation and disinformation behaviors.
- “Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election” (Allcott and Gentzkow, JEP, 2017) [https://pubs.aeaweb.org/doi/pdfplus/10.1257/jep.31.2.211](https://pubs.aeaweb.org/doi/pdfplus/10.1257/jep.31.2.211)
• Tucker et al., “Social Media, Political Polarization, and Political Disinformation: A Review of the Scientific Literature” [Link]
Week 12: November 23: Hate Speech and incivility online

It’s widely believed that hate-speech can lead to violence. And as with other aspects of social media, the appearance of hate-speech on social media (speech absent from many other public forums) can communicate to people that hateful views are more common than previously believed. If people update about the commonality of such beliefs, and implicitly the acceptability of those beliefs, they may update their own beliefs and/or behavior. Thus studying hate-speech on social media is viewed as an important topic.

Student Presenter(s): David

READINGS:

- Munger, "Tweetment Effects on the Tweeted: An Experiment to Decrease Online Harassment", 2017, Political Behavior
- Siegel (Forthcoming 2019). “Online Hate Speech” In Social Media and Democracy: The State of the Field.

Additional Readings:

- Müller, Karsten and Schwarz, Carlo, Making America Hate Again? Twitter and Hate Crime Under Trump (March 30, 2018). Available at: https://ssrn.com/abstract=3149103 or http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3149103
- Müller, Karsten and Schwarz, Carlo, Fanning the Flames of Hate: Social Media and Hate Crime (May 21, 2018). Available at: https://ssrn.com/abstract=3082972.
- Barbera and Theocaris, incivility and politicians
- Ben-David, Anat & Matamoros-Fernandez, Ariadna (2016) Hate speech and covert discrimination on social media: Monitoring the Facebook pages of

- Burnap & Williams (2016). “Us and them: identifying cyber hate on Twitter across multiple protected characteristics.” *EPJ Data Science*. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1140/epjds/s13688-016-0072-6

**Week 13:** November 30th: Student Presentations

**Week 14:** December 7th: Student Presentations

**Monday, December 14th:** Final papers due by 5:00 PM.