



Course title:	Social Media and Social Change	
Course #/term:	751, Winter 2023	
Time and place:	This is an online class that meets on Wednesdays from 5-8pm, from March 8 through April 5	
Credit hours:	1 credit hour. This amounts to 45 hours of engagement total, or approx. 9 hours per week for 5 weeks.	
Prerequisites:	none	
Instructor:	Laura Yakas, PhD, MSW	
Pronouns:	She/her	
Contact info:	Email: lyakas@umich.edu	Phone: N/A
Office:	Zoom office hours by appointment	

Course Description

This course teaches students about the role of social media in social change. Students will explore research that demonstrates the ways that social media has changed/is changing the social world. This will include an exploration of the harmful changes that can result from social media (such as mental health issues, and increases in extremism, polarization, and misinformation), as well as the anti-oppressive changes that are possible (such as increases in social connection and community, and the use of social media for activism). Throughout this course, students will also develop their own skills in effective digital presence and activism. Core competencies including critical thinking, social justice, and social equity are also examined and discussed.

Intensive Focus on Privilege, Oppression, Diversity and Social Justice (PODS)

This course integrates PODS content and skills with a special emphasis on the identification of theories, practice and/or policies that promote social justice, illuminate injustices and are consistent with scientific and professional knowledge. Through the use of a variety of instructional methods, this course will support students developing a vision of social justice, learn to recognize and reduce mechanisms that support oppression and injustice, work toward social justice processes, apply intersectionality and intercultural frameworks and strengthen critical consciousness, self-knowledge and self-awareness to facilitate PODS learning.

Course Schedule

This course will explore “big picture” questions like: what are the perks and pitfalls of social media? How is social media changing the social world? How can we harness social media to push for anti-oppressive social change? Over the five weeks we spend together, the following specific themes will be explored:

- In week one we will get oriented to one another and begin to explore the general perks and pitfalls of social media.
- In week two we will explore perks and pitfalls in the ways social media impacts human connection and relationships. For example, in general we see rates of loneliness rise in relation to social media use, and yet for some marginalized communities (such as Queer or Disabled folks) social media is a space for liberated connection and activism.
- In week three we will explore perks and pitfalls in the ways social media impacts body image. For example, in general we see rates of body dissatisfaction rise due to the oppressive beauty ideals social media can promote, and yet social media can also be a powerful platform for [body liberation](#) activism. We'll be joined this week by guest speaker [Shira Collings](#), a friend and a fabulous body liberation activist.
- In week four we will explore the ways social media can be used for activism. We'll be joined by a guest speaker who is prolific in digital activism - our school's very own Dr. [Shanna Kattari](#).
- And in week five we will debrief and wrap up our time together!

My Teaching Style

I completed my PhD in anthropology and social work here at the University of Michigan in 2018. My main area of passion and experience is [Disability Justice](#) (especially the [Mad Pride](#) and [Neurodiversity movements](#)) and how this connects to other forms of anti-oppression like intersectional feminism, antiracism, and decolonization. I work as a lecturer in our SSW (here's the link to [my faculty profile](#)) and I am committed to healing-centered teaching.

Healing-Centered Teaching: I aim to co-create [radically accessible](#) and [healing-centered](#) communities. I will go through this in more detail during our first class, but my healing-centered teaching practice involves:

- 1) **Choice** – I believe it is important for students to have agency and to feel ownership over their learning journeys. Therefore, I offer you choices in this class; firstly, I offer an array of assigned materials each week to support our learning, and though you're invited to read/watch them all, you can also choose which to prioritize based on your capacity (to help with this, I provide written descriptions of each material); secondly, I offer four reflective Discussion board assignments throughout our time together (one for each week, except in the final week), and you can choose three of these to complete (i.e., you only need to do 3 out of the 4 Discussion board assignments); thirdly, for your Final Project assignment there are many options to choose from. In these ways you can tailor your *personal* journey through this class, all the while scaffolding it within our *collective* journey.
- 2) **Flexibility** – to me, radical accessibility in a classroom means affirming different learning paces and styles, and making room for any barriers life throws our way, from the limitations of our own [body-minds](#) to the systemic barriers we face because we live in an ableist culture. I aim to co-create classes that are free of the common stressors of academia (such as perfectionism and anxiety about grades), and where students feel

seen and cared for. My classes are "penalty-free zones," which means that all course expectations and deadlines are flexible. All you need to do is let me know about any needs and barriers so I can support your learning. For example, you can email me if you need to miss a Zoom class so we can arrange a way to make up what is missed (such as watching a recording of the class later). If you need an extension for an assignment, I am happy to offer that. If you need to tweak an assignment to better suit your learning style (e.g. doing an assignment verbally instead of in writing), we can do that too. I do not believe in "laziness" (see this article titled "[Laziness does not exist: unseen barriers do](#)"). I believe everyone learns at their own pace and that an oppressive culture like ours can create barriers to learning. These barriers are easier to move through when there is open communication about them!

- 3) **Transparency / Radical Authenticity** – and speaking of open communication, I aim to co-create learning communities that feature transparent and authentic communication. I bring my full and vulnerable self into our class, and I invite this from students too. With authenticity, we can challenge the [hidden curriculum](#) of academia and the oppressive norms that ask us to be inauthentic. For example, you don't need to pretend "I have a technology issue, so I can't come to class" when you really feel overwhelmed and stressed - you can be honest, and I can reassure you that your need for rest and self-care is valid (or as I like to say; *in this community, we respect any "no" from our body-minds*)! Or, you don't need to pretend you agree with me or the other students all the time - you can be honest about differing perspectives, and an exploration of our differences might lead to deepened understanding and empathy! In sum: students are invited to speak their truths. Not only can this help us feel belonging, but it can also support healing and anti-oppression, and make our time together more enjoyable :)

Course Logistics

1. **Announcements:** On every day we meet for Zoom Class, you will receive a "Plan of the Day" Announcement on Canvas, which will tell you what to expect for our class that day. You will also receive a "Debrief" Announcement after class has ended, where I will share the slides and the video recording. Please be sure that you have Canvas Announcements enabled (in Canvas under Account → Notifications → Announcement).
2. **Content warnings:** in the service of our collective learning and growth, this course explores a variety of potentially activating topics. Instead of providing specific content warnings for each assigned piece (a difficult feat given that "activating" is subjective), I urge you to take care of yourselves however and whenever necessary, and please feel free to reach out to me if you need to process anything that comes up for you.
3. **Expected Time Commitment:** at our school a 1-credit class amounts to *45 hours of expected time commitment over the semester*. This includes all synchronous and asynchronous work, such as Zoom classes, exploring assigned materials, and assignments. For our class, this averages to approximately *9 hours per week*.
4. **Email:** I will do my best to respond to emails within 24 hours, but please feel free to send me a reminder if you are feeling any urgency or anxiety.
5. **Accommodations for Disabled students/my fellow "spoonies":** as mentioned in the previous page about my Healing-centered teaching practice, I am committed to [radical accessibility](#) in my learning communities. Please let me know if you have any specific needs. We can work together informally, or if you wish, you can include the [Services for Students with Disabilities Office/SSD](#).

6. **Religious observations:** please let me know if you have any religious observations I should be aware of (for example, if you need to miss a Zoom class).
7. **Paywalls:** some of the readings for this course are on websites (like New York Times) that have paywalls. If you can't access an assigned reading due to a paywall, please search the title on our [library website](#) as our school has paid subscriptions.

Assignments and Grading

In line with my healing-centered teaching practice, the assignments for this class are designed to be useful and energizing activities that invite you to explore your path to critical consciousness and compassion. They are not designed to test, judge, or rank you - so I invite you to relax, and enjoy the journey ahead!

When I read your work (whether it is a Discussion post or your Final Project assignment), this is what you can expect: 1) I will engage with your work by providing written feedback and validation. 2) Discussion posts will be graded as "complete/incomplete," and the Final Project will be graded with a point-based letter grade according to the following:

A = if you receive an A it means you met the expectations of the assignment and that your work conveyed critical thinking, care and depth.

A-/B+ = if you receive an A- or B+ it means you met the expectations of the assignment but your work was not as deep or nuanced as it could have been (which would also come through in my written feedback).

B = if you receive a B it means your work was adequate but an important element was missing (which would also come through in my written feedback).

If your work does not meet the criteria for B or higher, I will check in with you by email and see what the barriers are.

The graded assignments for this course will be as follows:

1. **Discussion Posts: 40 points/40% of your course grade**

In an online learning environment, Discussion boards are one of our main tools for exchanging ideas and developing relationships with one another! Each week (except for week five) there will be a Discussion board with questions or prompts that ask you to reflect on the assigned materials. You are expected to participate in at least 3 (out of 4) Discussion boards throughout the semester. Participation looks like:

- Making a primary post responding to at least one of the available prompts. This is **due by 12pm on the day of our Zoom class (Wednesdays)**. I set this deadline so I have time to account for your reflections while preparing for our Zoom class, though there is no penalty for posting later (as I said earlier, my classes are "punishment-free zones"!). There is no word limit - you are trusted to write the amount that is right for you, though I offer the advice to be concise (if everyone writes 1000 words, it will be hard for folks to read everything!).
- Reading your classmates' posts. For example, if you post early in the week, you are expected to return to the thread later in the week to read what was posted after you.

- Responding to your classmates' posts. This could look like; offering validation; asking a follow-up question; if someone before you wrote something that overlaps with what you want to say, acknowledging them in your post, etc. Note: **If you respond to a classmates' post in a meaningful and substantive way that also engages with the assignment prompts, this can count as your primary post for the week.**

There will also be an optional (not graded) weekly Discussion board devoted to community building. Specifically, each week there will be a "**Life Snapshot**" Discussion where you are invited to share an image (a photograph, a screenshot, a meme) from your daily life and describe it to us. There will be more information about this on the Discussion itself.

2. **Zoom Attendance and Participation: 20 points/20% of your course grade**

We will meet on **Wednesdays from 5-8pm** on Zoom. Here is the expected Zoom etiquette:

- **Start Time:** I will offer a few minutes of grace at the start of each class, but please be mindful of our start time and allow yourself enough time to log in and settle in.
- **Camera:** It is not required to turn on your camera, but doing so can make it easier to connect/build a sense of community, so it is encouraged.
- **Muting:** To avoid unwanted noise, please mute your microphone when you're not speaking.
- **Pronouns:** If you wish to, you can share your pronouns on Zoom by following [these instructions](#).
- **Meeting Your Needs:** I will build break times into our Zoom sessions, but you are also welcome to meet any of your needs during our time together (for example, eating, drinking, getting up to move your body, or stretch, etc.). However, if you leave your laptop at any point during class, please send me a direct message in the chat (this prevents any awkward moments, such as being assigned into a breakout room activity and not showing up).

Please see the "Zoom Attendance and Participation" assignment on Canvas for details about how attendance and participation will be graded (or *ungraded!*).

3. **Final Project: 40 points/40% of your course grade**

Please see the "Final Project" assignment on Canvas for more details.

Weekly Schedule

Week 1: Introductions/The Social Dilemma

Goal: This week we launch our course with welcomes and introductions, and a basic overview of the risks of social media (relying on the documentary *The Social Dilemma*).

Read:

Please read all the Pages under the Module titled "Course Overview" (or this entire document) as there is important information about what is expected of you, what you can expect from me and from the course, and what the flow of our journey will be like.

Watch:

Please watch this video about my [Healing-centered teaching](#) practice, which will help you get oriented to my teaching style.

Please watch the Netflix Documentary “[The Social Dilemma](#).” If you do not have access to Netflix, please email me and let me know as soon as possible!

This documentary covers the major problems/risks of social media – for example, the mental health consequences (such as increases in anxiety, depression, body image issues, etc.), the increases in social polarization and “tribalism,” the increases in forms of extremism (such as conspiracy theories, fake news, and hate-based violence), and the issues of data privacy and manipulation of social media users. I also recommend checking out the website for the [Center For Humane Technology](#) (which is discussed in the film), and the podcast “[Your Undivided Attention](#)” co-hosted by Center for Humane Technology founder Tristan Harris.

Do: Please follow instructions on our Canvas page.

Optional additional resources:

[How to Do Nothing: resisting the attention economy](#) (2020) by Jenny Odell. Here is an excerpt of the blurb: "In a world where addictive technology is designed to buy and sell our attention, and our value is determined by our 24/7 data productivity, it can seem impossible to escape. But in this inspiring field guide to dropping out of the attention economy, artist and critic Jenny Odell shows us how we can still win back our lives."

The Social Dilemma is a great review of many of the problems that arise from social medium, but if you're interested in more, the following articles from *The Economist* address different facets of these problems (PDFs in “Files”)

Do social media threaten democracy? Facebook, Google and Twitter were supposed to save politics as good information drove out prejudice and falsehood. Something has gone very wrong

Who controls the conversation? Free speech on social media is too important to be determined by a handful of tech executives

How the world was trolled: Once considered a boon to democracy, social media have started to look like its nemesis

Week 2: Social Media and Social Relationships

Goal: This week we explore how social media has impacted/is impacting social relationships, focusing on the perks and pitfalls. For example, in general we see rates of loneliness rise in relation to social media use (something which came up in *The Social Dilemma*), and yet many marginalized folks have discovered that social media allows them to find their community more easily than in the pre-social media past. Note: this reading list might seem long, but many of these pieces are very brief (approx. 2 pages) in length!

Read:

Katherine Hobson, 2017, [Feeling Lonely? Too Much Time On Social Media May Be Why](#)
This piece reviews a study that connects social media use to loneliness. You can look up the journal article/study they are referencing if you want to know more details (and the same goes for the next two readings, which are also reviews of journal articles/studies).

Roger Patulny, 2020, [Does social media make us more or less lonely? Depends on how you use it](#)

This is another piece reviewing research that connects loneliness to social media.

Mark Travers, 2023, [Are You Suffering From Social-Media-Induced Loneliness?](#)

This piece reviews research connecting social media use to loneliness, and also provides advice for folks who wish to remedy social-media-induced loneliness.

BBC, 2019, [Dunbar's number: Why we can only maintain 150 relationships](#)

This piece describes "Dunbar's Number," an anthropological concept that suggests humans have a cognitive limit to how many relationships we can sustain, and connects it to modern society and social media.

Lucy Osler, 2021, [Taking Empathy Online](#)

This is an article written by one of my friends, a philosopher who studies empathy and human connectedness. It is about the ways that empathy and connection can be felt in the digital realm, challenging the common (but untrue) belief that empathy/connection requires physical presence. It is a longer article, so you can feel free to skim read!

Sarah Kurchak, 2018, [Autistic People Are Breaking Stereotypes And Connecting Online](#)

This piece describes how social media has been helpful to Autistic folks.

Ginger Stickney, 2019, ["Stop Looking At Your Phone"?: 5 Ways Internet Technology Helps My Queer, Neurodivergent Family](#)

This is a piece about the positive impact social media can have for folks with oppressed identities.

Amber Leventry, 2019, [The importance of social media when it comes to LGBTQ kids feeling seen](#)

This piece explores how social media can be valuable for LGBTQIA+ youth.

Watch:

This video (5 min) from a researcher who studies "[the social impacts of hyperconnectivity](#)" (you might also want to read this brief [dictionary definition](#) of the term 'hyperconnectivity' to aid in your understanding).

Do: Please follow instructions on Canvas page

Optional additional resources:

Katelyn Burns, 2019, [The internet made trans people visible. It also left them more vulnerable: This decade has been a double-edged sword for trans people.](#)

This article talks about both positive and negative impacts of social media in the trans community.

[Dating and Relationships in the Digital Age](#), Pew Research Center 2020

[The Future of Well-Being in a Tech-Saturated World](#), Pew Research Center 2018

[A Majority of Teens Have Experienced Some Form of Cyberbullying](#), Pew Research center 2018

[Millennials will benefit and suffer due to their hyperconnected lives](#), Pew Research center 2012

[Why Are More American Teenagers Than Ever Suffering From Severe Anxiety?](#) New York Times 2017 (this article connects social anxiety to social media)

Karen Kelsky, 2020, [Online Education Can Help The Neurodivergent and Disabled](#). This piece is not about social media, but it is related: it is about how online education creates more accessibility for some Disabled and Neurodivergent folks.

Week 3: Social Media and The Body

Goal: This week we explore how social media impacts people's relationship to their bodies. We will look at both the dark side (how social media amplifies the harmful consequences of systems of oppression such as fatphobia and ableism) and the hopeful side (how social media is used to promote body liberation). We will be joined by guest speaker [Shira Collings](#), a friend and a fabulous radical body liberation activist.

Read:

ALOK, 2018, [Why Ugliness Is Vital in the Age of Social Media: ALOK talks with writer and disability justice organizer Mia Mingus about beauty, body positivity, and ableism](#)

Mia Mingus is a well-known and well-loved member of the Disability Justice community, and in this piece she is interviewed by another well-known activist named ALOK.

See also this post on ALOK's Instagram about ["the racist history of hair removal"](#) (and feel invited to follow them and check out some of their other posts, they're all pretty amazing!) Sonya Renee Taylor, 2018, Shame, Guilt and Apology – then and now (chapter two of *The Body is Not an Apology*) – PDF in "Files"

The Body is Not an Apology is an amazingly powerful book that our visiting speaker today recommended to me. It champions radical self-love / body liberation as a force to heal ourselves and transform our culture. This chapter describes the vicious relationship between oppressive ideas about what is "normal" and practices that shame people into believing themselves "abnormal" or "wrong." It also describes the role of media in perpetuating what she calls the "Global Body-Shame Profit Complex." If you're interested, the whole book is available on our library website. I also recommend checking out [The Body is Not an Apology](#) – the website for the global digital body liberation organization that she founded.

Shira Collings, 2020, [How Writing and Speaking Out Are Integral to My Recovery](#)

This is a short piece by our visiting speaker (using a pseudonym that she often uses in her more political work, which she will explain during her talk). It is about how writing and engaging in social media activism have been crucial in her recovery journey.

Do: Please follow instructions on Canvas page

Optional additional resources:

You might enjoy this TED talk by Sonya Renee Taylor as well: [BODIES AS RESISTANCE: Claiming the political act of being oneself](#) (8 min). I love the quote “will we use our bodies to uphold systems of oppression or to defy them?”

Vera Papisova, 2016, [How Social Media and Body Positivity Are Ending Period Stigma](#)
This is a very short piece about the ways that social media is used to challenge the patriarchal taboo/stigma surrounding menstruation

Week 4: Social Media and Activism

Goal: This week we explore how social media can be used for anti-oppressive social change, while also exploring some of the pitfalls associated with digital activism (such as performative allyship). We will be joined by Dr. [Shanna Kattari](#), a friend/colleague and social media activist.

Read:

Shanna Kattari and eli hess, 2022, [Harnessing the power of new media for good: Using TikTok as a tool for social justice and social work education](#)

From the abstract: "This article is a conversation between high-profile TikTok creator and MSW student eli hess and social work assistant professor and TikTok creator Shanna K. Kattari about the myriad ways that TikTok has been and can be used for educational purposes. They specifically address using TikTok both to teach students in formal social work programs and to engage the masses around topics related to social justice. In their conversation, the authors reflect on how they came to this method of social justice education and pose questions about the utility of this approach."

Talia Lavin, 2020, [Keyboard warriors: How the internet can be a lifeline for disabled activists](#)

This is an inspiring piece about the way social media can support community building and activism for Disabled folks.

Cabrera, N. L., Matias, C. E., & Montoya, R., 2017, Activism or slacktivism? The potential and pitfalls of social media in contemporary student activism (PDF in “Files”)

This is a journal article that reviews research about the positive and negative roles that social media plays in student activism.

Rachel Liu, 2020, [#Woke: The Dangers and Possibilities of Social Media Activism and Woke Washing](#)

This piece addresses similar issues to the piece above, though it is not focused only on students, and is written as a blog post rather than peer-review article.

Holiday Phillips, 2020, [Performative Allyship Is Deadly \(Here’s What to Do Instead\)](#)

This is a brief piece defining ‘performative allyship’ and describing its harmful impacts.

Aleesha Kaur Tamber, 2021, [Social Media and Modern Activism](#)

This is a brief blog post that takes a big picture view of social media as a form of modern activism.

Do: Please follow instructions on Canvas page

Optional additional resources:

Jane Hu, 2020, [The Second Act of Social-Media Activism: Has the Internet become better at mediating change?](#) - in "The New Yorker"

Hedy Greijdanus et al., 2020. [The psychology of online activism and social movements: relations between online and offline collective action](#) - an academic journal article in "Current Opinions in Psychology"

The NASW has released this resource with [Standards for Technology in Social Work Practice](#) – it features a uniform set of technology standards for professional social workers to use as a guide in their practice. Highly recommended for future use!

I assign Johanna Hedva's [Sick Woman Theory](#) in every class I teach! It's my favorite Disability Justice piece, and it brings to light many powerful points about anti-oppression. One of the key points is how Disabled people are erased when we view activism as something one must be present for in person (the famous question Hedva asks is "How do you throw a brick through the window of a bank if you can't get out of bed?"). It relates nicely to what we are exploring this week, so if you have extra time, treat yourself to this beautiful read!

Week 5: Wrapping Up

Goal: There are no assigned materials this week, as the goal for today is to debrief our time together and offer space for those who wish to present their Final Project to the community. See Canvas for further instructions about wrapping-up logistics (e.g., submitting Final Projects)