

**FIMS 9334**  
**Culture and Creative Labour in the Age of Digital Platforms**  
**Fall 2021**  
Alison Hearn



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**Office Hours: Thursdays 12:00-1:30**

**VIA ZOOM: <https://westernuniversity.zoom.us/j/92926742211>**

**Description:**

The culture industries, creative work and culture itself have been transformed in complex ways by the current hegemony of digital platforms. Google, Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Microsoft, Baidu, Alibaba, and Tencent are all working to control, contain and monetize the production and distribution of creative expression and community formation, changing the very definitions and understanding of culture and creative work in the process. From the institutional reconfiguring of legacy cultural industries like music and television, to the dominance of platform-specific cultural forms such as gaming and vlogging and the new creative worker subjectivities they have inaugurated, such as social media influencers, the 'ordinariness' of culture as defined by Raymond Williams – a society's "common meanings and directions...shaped in arts and learning" – is becoming increasingly difficult to discern. Drawing from political economy, software studies and cultural studies, this course will provide a survey of cultural production and creative work in the age of digital platforms. What new forms of creative production and expression are facilitated and/or impeded by the structural logics of platforms? What new kinds of creative labour are emerging and what other forms are receding? What can culture mean when our individual tastes and proclivities are directed and determined in advance by hyper-personalized proprietary algorithms and artificial intelligence? What implications do these developments have for personal identity, social connection and collective politics?

**Readings:**

All readings available as PDFs on OWL, or as links on the syllabus.

**Assignments:**

(Additional information about assignments will be provided in class)

1. **Response papers.** 250-400 words. You are required to write short reading response papers for 7 out of the 11 weeks of class. You can choose to respond to one of the assigned papers, to a few, or to all of them for that week, drawing out themes or questions you might have. The responses do not need to be formal – they are a way to get you engage with the texts. Think of them as blog posts. 7x3%= 21%
2. **Seminar presentation.** You are required to prepare a presentation (45 minutes) based on the course readings, and then lead the class in a seminar discussion. You are the professor for the week. 24%
3. **Short conference paper presented in class.** We will be holding short, mini-conference panels throughout the class. You can use this short, 20-minute conference presentation (approx. 2000-2500 words) as the building block for your final research paper. 20%
4. **Final research paper.** You are required to produce a final research paper that draws from the course content and material. The research paper will need to be clear about its theoretical frame and methodology and, of course, have a clear and compelling research question. It should be clearly written and have a keen sense of the stakes of the research question being asked – why should the reader care about your topic? What does it contribute to understandings of platformed cultural production and its social, political, economic, cultural or environmental implications? 35%

**Course information:**

1. Students should come to all classes prepared, having done the readings with questions and comments in hand.
2. Regular attendance is required.
3. This class is a seminar; there will be no lectures. Students will have equal responsibility to generate and sustain discussion. Students are also expected to show respect and care to others in the class.

**COVID 19 and our classroom**

We are still in a state of emergency. We need to keep this fact in mind because the progression of the pandemic will profoundly shape the kind of experience we have in this class. I know we were all hoping it would be over by now, but it's not. As I write this, the numbers are going up because of the virality of the Delta variant and vaccine hesitancy, especially among younger people. We are all in different living situations, many of us have close contact with young kids, who can't be vaccinated, or older parents and grandparents who are more vulnerable. Even though I am vaccinated, I have an underlying medical condition that increases the likelihood of more severe illness should I develop a breakthrough case. I am also a caregiver to three very elderly parents, one of whom is immuno-compromised. Our classroom provides a direct link between you and them. I ask that you make all reasonable efforts to protect yourselves, our campus, and the broader community from the spread of COVID 19. The best way you can do this is to wear a mask inside, wash your hands often, socially distance as much as possible and, most of all, **get vaccinated!**

I also want to ask you to be sensitive to the varieties of experiences your classmates might have had with the disease. Some may have gone untouched so far, while others might have experienced illness or loss. We need to be careful about making assumptions about other people's experiences and treat each other with compassion and sensitivity. Hopefully, together we can make this semester as safe, thoughtful, fun, and rigorous as possible.

**Course Schedule**

Sept 14.

## Introduction

### **Section 1: Culture/Culture industries/algorithms/platforms**

Sept. 21.

#### **Culture/ Cultural industry/ies**

Raymond Williams, "Culture is Ordinary" (OWL)

Raymond Williams, "Culture" in *Marxism and Language* (OWL)

Adorno and Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception"

<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/adorno/1944/culture-industry.htm>

Bernard Miege, "Cultural and Creative Industries and the Political Economy of Communication" in *Making Media: Production, Practices and Professions*. (OWL)

Dave Hesmondhalgh, "The Cultural Industries Approach" in *The Cultural Industries* (4<sup>th</sup> edition) (OWL)

Sept. 28.

#### **Algorithmic culture**

Ed Finn, "What is an Algorithm?" in *What do Algorithms Want?* (OWL)

Ted Striphas, "Algorithmic culture" <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1367549415577392>

Tarleton Gillespie, "#trendingistrending: When algorithms become culture"

<http://www.tarletongillespie.org/essays/Gillespie%20-%20trendingistrending%20PREPRINT.pdf>

David Beer, "Algorithms: Shaping Tastes and Manipulating the Circulations of Popular Culture" in *Popular Culture and New Media* (OWL)

Oct 5.

#### **Platformed culture/capitalism**

Helmond, A. (2015). The Platformization of the Web: Making Web Data Platform Ready.

*Social Media + Society*, 1(2), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115603080>

Tarleton Gillespie, "The politics of 'platforms'." (OWL)

David Nieborg and Thomas Poell. "The platformization of cultural production: Theorizing the contingent cultural commodity." (OWL)

Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism*, Chapters 1 and 2. (OWL)

## READING WEEK

### **Section 2: Platformed cultural industries and infrastructures:**

Oct. 19.

#### **Platformed music**

Jeremy Wade Morris, "Music Platforms and the Optimization of Culture." *Social Media + Society*, 6(3), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120940690>

Dave Hesmondhalgh and Leslie Meier, "What the Digitalisation of Music tells us about capitalism, culture and the power of the information technology sector", *Information, Communication and Society*, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1369118X.2017.1340498?scroll=top&needAccess=true>

Robert Prey, "Locating power in platformization: Music streaming playlists and curatorial power" <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2056305120933291>

Dave Hesmondhalgh, Ellis Jones & Rauh, A. (2019). SoundCloud and Bandcamp as Alternative Music Platforms. *Social Media + Society*, 5(4), 1–13.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119883429>

Oct. 26.

## **Platformed television**

Amanda Lotz, *We Now Disrupt this Broadcast: How cable transformed television and the internet revolutionized it all* - Part 2 and Conclusion. (OWL)

Catherine Johnson, "The Appisation of Television: TV apps, discoverability and the software, device and platform ecologies of the internet era"

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1749602020911823>

Annemarie Navar-Gill, (2020). "The Golden Ratio of Algorithms to Artists? Streaming Services and the Platformization of Creativity in American Television Production."

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2056305120940701>

Nov.2.

## **Platform-dependent entertainment**

Phil Napoli and Robyn Caplan, "Why media companies insist they're not media companies, why they're wrong, and why it matters", <https://journals.uic.edu/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/7051>

Stuart Cunningham and David Craig, "Platform Strategy" from *Social Media Entertainment* (OWL)

Kumar, Sangeet. (2019). "The algorithmic dance: YouTube's Adpocalypse and the gatekeeping of cultural content on digital platforms."

<https://policyreview.info/articles/analysis/algorithmic-dance-youtubes-adpocalypse-and-gatekeeping-cultural-content-digital>

Caplan, R., & Gillespie, T. (2020). Tiered Governance and Demonetization: The Shifting Terms of Labor and Compensation in the Platform Economy. *Social Media + Society*, 6(2), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120936636>

Partin, W. (2020). "Bit by (Twitch) Bit: 'Platform Capture' and the Evolution of Digital Platforms."

<https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120933981>

## **Section 3: Platformed Creative Labour**

Nov 9.

### **Love/hope/play/precarity**

Miya Tokumitsu, "In the Name of Love", <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/01/in-the-name-of-love/>

Andrew Ross, "In Search of the Lost Paycheck" (OWL)

Rosalind Gill, "Life is a Pitch: Managing the self in new media work" (OWL)

Kuehn, Kathleen and Thomas Corrigan, "Hope Labor: The Role of Employment Prospects in Online Social Production." <https://polecom.org/index.php/polecom/article/view/9>

Jamie Woodcock, "The Work of Videogames," In *Marx at the Arcade: Consoles, Controllers and Class Struggle* (OWL)

Brooke Duffy, "Algorithmic Precarity in cultural work" (OWL)

Nov 16.

### **Creator or influencer?**

Stuart Cunningham and David Craig, "Creator Labour" in *Social Media Entertainment* (OWL)

Brooke Duffy, "(Not) Just for the Fun of it" from *(Not) Getting Paid to Do What you Love* (OWL)

Susie Khamis, Lawrence Ang and Raymond Welling, "Self-branding, micro-celebrity and the rise of social media influencers" (OWL)

Alison Hearn and Stephanie Schoenhoff, "From Celebrity to Influencer" (OWL)

Brooke Duffy and Megan Sawey, "Value, Service and Precarity among Instagram content creators" in *Creator Culture* (OWL)

Nov 23.

### **Algorithmic in/visibility and burn out**

Brooke Duffy, "Aspirational Labour's (In)visibility" (OWL)

Sophie Bishop, "Anxiety, Panic and Self-Optimisation: Inequalities and the YouTube Algorithm" (OWL)

Zoe Glatt, "We're all told not to put our eggs in one basket": (In)visibility, uncertainty and the metrification of self-worth in platformised creative work." (OWL)

Kelly Cotter, "Playing the Visibility Game: How Digital Influencers and Algorithms Negotiate Influence on Instagram." (OWL)

Vicki O'Meara, "Weapons of the chic: Instagram influencer engagement pods as practices of resistance to Instagram platform labor." <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2056305119879671>

### **Section 4: Holding platforms to account**

Nov 30.

#### **Challenging structural 'invisibilities'**

Caitlin Lawson, "Platform vulnerabilities: harassment and misogynoir in the digital attack on Leslie Jones" (OWL)

Claire Southerton, Daniel Marshall, Peter Aggleton, P., Mary Lou Rasmussen, and Rob Cover, "Restricted modes: Social media, content classification and LGBTQ sexual citizenship." <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1461444820904362>

Janice Asare, "Does TikTok Have A Race Problem?" *Forbes* <https://www.forbes.com/sites/janicegassam/2020/04/14/does-tiktok-have-a-race-problem/?sh=44fceb323260>

Alex Hern. "TikTok's local moderation guidelines ban pro-LGBT content." *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/sep/26/tiktoks-local-moderation-guidelines-ban-pro-lgbt-content>

Makena Kelly, "TikTok pledges to promote black creators after accusations of censorship." *The Verge*. <https://www.theverge.com/2020/6/1/21277505/tiktok-black-creators-censorship-algorithm-donation-diversity-council>

Connor Perret, "Transgender TikTok creators say the app's mysterious 'For You' page is a breeding ground for transphobia and targeted harassment." *Business Insider*. <https://www.businessinsider.com/tiktok-transphobia-problem-creators-report-harassment-threats-2021-2>

Dec 7.

#### **Organizing platformed creative labour**

Amelia Tait, "Influencers are being taken advantage of: The social media stars turning to unions." *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2020/oct/10/influencers-are-being-taken-advantage-of-the-social-media-stars-turning-to-unions>

Valentin Niebler, 'YouTubers unite': Collective action by YouTube content creators. (OWL)

Paolo Ruffino & Jamie Woodcock, "Game Workers and the Empire: Unionization in the UK Video Game Industry."

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412020947096>

Greig de Peuter, Bianca Dreyer, Marisol Sandoval and Aleksandra Szaflarska. *Sharing Like We Mean It: Working Co-operatively in the Cultural and Tech Sectors*. <https://culturalworkersorganize.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Sharing-Like-We-Mean-It-Web.pdf>