

**The University of Western Ontario  
Faculty of Information and Media Studies**

**MIT 2155B – Social Media + Networked Life  
Course Outline, Winter 2021**

**Instructor Information**

Name: Prof. Luke Stark (pronouns: he/him/his)

Office: FNB 4035

Student Meetings: By appointment via Zoom (<https://calendly.com/lukestark>)

Office Phone: 519-661-2111 ext 88511

E-Mail: [cstark23@uwo.ca](mailto:cstark23@uwo.ca) \*please note I will work to answer your email within 24 hours, excluding weekends\*

**Course Information**

Synchronous lecture (optional): Wednesdays 11:00am-12:15pm EST via Zoom

Lecture material will be accessible asynchronously and discussion forums will take online place via VoiceThread

Student meetings: By appointment via Zoom (<https://calendly.com/lukestark>)

OWL site information: <https://tinyurl.com/ybosojwe>

Technology requirements: Students will require regular or at least consistent access to a computer and internet connection capable of handling, in particular, streaming video. If this is an issue, please contact me as soon as possible.

**Prerequisites or Antirequisites**

Antirequisites: Digital Communication 2310A/B

**Course Description**

It's hard to deny—especially this past year—how central social media platforms, digital communications technologies, and online social and political communities are to our everyday lives as citizens and social beings. In this course, you'll be introduced to a variety of scholarly perspectives on social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and TikTok; digital games and game streaming; Influencer culture; and tracking devices like FitBits and other wearables. We'll explore how different facets of human identity, including race, disability, gender, and sexuality, are shaped by social media; we'll examine the ways in which scholars from different disciplines—computer science, history, sociology, philosophy, media studies, and anthropology—have approached these topics, and tried to gauge the impacts of digital media. And perhaps most centrally, we'll consider how the business models of social media and digital networks shape relations of power in the world today.

*Course Objectives*

In these challenging times, the first objective of the course is to support each other throughout the semester.

Additionally, by the conclusion of the course I hope you'll also feel confident to do the following:

- Think expansively about the constitutive relationships between social media platforms and the people who make and use them.
- Analyze and describe how these relationships have influenced and continue to shape our everyday lives, and those of diverse communities around the world.
- Learn to trace how political, cultural, and social power circulates via digital media in different contexts.
- Become adept in applying your knowledge to the changing digital media landscape.
- Develop a mix of critical research skills, and learn to use these skills synthetically, creatively, and thoughtfully to your own analyses and arguments.
- Apply both your knowledge and research skills to a particular context as part of a broader group collaboration.

**Methods of Evaluation**

In this course, you have access to 100 possible evaluation points; collecting 100 points means you will receive 100% in the course. Question prompt and assignment point values are variable and commensurate with time commitment/difficulty. Regardless of point values, all in-term assessments and activities will be evaluated on a binary scale (credit/no credit) and all group project components will be evaluated on a simple three tier scale (full credit, partial credit, or no credit). Your cumulative point total will be available to view in OWL Gradebook throughout the semester.

These points are divided up among various forms of evaluation as follows:

*Module Objectives and Assessments: up to 50 points*

The bulk of your evaluation for this course will consist of a series of short prompts and brief assignments throughout the semester tied to each week's content module. As you move through each week's module, you'll have the opportunity to complete these assessments, including answering question prompts, providing reflections, and filling out short surveys. You will also receive points for completing all aspects of the module each week: **this will be assessed by you completing the weekly checklist within each module.** Please see the detailed course schedule for a list of activities worth points.

These activities are not meant to be onerous, nor are they intended as busy work. They are designed to help you reflect on how key concepts in the course relate to your own experience of social media, and to apply your knowledge to real-world examples. Each of these activities will be assigned some number of points graded on a simple binary scale (full credit/no credit) based on whether or not you completed them satisfactorily.

All in-module activities will be open for one week, starting the day their corresponding module is opened to the class. After a module closes, it will not be possible for you to submit the assignment for that module unless under exceptional circumstances. Please complete module components in order. Further module details are available on the course OWL site.

*Virtual Discussions: up to 20 points*

At the beginning of the semester, you will be assigned a discussion pod (of between 8-10 students). For most modules, I will post discussion prompts for your pod to complete. These discussions will take place alternately via Voice Thread, and each pod will have its own dedicated space. Please note **I would like you to use the audio recording feature of VoiceThread for discussions**, except in exceptional circumstances. The goal here is to give you a break from typing and let you engage in discussions through a different medium.

Within your discussion pod, you can earn points in the following ways:

- Discussion Leader (4 points): preparing a 200-300-word reflection on a module's discussion topic, recording it in your pod and sending a transcript to me, and engaging with the ensuing conversation multiple times throughout the week
- Discussion Respondent (2 point): Engaging with reflections and prompts in your pod, and with the conversation throughout the week.

If it happens that there is no Discussion Leader in a pod for a particular week's module, Discussion Respondents should feel free to engage with the prompt provided by me.

Sign-up lists for Discussion Leader/Respondent will be available the first week of class. You are responsible for making sure you have participated in discussion forums in any combination up to the maximum of 20 points. Please note that you cannot receive more than 20 points for discussion activities.

*"Black Mirror" Writer's Room Activity: up to 10 points*

The Netflix show *Black Mirror* imagines dystopian future technologies \*just\* fictional enough to creep us out and make us think critically about the role of these technologies in our lives. In this activity, you'll develop a short story treatment around speculative future technology and how to avoid its negative effects.

### *Collaborative Group Project: up to 20 points*

Early in the semester, you will be assigned a project group (of between 3-5 students). As a group, you will prepare a multimedia research portfolio focusing on a social media platform or network, assigned randomly to you by me. The finished portfolio will include:

- A **2500-word research brief** on the *historical context, organizational history, business model, and public impacts/controversies* of the platform (2 points for initial draft/10 points for finished version), including an annotated bibliography of at least 10 scholarly articles supporting the research brief.
- An **8 to 10-minute video** exploring how *three or more themes* from the course modules (such as the circulation of power, disability gender and misogyny, racism and antiblackness, surveillance) are expressed via the platform in question (5 points)
- A **self-assessment from each student** detailing their contribution to the project (3 points)

At the end of the term, point totals will be converted to letter grades according to the following scale, which corresponds to the Western marking scale ([https://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic\\_policies/general/grades\\_undergrad.pdf](https://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/general/grades_undergrad.pdf)):

A+	90 – 100 points
A	80 – 89 points
B	70 – 79 points
C	60 – 69 points
D	50 – 59 points
F	below 50 points or assigned when course is dropped with academic penalty

#### *What do these grading tiers and the point system mean for you, the student?*

You have to work in the class—that’s unavoidable. However, I’m interested in giving you some control over your experience of the course. Using this grade scale, you should be able to modulate the amount of work that corresponds with your course goals and bandwidth for this semester.

If you want an A+, then make sure you put together a minimum of 90 points by the end of the term. If all you want or need is a C, then make sure you get at least 60 points; it’s entirely up to you. Moreover, you never have to wonder where you stand in the class—you can look at your points, look at the grade scale, and plan accordingly.

#### *What do these grading tiers and the point system mean for me, the professor?*

By simplifying evaluation scales and assigning point tiers, I’m able to focus on the important things, like designing engaging content and interacting with your ideas. It also helps me limit the most subjective dimensions of grading—dimensions that often implicitly reproduce Western gendered, racial, ethnic, class, ability or other biases. I want an A grade to be reasonably attainable by all who want to do the appropriate work; it shouldn’t only be something “natural” talents or stereotypically “good” students can get, since “natural” and “good” are often just codes for certain kinds of privilege.

#### *Weekly Module Tempo*

Each week’s module content and discussion tools will be available as of **Wednesdays at 9am EST**. I will lecture live from **11:00am-12:15pm every Wednesday; I will record and post these lectures to MS Stream by Wednesday afternoon at 5pm**. To access lecture, look for the scheduled Zoom links emailed to the class each week. Please note that lecture attendance is optional – you should be able to complete this course entirely asynchronously should you wish, and all course points can be collected without attending synchronous sessions.

Discussion pods for each module will run from **Wednesday at 9am to the next Monday at 5pm. All discussion prompts will be available in advance, and I strongly encourage students who have signed up as Leaders to prepare their responses before the opening of pods each week (e.g. prepare your response on the Monday or Tuesday prior to a module opening).**

### **Weekly Schedule**

Details TBD

### **Etiquette & Course Conduct**

In this course, I'd like you to strive to embody Western's equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) principles. Western's institutional commitment to equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) supports the University's mandate as a research-intensive institution of higher learning, an employer of choice and a community leader. The University is enriched by the diversity of our campus community and strengthened by our shared commitment to equity and inclusion. Black Lives Matter, as do the lives and experiences of Indigenous peoples, other visible minorities, and all underrepresented and equity-seeking groups\*. Your conduct in this course should be guided by the principles below:

*Equity* – We value equity of access and opportunity for members of underrepresented and equity-seeking groups\*. We take action to identify and address barriers to the full participation of members of these groups at the University.

*Diversity* – We value and respect the diversity of our campus community. We recognize the important contributions that diverse perspectives and lived experiences bring to Western's learning, teaching, working and research environments.

*Inclusion* – We value inclusion and active engagement with and across diverse communities in all aspects of university life. We foster a welcoming campus community where everyone feels respected, valued and included.

\*Members of underrepresented or equity-seeking groups includes, but may not be limited to, women, Indigenous peoples (First Nations, Inuit and Métis), persons with disabilities, members of racialized groups and members of LGBTQ2+ communities. In recognition that all individuals have multiple aspects of identity, an intersectional lens will also be used when assessing barriers and/or developing policies/programs at the University.

Your goal is full attendance, attention, participation, listening and reading all of required texts. That said, while I expect the very best you can give, this semester is unlike many others, and goals are always aspirational. Do your best, but don't beat yourself up when (as we all do) it feels to you as if you come up short.

Disagreements are expected, but while arguments are not contests, they often have high stakes (sometimes invisible to you, but highly compelling to others – see the EDI principles above). Personal attacks, bullying, or intimidation are not acceptable under any circumstance. Please keep nitpicking to a minimum; all questions, whether basic or advance, are valuable. Remember, you are free to change your mind at any time -- as are others.

Do not engage in “seek and destroy” criticism of others' ideas, or of ideas in the readings. Critique is a powerful tool and can do damage. If you have something critical to say about a reading, please be ready to explain how the piece could be improved; if you disagree with the premise of a piece, read to understand what motivates the argument -- without knowing your adversary, how can you defeat it?

The testimony of personal experience is a necessary and often valuable part of our intellectual grounding and trajectory. However, like critique, testimony is also a powerful tool that can cut both ways. Please be thoughtful about mobilizing personal experience in class. Ask yourself if the testimony is relevant, and safe for you to share; ask yourself too if you are prepared to seriously consider others' interpretations of your experience if they differ from your own? Anecdotes are a different kind of evidence that systematically collected scholarly data, and useful (or harmful) in different ways.

For more information on Western's policies around academic integrity, including plagiarism, please visit <https://teaching.uwo.ca/teaching/assessing/academic-integrity.html>

### **Course Materials**

All course materials will be available via OWL, including short video lectures, accessible PDFs, links to external online content, discussion fora, and text-based assignment prompts.

There are no late penalties for this course, other than the policies regarding course modules and points already described.

Students will receive graded work worth no less than 15% at least 3 days prior to the deadline for withdrawal without academic penalty. This year, the date by which students are to have received at least 15% of their grade in a second semester course is March 14, 2021. Students can find details about this academic policy here:

[http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic\\_policies/exam/evaluation\\_undergrad.pdf](http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/exam/evaluation_undergrad.pdf). Please note, students are responsible for ensuring that they are aware of the grades they have received in their courses.

### **Statement on the Use of Zoom Recording**

Participants in this course are not permitted to record sessions, except where recording is an approved accommodation, or the participant has the prior written permission of the instructor.

**Class zoom sessions for this course will be recorded.** The data captured during these recordings may include your image, voice recordings, chat logs and personal identifiers (name displayed on the screen). The recordings will be used for educational purposes related to this course, including evaluations. The recordings may be disclosed to other individuals under special circumstances. Please contact the instructor if you have any concerns related to session recordings.

### **Land Acknowledgment**

We acknowledge that Western University's buildings are located on the traditional lands of the Anishinaabek, Haudenosaunee, Lūnaapéewak, and Attawandaron peoples, on lands connected with the London Township and Sombra Treaties of 1796 and the Dish with One Spoon Covenant Wampum. We pay our respects to their Elders, past, present, and future, and acknowledge the painful history of genocide and forced removal from this territory. This land continues to be home to diverse Indigenous peoples (e.g. First Nations, Métis and Inuit) whom we recognize as contemporary stewards of the land and vital contributors of our society, and we honor and respect the Indigenous communities still living on and connected to this land by striving for restorative justice for First Nations peoples, and for all.

### **Course Credits**

This syllabus is grounded in part on materials developed by Professor Gabriella Coleman of McGill University, Professor Casey Fiesler of the University of Colorado-Boulder, Professor Anna Lauren Hoffmann of the University of Washington, and Professor Jonathan Sterne of McGill University.