

Platforms, Networks, and New Power

Technology's Impact on Politics, Policy, and Elections

Summary

This study group will explore the expected and the unexpected ways that new technology platforms and networks are impacting policy, politics, and elections. The study group will begin with an introduction to the issues at stake in the intersection of technology and politics. Next, we will explore how technology has shifted the dissemination of information in our society, and the impact of political figures turning to and embracing use of these platforms.

In order to understand the issues at stake in this broader conversation, it will be critical to understand the unique operational questions and decisions that technology platforms face. The class will have the opportunity to hear from guest lecturers who pioneered many of these best practices at leading companies as early industry leaders.

Finally, we will apply these new concepts to attempt to better understand the impact of technology platforms on the 2016 election, how these effects are similar and different from the disruptive technologies that preceded them, and key areas around elections and media to focus on in the years to come.

SOME TOPICS MAY BE RESCHEDULED DUE TO PENDING SPEAKER AVAILABILITY

February 15: Understanding the influence of technology on information today: Platforms, networks, aggregators, and distributors.

Understanding the power that technology has today requires us to understand some fundamental concepts. Only then can we discuss the power these platforms and networks have and the disruption they have caused. These concepts include Commoditization, aggregation, distribution, and disruption of information, the rise of Platforms and platform companies, network power, and the difference between startups versus the big five tech companies.

February 22: News commoditization and disruption, fake news, and the surprise interdependence of cable news and the internet.

Today's fractured media environment requires understanding the commoditization and distribution of news, the conflict between paid and organic reach online, how these developments led to the rise of "fake news," and the interdependence of cable news and the internet in today's modern political environment. We will examine these concepts through the lens of the 2016 election and how they played a role in President Trump's success in the 2016 campaign and into his Presidency.

March 1: Communicating in a crisis (And there's almost always a crisis)

From Congress to Uber, there's always a crisis. But when a modern technology platform has a communications crisis, the scale and impact can be different than any other kind of PR or communications. We will explore the considerations in communicating for a platform and how challenging it can be to break through the fractured media environment today.

Invited Guest Speaker

- Andrew Noyes, VP of Communications at Hampton Creek, former Comms Uber and Facebook

March 8: How does the technology world think about policy?

Technology companies spent many years outside of the influence of government. But as technology companies push forward from the digital space to the real world, from health care to self-driving cars, they are intersecting with regulated spaces. How do technology companies, new and old, think about policy and how to influence it?

March 22: The new world of content policy: It's complicated!

Today, the rules that technology companies use to govern content on the internet are far-reaching and poorly understood. Nonetheless, the size and scale of many of these systems means that these rules become a new system of governing, often with minimal transparency. We will discuss these issues with some of the pioneers in the content policy field who helped shape and develop these rules.

Guest Speakers

- Charlotte Willner, former Facebook Content Policy team, current Pinterest Policy team
- Dave Willner, former Facebook Content Policy team, current AirBnB Policy team

March 29: Social media and elections before and after 2016.

Few could have predicted what would happen when politicians and political campaigns started joining social media platforms. Just like social media itself, what first seemed like a joke or pandering to young people, morphed into a much larger force. We will discuss the growth of social networks across demographics, how politicians talk to different audiences on different networks, and what Donald Trump taught us with his unmatched authenticity in social media.

Guest Speakers

- Katie Harbath, Director, Politics team at Facebook
- Annie Lewis, Industry Manager, Politics & Advocacy at Facebook

April 5: Cybersecurity is more than a buzzword

Today, almost all essential information is stored online. Everyone from nation states to scammers are engaged in a constant battle online, and the 2016 election demonstrated unprecedented weaponization of leaks and hacking. With more information moving to the cloud, protecting it is essential to our use and trust of technology. We will explore cybersecurity best practices, and how we should think about cybersecurity in our daily lives, and its impact on our broader global systems.

Invited Guest Speaker

- Geoff Belknap, Chief Security Officer, Slack

April 12: Disruption, new technologies, looking to the future, and lessons from the past.

A core lesson from the 2016 election is that America's electoral, political, and media systems are not prepared for non-traditional purposeful disruption of our electoral and political systems. State and non-state actors now have tools that can be exploited from anywhere around the globe.

Having explored the numerous impacts of technology platforms and networks on politics, policy, and elections, we will revisit to some of the fundamental concepts. We will then assess the differences between these new disruptive technologies and the disruptive technologies that came before them. What makes these new technologies unique? Are scale and speed the only differences? We will examine the lessons that we can learn from the emergence of previously disruptive technologies and the systems that adopted to them.