

# The New School

## Designing Digital Communities

Fall 2015

### Course Description

The Internet is a place for discussion and collaboration, but the experience can be difficult, confusing, intimidating, or downright hostile. This course will explore how we can design systems for better discussion, collaboration, voting and governance online. This course is taught by Francis Tseng, who is currently involved in the design and development of the Coral Project, a collaboration between the Washington Post, Knight-Mozilla OpenNews, and the New York Times that seeks to reinvent how digital communities work.

### Learning Outcomes

- Understand micro and macro-level behaviors in communities
- Identify the major problems in online communities
- Analyze social networks
- Design wireframes, flows, and features for improving social networks and other community platforms

### Final Grade Calculation

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Participation & Attendance	40%
Project	60%
Total	100%

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## Course Readings

Readings for each class will be provided as needed - all are available free online.

## Assignments and Participation

There will be one group project that you will work on throughout the semester. The project is broken up into smaller assignments to be completed between classes.

For classes where work was assigned, we'll have group critiques of the work - you are expected to participate in these critiques as well.

## Course Policies

### Attendance

You are expected to attend every class, but if you need to miss a class let me know in advance and we can discuss.

### Laptops & Cellphones

Please refrain from using cellphones or laptops in class - they're more distracting than helpful.

### Assignments

Students are responsible for all assignments, even if they are absent. Late papers, failure to complete the readings assigned for class discussion, and lack of preparedness for in-class discussions and presentations will jeopardize your successful completion of this course.

We can work out late assignments or makeup exams as necessary.

# Course Outline

## Week 1 (Sept 21): Introduction

### Topics

- Introductions
- What is community?
- A brief history of online community
- Why is community important?
- What makes a *good* community?
- What's wrong with digital communities today?
- Exercise: what would your nightmare community be like?
- Exercise: what would your ideal community be like?

### Readings

- 'It's Yours': A Short History of the Horde. Eva Holland.  
<http://blog.longreads.com/2015/02/04/its-yours-a-short-history-of-the-horde/>  
(<http://blog.longreads.com/2015/02/04/its-yours-a-short-history-of-the-horde/>)
- This Story Stinks. Dominique Brossard & Dietram A. Scheufele.  
[http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/03/opinion/sunday/this-story-stinks.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/03/opinion/sunday/this-story-stinks.html?_r=0)  
([http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/03/opinion/sunday/this-story-stinks.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/03/opinion/sunday/this-story-stinks.html?_r=0))
- These astroturf libertarians are the real threat to internet democracy. George Monbiot.  
<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/libertycentral/2010/dec/13/astroturf-libertarians-internet-democracy?INTCMP=SRCH>  
(<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/libertycentral/2010/dec/13/astroturf-libertarians-internet-democracy?INTCMP=SRCH>)
- The Science of Why Comment Trolls Suck. Chris Mooney.  
<http://www.motherjones.com/environment/2013/01/you-idiot-course-trolls-comments-make-you-believe-science-less> (<http://www.motherjones.com/environment/2013/01/you-idiot->

course-trolls-comments-make-you-believe-science-less)

## Assignments due

No assignments for this week.

## Week 2 (Sept 28): Designing communities

### Topics

- Designing a digital community platform
- Intro to wireframing and UX flows

### Readings

- Fixing Online Gaming Idiocy: A Psychological Approach. Bill Fulton.  
[http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/3604/fixing\\_online\\_gaming\\_idiocy\\_a\\_.php](http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/3604/fixing_online_gaming_idiocy_a_.php)  
([http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/3604/fixing\\_online\\_gaming\\_idiocy\\_a\\_.php](http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/3604/fixing_online_gaming_idiocy_a_.php))
- The Laborers Who Keep Dick Pics and Beheadings Out of Your Facebook Feed. Adrian Chen. <http://www.wired.com/2014/10/content-moderation>  
(<http://www.wired.com/2014/10/content-moderation>)

## Assignments due

No assignments for this week.

## Week 3 (Oct 5): Identity and reputation

### Topics

- The effects of anonymity on behavior
- Sockpuppeting/Sybil attacks
- Anonymity, pseudonymity, or real names?
- Reputation systems
- Verification

### Readings

- We Need Online Alter Egos Now More Than Ever, Judtih S. Donath.  
<http://www.wired.com/2014/04/why-we-need-online-alter-egos-now-more-than-ever/>  
(<http://www.wired.com/2014/04/why-we-need-online-alter-egos-now-more-than-ever/>)
- "Real Names" Policies Are an Abuse of Power, danah boyd.  
<http://socialmediacollective.org/2011/08/04/real-names-policies-are-an-abuse-of-power/>  
(<http://socialmediacollective.org/2011/08/04/real-names-policies-are-an-abuse-of-power/>)
- Forcing Commenters to Use Real Names Won't Root Out the Trolls. Annemarie Dooling.  
<http://www.wired.com/2014/08/forcing-commenters-to-use-real-names-wont-root-out-the-trolls/> (<http://www.wired.com/2014/08/forcing-commenters-to-use-real-names-wont-root-out-the-trolls/>)
- Troll, Reveal Thyself. Farhad Manjoo.  
[http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/technology/2011/03/troll\\_reveal\\_thyself.single.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/technology/2011/03/troll_reveal_thyself.single.html)  
([http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/technology/2011/03/troll\\_reveal\\_thyself.single.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/technology/2011/03/troll_reveal_thyself.single.html))

## Assignments due

Design some simple wireframes and UX flows for a basic community site. Assume that it is discussion-based, like a news site, Twitter, or a web forum. Your wireframes and flows should address the following:

- How do users submit or input new content?
- How do users browse existing content? Consider features like sorting and filtering.
- How is content presented?
- How do users respond to content?
- Do users sign up for the service? If so, how?
- How are users notified about responses or other interactions?

Feel free to refer to existing platforms for inspiration. You do not have to come up with something completely new - that's not what design is about!

Free tools for wireframing and creating flows:

- <https://wireframe.cc/> (<https://wireframe.cc/>)
- <https://www.draw.io/> (<https://www.draw.io/>)

## Week 4 (Oct 12): Trolling and other toxic behaviors

### Topics

- Toxic behaviors online (trolling/flaming/cyberbullying, astroturfing, witch hunts, brigading, doxxing)
- User-level tools for avoiding harassment

## Readings

- The Imminent Death of the Internet Troll. Jake Swearingen.  
[http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2014/10/online-harassment-is-awful-what-can-we-do-to-change-it/381754/?single\\_page=true](http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2014/10/online-harassment-is-awful-what-can-we-do-to-change-it/381754/?single_page=true)  
([http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2014/10/online-harassment-is-awful-what-can-we-do-to-change-it/381754/?single\\_page=true](http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2014/10/online-harassment-is-awful-what-can-we-do-to-change-it/381754/?single_page=true))
- Confessions of a former internet troll. Emmett Rensin.  
<http://www.vox.com/2014/9/29/6840773/confessions-of-a-former-internet-troll>  
(<http://www.vox.com/2014/9/29/6840773/confessions-of-a-former-internet-troll>)
- Why Women Aren't Welcome on the Internet. Amanda Hess.  
<http://www.psmag.com/health-and-behavior/women-arent-welcome-internet-72170>  
(<http://www.psmag.com/health-and-behavior/women-arent-welcome-internet-72170>)
- Hey Troll, Who You Calling a Troll? Brendan I. Koerner.  
<http://www.wired.com/2013/04/trolling/> (<http://www.wired.com/2013/04/trolling/>)

## Assignments due

Design your platform's identity, reputation, and verification systems. Your wireframes and flows should address the following:

- What form does identity take?
- How is reputation measured and displayed?
- How are users and/or their submissions verified?
- How are verifications displayed/communicated to others?
- How would you handle sockpuppet/Sybil attacks?

You can forgo designing these systems if you feel they are not necessary, but you will have to explain your decision.

## Week 5 (Oct 19): Human behavior: Why do they do that?

### Topics

- Frameworks for understanding human behavior
- Exercise: playing experimental behavioral games

## Readings

- Us and Them. Marek Kohn. <http://aeon.co/magazine/philosophy/marek-kohn-us-and-them/> (<http://aeon.co/magazine/philosophy/marek-kohn-us-and-them/>)
- A brief history of groupthink. Kathrin Lassila. <https://yalealumnimagazine.com/articles/1947/a-brief-history-of-groupthink> (<https://yalealumnimagazine.com/articles/1947/a-brief-history-of-groupthink>)

## Assignments due

Design how your platform handles trolls and other toxic actors. Your wireframes and flows should address the following:

- What features do users have to control who they see/has access to them?
- What features would discourage trolls or other toxic actors from participating or behaving in that way?
- How can users flag or escalate harassment reports or harmful content? Remember, think beyond just the screens - how does your organization respond to and handle these reports?

## Week 6 & 7 (Oct 26 & Nov 2): Guest lecturers

### Assignments due

No assignments for these weeks.

## Week 8 (Nov 9): Moderation and reform

### Topics

- Moderation: top-down or bottom-up?
- Banning and other punishments
- Designing for reform

### Readings

- GTFO: Moderation in online communities. Francis Tseng.  
[http://spaceandtim.es/etc/gtfo\\_moderation\\_in\\_online\\_communities](http://spaceandtim.es/etc/gtfo_moderation_in_online_communities)  
([http://spaceandtim.es/etc/gtfo\\_moderation\\_in\\_online\\_communities](http://spaceandtim.es/etc/gtfo_moderation_in_online_communities))
- Using science to reform toxic player behavior in *League of Legends*. Dennis Scimeca.  
<http://arstechnica.com/gaming/2013/05/using-science-to-reform-toxic-player-behavior-in-league-of-legends/> (<http://arstechnica.com/gaming/2013/05/using-science-to-reform-toxic-player-behavior-in-league-of-legends/>)

## Assignments due

No assignments for this week.

## Week 9 (Nov 16): Quantifying quality

### Topics

- Voting systems
- Ranking systems

### Readings

- Very Serious Populists. David A. Banks. <http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/very-serious-populists/> (<http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/very-serious-populists/>)
- What I've Learned from Hacker News. Paul Graham.  
<http://www.paulgraham.com/hackernews.html>  
(<http://www.paulgraham.com/hackernews.html>)
- Why You Shouldn't Trust Internet Comments. John Bohannon.  
<http://news.sciencemag.org/technology/2013/08/why-you-shouldn%E2%80%99t-trust-internet-comments> (<http://news.sciencemag.org/technology/2013/08/why-you-shouldn%E2%80%99t-trust-internet-comments>)

## Assignments due

Design how moderation works on your platform. Your wireframes and flows should address the following:

- Who does the moderation? How are moderators selected and managed?
- How are moderated users dealt with?

- How do users communicate with moderators, in order to provide feedback or appeals?
- How is moderated content displayed (if at all)?

## Week 10 (Nov 23): Analyzing communities

### Topics

- Intro to graph theory
- Data visualizations

### Readings

- Visualizing Communities. Jonathan Stray. <http://jonathanstray.com/visualizing-communities> (<http://jonathanstray.com/visualizing-communities>)
- Israel, Gaza, War & Data: Social networks and the art of personalizing propaganda. Gilad Lotan. <https://medium.com/i-data/israel-gaza-war-data-a54969aeb23e> (<https://medium.com/i-data/israel-gaza-war-data-a54969aeb23e>)

### Assignments due

Design how contribution quality is measured and displayed on your platform. Your wireframes and flows should address the following:

- How is contribution quality measured?
- How is the contribution quality displayed or reflected?
  - How are high-quality contributions displayed? How are low-quality contributions displayed?
- How do you avoid herd mentality/silencing of dissenting voices?
- How is "gaming the system" avoided?

## Week 11 (Nov 30): Dealing with scale

### Topics

- Problems of scale
- Onboarding new users
- Groups
- Automation

## Assignments due

Design dashboards for gaining insight into your communities. Your wireframes and flows should address the following:

- What kind of information would be valuable?
- How do you think it should be presented?

Come up with wireframes and flows for *both* users and moderators/your organization's staff.

## Week 12 (Dec 7): Ethics, privacy, and the communitarian internet

### Topics

- Intro to the internet
- The ethics of crowdsourcing
- Decentralization
- The Federated Social Web

### Readings

- The Mission to Decentralize the Internet. Joshua Kopstein.  
<http://www.newyorker.com/tech/elements/the-mission-to-decentralize-the-internet>  
(<http://www.newyorker.com/tech/elements/the-mission-to-decentralize-the-internet>)

## Assignments due

Design how your platform will handle large-scale users. Your wireframes and flows should address the following:

- How can your platform be home to many, many people of many, many backgrounds in a way that they integrate and interact civilly?
- How are new users onboarded and integrated into the community?
- If you use groups, how are those groups formed? How are they managed? How do they interact with each other?