PLAN 673: The Ethics and Politics of New Urban Analytics

Fall 2019

Class Room: Murphy 302
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Course Description & Objectives

Smart Cities are now a buzzword. While there is no consistent definition of what these cities are, these smart cities are urban spaces blanketed with ubiquitous and heterogeneous sensor networks that are constantly monitoring the vitality of the city. Such continuous surveillance raises deep political and ethical questions. It raises issues about institutional reconfiguration to manage and plan for these cities.

In this seminar, we will examine urban analytics platforms and interrogate them from variety of lenses, including privacy, equity and probity. We will examine the need and the structure of new governance mechanisms, delinations of rights, novel market transactions and social interactions. The main objective of the course is to take a critical look at urban data infrastructure and its discontents. This includes understanding the design of data collection mechanisms, institutional dimensions of data production (e.g. administrative vs crowdsourced) and self-reinforcing feedbacks of analysis and production of data.

This is a companion course to PLAN 672: Urban Data Analytics, which deals with different analytic techniques. Students are encouraged to take them both.

Prerequisites & Preparation

This course does not require any prior preparation. However, it moves quickly and has voluminous readings. Prior exposure to an applied theory course is useful.

The course requires vigorous in-class participation, ability to digest and interpret large amount of literature and extensive out-of-class research.

Course Policies

The following set of course policies is not meant as an exhaustive list. If in doubt, ask for permission and clarification.
Grading

- 15% Seminar lead/presentation
- 15% Case study presentation
- 40% Seminar participation (weekly annotations)
- 30% In-depth end-of-term paper

Attendance

Because this is a seminar, your attendance and participation is essential.

Assigned Readings

Much of the material covered in the class will be from various books that are assigned for the particular week. I don’t necessarily require you buy them, but you can procure them as necessary including using communal strategies.

As you can see from the schedule, readings from the week are voluminous. You will have to figure out ways to read and digest material. After all, one of the recurring themes in the seminar is “Big Data”.

When articles are assigned, links are usually provided on Sakai.

We will use hypothes.is to annotate a selected set of readings for the week. The selected readings are marked explicitly on Sakai. These annotations are used by seminar lead to present and discuss the material. These readings are mandatory for everyone and form the bulk of the discussion in the class. The annotations are due Monday 5 PM.

For other readings assigned for the week, you will split the readings (chapters, articles) amongst yourself. Each of the student will then make a brief presentation (~5 min) of the main points of their assigned pieces.

Class Format

In general, every class is broken up into three parts.

In the first part, the one student will lead the seminar touching upon the salient points of the required readings for the week along with summarising/challenging/expanding on annotations made by his/her colleagues. (~1 hr)

In the second part, all students will summarise and discuss the optional readings (~30 min)

In the third part of the class, another student will lead the seminar particularly focusing on a case study that illuminates, and builds upon other readings until that week (~45 min).

We will take short breaks as necessary.
Case Study Presentation.

Each of you is expected to lead the seminar using concrete case studies at least one of the topics assigned. The case studies can be drawn from the set of the readings assigned for the class, ethnographies of places or from non-academic reports. There is a non-exhaustive list at the end of the syllabus that might provide some starting points. You are welcome, but not required to pick from this list. In either case, you should treat the articles as starting points for more in-depth research on the case rather than as definitive word on the case.

If you prefer to discuss a different topic not listed in the schedule, please see me ahead of time so that we can make space.

End of Term Paper

A well thought out, diligently researched, properly supported paper on the issues of data and society as they apply to urban environment and its management is required at the end of the semester. At appropriate times, students will informally present progress on this paper in class and solicit feedback. Final presentations on this paper are scheduled on Dec 6.

E-mail

Sakai messaging system is the preferred way to communicate with me and your colleagues.

Appointments

I am available during my office hours. You can also schedule a time on my calendar that is mutually convenient, to discuss any aspect of the course. http://nikhilkaza.youcanbook.me.
Schedule (Tentative)

Aug 21 (Wed): Introduction


The Politics of Promise & Institutional Reconfiguration

Aug 28 (Wed): Smart Cities


Sep 4 (Wed): Technological Anxiety & Creative Destruction


Sep 11 (Wed): Pursuit of Efficiency & Neoliberal Paradigm


Sep 18 (Wed): The Fall of the Firm and the Rise of Platforms


The Politics of Data Generation & Acquisition

Sep 25 (Wed): What data is collected? Why?


Oct 2 (Wed): Multiple Epistemologies


Oct 9 (Wed): Consent & Ownership


The Politics of Data Analysis

Oct 16 (Wed): Coding & Decoding


Oct 30 (Wed): Summarisation, Analysis & (Mis)Representation of Data


Nov 6 (Wed): Critical Cartography


Nov 13 (Wed): Predictive Blackboxes & Algorithmic Bias


The Politics of Control

Nov 20 (Wed): Biopolitics


Dec 4 (Wed): Surveillance


Potential Case Studies

The following are some ideas that provide starting points for exploration into cases. They are not exhaustive, nor are they meant to be representative of the cases. The collection itself is also not representative, but illustrative.

- Data Commons & Waze
- Pigeon Air Patrol
- Chicago Array of Things podcast
- Mayors’ Response to Uber, Airbnb
- Transportation Network Companies in Asia
- Pew Shared Economy & Equity
- Data Privacy in Seattle
- Civic Tech clusters
- Climate Data Partnerships
- Civic Hacking
- Brooklyn City Observatory
- Data security and IOT
- Access to healthcare
- Global South