

About the course:

First and foremost, the course provides an overview of themes and approaches to the digital, from social media to smartphones, from temporality to mobility. Secondly, it presents and discusses the methodologies required to study these phenomena, relating them to classic ethnographic methods. Thirdly and finally, the course contextualises the new digital technologies historically, indicating continuities and ruptures with enduring and classic themes and theories of anthropology. It therefore presupposes basic knowledge of anthropological theory, method and subject matter. Whether your passion is smartphone use in a society that interests you – rural Zambia, urban Brazil, highland Burma or the western suburbs of East London – or the implications of the Internet in a particular sector – health, education, business ... – or if your interest rather lies in theories of networks, principles of social organisation or the fundamentals of communication, this course will add unexpected depth and relevant breadth to your knowledge of the contemporary world and the human condition.

The course covers a broad range of issues relating to digital technologies, including:

- Social networks online and offline
- New methodologies tailored to research on digital communication
- The transformation of work
- Empowerment and surveillance in digital capitalism
- Games and gaming
- Micro-coordination and the smartphone as locative media
- Temporality, simultaneity and acceleration
- Mobility and the smartphone
- Information excess

In the lectures, these subjects will be dealt with on their own terms, but they are also connected to the non-digital, both historically and in a contemporary sense, thereby indicating historical continuities, perhaps even human universals, and not merely rapid change.

Learning outcome

Knowledge

- Overview of recent and current anthropological research on the digital;
- Introduction to research methods dealing with the digital;
- Knowledge of cultural and social variation regarding engagement with digital technologies;
- Understanding of network types and forms of social and cultural integration;
- Awareness of tensions, conflicts and contradictions involving digital technologies, ranging from concentration deficits to robotisation.

Skills

- Ability to distinguish theoretically and analytically between different information technologies and their implications;
- Mastery of methodological tools enabling basic research on digital and virtual worlds;
- Ability to work competently with other people in computer-mediated work environments.

General competence

- The ability to build an argument blending methodological, theoretical and empirical elements, both orally and in writing;
- Enhanced academic reading competence, which involves the critical interrogation of form and content in anthropological texts.

Teaching:

There have been ten double lectures in the autumn semester. Since not all the students have social anthropology as their major, some attention has been paid to the basics of anthropology, notably the kind of knowledge produced through ethnographic fieldwork, participant observation, and the importance of a holistic approach and the rejection of dichotomies. It has also been emphasised throughout that digital anthropology is, in fact, anthropology and should be viewed as part of a larger knowledge project. Simple dichotomies such as the online/offline nexus have been challenged.

The course has been guested by several scholars with overlapping research interests.

- Professor Thomas Hylland Eriksen had the first lecture in this course, which concerned introduction to the course and to digital anthropology.
- University lecturer Anna Kirah (Two lectures: (1) Methodologies: Experiences from the field – from participant observations and ethnography to gadgets and user interfaces & (2) Smartphones and gadgets.)
- Professor Faltin Karlsen (Netnography, online communities and game culture).
- Postdoctoral fellow Tom Bratrud (Identities: Self and Others in the Digital Age).
- Professor Jo Helle-Valle (Temporalities: epistemic, political, historical).
- Associate professor Lene Pettersen (Four lectures: (1) Methodologies: Experiences from the field – from participant observations and ethnography to gadgets and user interfaces. (2) Power, inequality and platforms. (3) Mobilities and social media. & (4) Lessons from the pandemic.)

The lectures have used the texts on the reading list as a point of departure for examining the social, cultural, cognitive and political aspects of digitalisation as well as methodological implications of digital technology. Several of the lectures have used practical examples and the lecturers' own research findings as discussion cases with clear links to today's topic. The majority of the articles on the reading list has been mentioned during lectures, yet mainly to address a point, rather than summarising the article. Suggestions to supplementary readings to cover specific points has been provided during the lectures.

Exam:

The students have written essays conforming to the general guidelines for take-home exams. They were asked to answer one of three questions; one concerning reworking established ethnographic methods, one about the online offline link, one about variation and commonalities in mobile phone use and social media interaction practices.

In assessing the essays, examiners should emphasise the students' ability to develop an independent and critical line of reasoning drawing on academic literature on the reading list (but other sources are also fine when relevant), as well as their ability to connect the topic at hand to broader issues, either through comparison or by showing its relevance in practice.

The course has an interdisciplinary element, and several of the students come from other study programs and fields (e.g. media science, pedagogics, political science, and others). The literature on the reading list is very considerable (40+ scientific articles and book extracts), and from different

disciplines (media science, internet studies, social anthropology, psychology, sociology, and others). In assessing the essays, examiners should nevertheless place emphasis on the students' ability to use anthropological approaches – ethnography, comparison, non-ethnocentrism, holism, rejection of dichotomies – in making sense of the digital. Rather than producing simple 'just so' narratives, they have been encouraged to search for tensions and contradictions in the field.