

Critical Data and AI Studies

HPSS S286

SPRING 2026

Tuesdays 9:40AM - 12:40PM

College Building, Room 302

[SYLLABUS WEBSITE](#)

Instructor Allison (AP) Pierce

Email apierc03@risd.edu

Counts for 3 credits, Liberal Arts or HPSS elective

OFFICE HOURS

Tuesdays and Thursdays 1:00PM - 2:30PM

College Building 246A

Sign up for 15-minute slot [here](#).

How to get there: Entering from S. Main St: go into stairwell that is up the ramp and in the corner; go up one level and exit; go through the glass door and into the doorway on the left; office is through the doorway.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Do you think before clicking "Accept Cookies" when visiting a website these days, or is it just second nature? This course will examine the politics of technological and data surveillance, how we have come to consent to it, and what happens once it's collected. We will engage interdisciplinary critical internet and data studies to explore the politics of information and how it interacts with cultural norms and systems of racialized and gendered surveillance. We'll also look at the status of data politics in the age of AI and ask how we might create digital worlds based in social justice and liberation.

Course Elements

IN-CLASS ACTIVITIES

15%

Throughout the semester, we will do many different activities analyzing digital objects or digging deeper into readings either all together or in groups. This work will take place in-class and you will turn something in to me at the end of the activity that will count toward your grade.

Grading for these activities will be based on 1) completion and 2) engagement with course material & concepts.

 *You must be present to participate in these activities, and they cannot be made up or turned in late.*

WEEKLY ANNOTATIONS AND RESPONSES

25%

Each week, I will ask you to complete either an annotation activity or a written reading response with the assigned material. Annotations will occur on Canvas with the tool Hypothesis. Sometimes you will be able to see and interact with others' annotations as well.

For written responses, you will respond to a particular prompt I post on the assignment; for annotations, you will be asked to complete a certain number of highlights, comments, questions, or interactions with others.

Grading will be based on meeting the annotation requirements & level of engagement with the text. Your lowest grade for this category will be dropped automatically on Canvas.

ATTENDANCE AND ENGAGEMENT

15%

Attendance is required in this course and I will take it in class. Please reach out to me if you are sick or anticipate missing class. Unexcused and uncommunicated absences will result in a lower grade in this category— or, in extreme circumstances, you could be dropped from the course.

Engagement generally can come through speaking in class discussions, as well as participation in in-class activities, communication with me after class/via email, and turning in assignments on time and with tangible effort.

PAPER 1 – DETERMINISM ANALYSIS**15%**

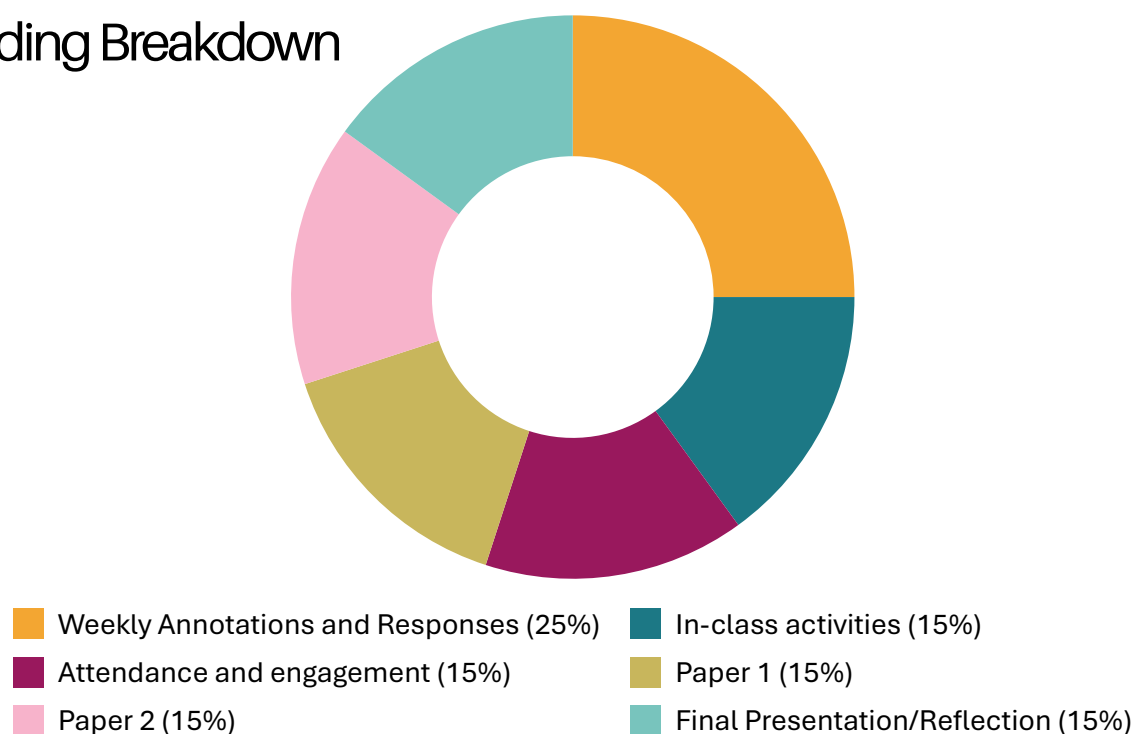
This will be a short essay, essentially a media analysis, where you'll demonstrate a company or technology's connection to the kinds of technological determinism we will discuss in Week 2. You'll look at ads, news articles, or other media for this. You can build off of your reading response due in Week 2, and will add in another in-class reading for your analysis.

**PAPER 2 AND PRESENTATION –
CHOICE OF METHODS****15% each**Paper 2: choice of prompts

I will provide a few different options for papers to write here that you'll be able to choose from. (For example, I might have a prompt to use to conduct interviews with people about their technology use & write about your findings; another prompt might be to create a new, fake social media account and see how you can tweak the algorithm that is serving you content.)

Final Presentation & Reflection: Expanding on Paper 2

For your final in the course, you will expand upon your work in paper 2 and present on it in class. You'll incorporate feedback you got in Paper 2. I'll provide more details about this later!

Grading Breakdown

COURSE POLICIES

Course Policies

TECHNOLOGY

- This course features class discussion heavily, and I want technology to be available as a resource, but limited as a distraction.
- Phones should be put away and not used during class time.
- You may use a laptop for readings and note-taking, but if we are struggling with attention/participation, I will request for laptops to be put away and for an "analog" class time.
- Please come to class with some sort of paper and a writing implement for writing activities or analog note-taking.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

I understand how stressful the writing and thinking process is, and the various pressures students face regarding workload and extracurriculars. **However, I expect all writing in this course to be generated from you and demonstrate your knowledge, opinions, and skills.**

For environmental, ethical, and practical academic reasons, **writing submitted using ChatGPT/AI-generated text will be considered plagiarized and result in a zero on the assignment.** It is still a way of passing off others' ideas as your own, as we will discuss in class.

For similar reasons, my policy is also that generative AI should not be used in the editing process either (i.e., I expect you not to use Grammarly's suggestions for rewriting your sentence; Microsoft Word's spelling and grammar check is fine). Translation software is acceptable *as long as it is not generative*—all original text should be written by you.

RECORDING & PHOTOS

Taking photos or videos of me / my slides during class is not allowed.

If you miss class, you can let me know and I can send you a copy of the slides. If you have a DSS accommodation and need access to lecture slides, please let me know. If your DSS accommodations have to do with needing to record audio/video, we can have a conversation about that.

Taking photos or videos of classmates (if they are giving a presentation, etc.) is not allowed under any circumstance.

COURSE POLICIES

Course Policies

PLAGIARISM

You are responsible for understanding the RISD Code of Student Conduct and abiding by it.

Plagiarism will not be tolerated and will be reported. Read more here on how to avoid plagiarism.

KEEPING UP

You must check your email and the course Canvas site regularly for updates, assignment information, and announcements.

I will be available via email from 8AM-4PM, Mondays through Fridays. I will not always check email over the weekend or in the evenings.



EXTENSIONS & LATE WORK

Extension Policy:

- **You must send me an email *before the assignment due date/time* requesting your extension.** In that email, you should **propose a new due date/time** by which you plan to submit your assignment. I will reply to confirm the new time.
- If you miss your extended due date, you risk a zero on the assignment or a grade penalty.

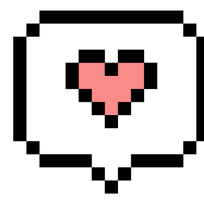
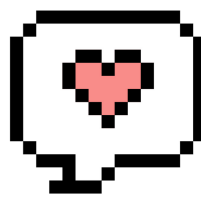
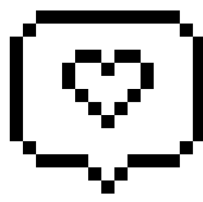
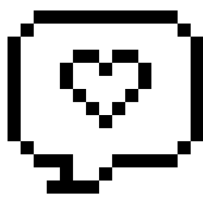
Late Work Policy:

- If you have an approved extension, your work won't be considered "late."
- Late work—assignments missed and not given an extension before their due date—**may be accepted within two weeks of an assignment's due date, with a possible grade penalty.**
- The severity of the grade penalty will be based on how late it is turned in.

MUTUAL RESPECT

I expect everyone, myself included, to come to each reading and class discussion with intellectual generosity, making sure to put in effort to understand the author/each other. Questions are always encouraged! Hateful speech or demeaning comments will not be allowed.

Part of mutual respect happens through preparation—everyone coming in having prepared for the class in which we're about to engage. Please do your best to come to the classroom ***having already completed*** the assigned readings for that day.



COURSE SCHEDULE

Week	Readings and Assignments
Week 1 - 2/17 Introductions, What are Data and AI?	Read over syllabus and course site. Optional: MIT Technology Review's <i>Power Hungry</i> series on AI and Energy "Data" from Keywords for American Cultural Studies
Week 2 - 2/24 Critically Studying Data & Technology	Wyatt, "Technological Determinism: What it is and why it matters" Video: Karen Hao on AI Annotation due Monday 2/23 at 11:59PM on Canvas
Week 3 - 3/3 Microwork and Digital Labor	Podcast: "The Poorly Paid Workers Powering Automation w/ Phil Jones" on <i>Tech Won't Save Us</i> Rodrigo Pina, "Consent and Data In Social Media" Response due Monday 3/2 at 11:59PM on Canvas
Week 4 - 3/10 The Cost of Convenience	Jenny Huberman, "In the Spirit of Convenience: Amazon Go and Surveillance Capitalism" Annotation due Monday 3/9 at 11:59PM on Canvas PAPER 1 DUE FRIDAY 3/13 at 11:59PM on Canvas
Week 5 - 3/17 AI images & the automation of inequality	<u>Choose one of these:</u> Hito Steyerl, "Mean Images" Michelle Elam, "AI, Art, and the Matter of Race" <u>And choose one these:</u> Issy, "The rise of the AI beauty pageant and its complicated quest for the 'perfect' woman" Leibert, "Lensa AI and the Trap of Otherworldly Beauty" Response due Monday 3/16 at 11:59PM on Canvas

COURSE SCHEDULE (CTD.)

Week	Readings and Assignments
Week 6 - Spring Break	---
Week 7 - 3/31 Automated labor	<p>Selections, Vora and Atanasoski's <i>Surrogate Humanity</i> Selections, Srnicek and Williams' <i>Inventing the Future</i></p> <p>Annotation due Monday 3/30 at 11:59PM on Canvas</p>
Week 8 - 4/7 Race and Surveillance	<p>Selections, Simone Brown's <i>Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness</i> Zimmermann, Di Rosa, and Kim, "Technology Can't Fix Algorithmic Injustice"</p> <p>Response due Monday 4/6 at 11:59PM on Canvas</p>
Week 9 - 4/14 Techno-authoritarianism	<p>Lisa Garbe and Seraphine F. Maerz, "The rise of authoritarian informationalism: escalating surveillance, manipulation, and control"</p> <p>Annotation due Monday 4/13 at 11:59PM on Canvas PAPER 2 DUE FRIDAY 4/17 at 11:59PM on Canvas</p>
Week 10 - 4/21 Resistance	<p>"Decolonial AI Manifesto"</p> <p>Selections from Cory Doctorow's <i>The Internet Con: How to Seize the Means of Computation</i></p> <p>Response due Monday 4/20 at 11:59PM on Canvas</p>
Week 11 - 4/28 Choose your own adventure	<p>TBD</p> <p>Annotation due Monday 4/27 at 11:59PM on Canvas</p>
Week 12 - 5/5 Workshop & finishing up	---
Week 13 - 5/12	<p>Final Presentations</p> <p>PAPER 3 DUE FRIDAY 5/15 at 11:59PM on Canvas</p>

COURSE GOALS / LEARNING OUTCOMES

- Recognize and discuss naturalized ideologies regarding technology and who the beneficiaries are of this naturalization
- Understand and critically examine the political, racial, gendered, and economic valences of data and datafication
- Accurately describe the processes that power generative artificial intelligence and the involvement of materials, energy, and humans in those processes
- Most importantly: demonstrate an understanding of, and ability to analyze, the social and economic contexts of technological development, its imbrication with systems of power and control, as well as the uneven distribution of technologies' benefits and harms

IMPORTANT ACADEMIC DATES

February 12	Classes begin
February 19	Last day to drop without a withdraw "W"
March 23-27	Spring Break
April 15	Last day to withdraw
May 13	Last day of classes
May 15	Liberal Arts Exam Day



Resources & Links

NOTE ON MANDATED REPORTING

As an employee of RISD, I am a mandated reporter for issues of equity and compliance, including discrimination, harassment, sexual violence, or retaliation. Discussing specific incidents with me or in your assignments will result in a report going to Equity & Compliance (this would not necessitate that any other action be taken). Confidential discussion of these issues is, however, available at CAPS.

We can, of course, discuss cultures of discrimination and harassment, the phenomenon of rape culture, social systems enabling these, and their gendered, racial, class, and sexual dynamics in class as part of our curriculum. It is specific incidents that fall under what is required of me to report to Equity and Compliance.

RISD POLICIES

- [Code of Student Conduct](#)
- [Academic Code of Conduct](#)
- [Chosen Name Policy](#)
- [Attendance and Absence Policy](#)

OFFICES

- [Counseling and Psychological Services \(CAPS\)](#)
- [Equity and Compliance](#)
- [International Student & Scholar Affairs](#)
- [Intercultural Student Engagement \(ISE\)](#)
- [Disability Support Services \(DSS\)](#)
- [CARE Network](#)
- [Center for Arts and Language](#)

RESOURCES

- [DSS Academic Accommodations](#)
- [CARE Network Referral](#)
- [Multilingual Learners Hub](#)
- [Guides & Tutorials from Center for Arts and Language](#)
- [MLA Formatting Guide](#) / [APA Formatting Guide](#)