



TikTok Politics

Navigating Information, Influence, and Online Harm

University of Zurich, Fall 2026

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Office Hours: By appointment

Course number: 06SE615p006a Seminar

Overview

Social media platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube have fundamentally transformed how citizens encounter news, engage with political actors, and participate in public life. This course examines the shift toward algorithm-driven, short-form content and what this means for the accuracy and depth of political information, the spread of misinformation, and exposure to harmful online environments. Alongside these risks, we explore the rise of new political influencers, the dynamics of comment sections, and the effects of social media consumption on political knowledge and participation. Students will engage with cutting-edge empirical research and learn about the analytical tools to study digital political behavior systematically.

Course Objectives

- Students will develop a good overview of current research on the implications of digitalization for political online behavior.
- They will understand and learn to apply current best practices for studying these phenomena empirically.

Course Times

The course takes place every Tuesday 10:15 – 12:00 starting on Sep. 15, 2026; the last session of the class is on Dec. 15, 2026. The seminar sessions take place in person in room AND-2-46.

Course Assessment

The first part of the course assessment is an in-class presentation. Once during the term, each student will present and discuss one assigned reading from the week's session. The goal is to help fellow students understand its contribution and not just to summarize the work, i.e., what question it asks, how it answers it, and what can be learned from it methodologically.

- The presentation should provide a clear summary (What is the work's core argument, research question, and main findings in plain English) and a critical discussion of the contribution (What does it do well? What are its limitations? What questions does it leave open?).



- From the reading, each student is also expected to extract a research skill, i.e., identify one concrete methodological or analytical skill the work demonstrates and explain it to their fellow students in accessible terms.
- And to facilitate the in-class discussion, each student is asked to prepare 2-3 discussion questions that expand on the topic of the presentation.

In-class presentations are assessed on clarity, critical engagement, and the quality of the research skill extraction. More specific expectations on the length, structure and content of the presentation will be provided in class.

The second part of the course assessment will be based on a hands-on platform audit and analysis report due at the end of term on Friday Dec. 18, 2026 (midnight). Throughout a fixed period of several weeks throughout the term, students systematically observe and record their own social media feed on a platform of their choice. Based on the data collection, students then produce a short, structured report (~3000 words, no longer than 4000 words) analyzing what they found through the lens of course concepts.

- The idea is that each student will substantively focus on a specific research question of their choosing within the scope of what is covered in class.
- In class, we will together develop the strategies and necessary skills for a structured data extraction and empirical analysis of the social media content.
- There will be different intermediate milestones, skills and work sessions throughout the class that help to structure the assignment and make the empirical work accessible to students with a broad range of backgrounds and prior experiences.

The course grade is then based on the in-class presentation (20%) as well as the audit and analysis report submitted at the end of the class (80%). Please note that the module will only be considered passed if all components of the portfolio are passed.

Information on the Use of AI Tools

The use of generative AI (artificial intelligence) in assignments is only permitted for the purpose of copy-editing and to support coding tasks. All other uses are prohibited. Please use the declaration of authenticity of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences when submitting your final assignment for this class. If you have questions regarding the use of AI tools as part of this seminar, please contact me. Please remember that the sole responsibility for the correctness of all content rests with you when you submit your final assignments.



Course Outline

Week 1 (Sep. 15). Introduction: Politics in the Digital Age

Optional Readings:

Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. (2025). *Digital News Report 2025*. University of Oxford. (Executive Summary and Key Findings, p. 9-36)

Boulianne, Shelley. (2020). "Twenty Years of Digital Media Effects on Civic and Political Participation." *Communication Research* 47(7): 947–966.

Part 1 – Algorithms, Affordances, and Methods

Week 2 (Sep. 22). Short-Form Video and Platform Affordances

Required Reading:

Guinaudeau, Benjamin, Kevin Munger & Fabio Votta. (2022). "Fifteen Seconds of Fame: TikTok and the Supply Side of Social Video." *Computational Communication Research* 4(2): 463–485.

Optional Reading:

Schellewald, Andreas. (2023). "Understanding the Popularity and Affordances of TikTok through User Experiences." *Media, Culture & Society* 45(8): 1568–1582.

Week 3 (Sep. 29). How Algorithms Curate Political Reality

Required Reading:

Boeker, Maximilian & Aleksandra Urman. (2022). "An Empirical Investigation of Personalization Factors on TikTok." In *Proceedings of the ACM Web Conference 2022* (pp. 2298–2309). ACM.

Optional Reading:

Ibrahim, Hazem, HyunSeok Daniel Jang, Nouar Aldahoul, Aaron R. Kaufman, Talal Rahwan & Yasir Zaki. (2026). "Systematic Partisan Content Skews in TikTok during the 2024 US Elections." *Nature* 654: 1004–1011.

Week 4 (Oct. 6). How Researchers Study Social Media

Required Reading:

Ohme, Jakob, Theo Araujo, Laura Boeschoten, Deen Freelon, Nilam Ram, Byron B. Reeves & Thomas N. Robinson. (2024). "Digital Trace Data Collection for Social Media Effects Research: APIs, Data Donation, and (Screen) Tracking." *Communication Methods and Measures* 18(2): 124–141.

Optional Reading:

Cervi, Laura & Carles Marín-Lladó. (2021). "What are Political Parties Doing on TikTok? The Spanish Case." *Profesional de la Información* 30(4), Article e300403.



Week 5 (Oct. 13). Developing a Research Question

Required Reading:

Pew Research Center. (2024). *How Americans Navigate Politics on TikTok, X, Facebook and Instagram*. Pew Research Center. (Overview, p. 4–16)

Optional Reading:

Stahl, Catherine Cheng & Ioana Literat. (2023). “#GenZ on TikTok: The Collective Online Self-portrait of the Social Media Generation.” *Journal of Youth Studies* 26(7): 925–946.

Week 6 (Oct. 20). Guest Session & Research Idea Pitches

Prof. Dr. Benjamin Guinaudeau (Week 2) will visit our course and give a short input presentation. And we will use the remainder of the class to discuss your (brief) research idea pitches before your social media feed audit begin.

Part 2 – Misinformation, Toxicity, and Harm

Start of Social Media Feed Audit (Oct. 26 to Nov. 8)

Week 7 (Oct. 27). Shifts in Access to Political Information

Required Reading:

Hendrickx, Jonathan. (2025). “‘Normal News is Boring’: How Young Adults Encounter and Experience News on Instagram and TikTok.” *New Media & Society* 27(10): 5736–5754.

Optional Reading:

Robertson, Craig T., Amy Ross Arguedas, Mitali Mukherjee & Richard Fletcher. (2026). *Understanding Young News Audiences at a Time of Rapid Change*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford. (first sections, p. 3-20)

Week 8 (Nov. 3). Misinformation and Disinformation

Required Reading:

Bhargava, Puneet, Katie MacDonald, Christie Newton, Hause Lin & Gordon Pennycook. (2023). “How Effective are TikTok Misinformation Debunking Videos?” *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review* 4(2): mr-2020-114.

Optional Reading:

Pennycook, Gordon & David G. Rand. (2021). “The Psychology of Fake News.” *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 25(5): 388–402.

Week 9 (Nov. 10). Audit Data Workshop

The session is dedicated to workshopping your social media feed audit data collection that concluded just two days prior. The goal is to reflect on what you collected, how this helps you address your research questions and start working on your final technical report.



Week 10 (Nov. 17). Harmful Content and How to Regulate It

Required Reading:

Theocharis, Yannis, Pablo Barberá, Zoltán Fazekas & Sebastian Adrian Popa. (2020). "The Dynamics of Political Incivility on Twitter." *SAGE Open* 10(2): 1–15.

Optional Reading:

Munzert, Simon, Richard Traunmüller, Pablo Barberá, Andrew Guess & JungHwan Yang. (2025). "Citizen Preferences for Online Hate Speech Regulation." *PNAS Nexus* 4(2): pgaf032.

Week 11 (Nov. 24). Comment Sections as Political Spaces

Required Reading:

Zeng, Jing & D. Bondy Valdovinos Kaye. (2022). "From Content Moderation to Visibility Moderation: A Case Study of Platform Governance on TikTok." *Policy & Internet* 14(1): 79–95.

Optional Reading:

Boukes, Mark. (2025). "Deliberation in Online Political Talk: Exploring Interactivity, Diversity, Rationality, and Incivility in the Public Spheres Surrounding News vs. Satire." *Journal of Communication* 75(2): 125–136.

Part 3: Effects on Political Behaviour

Week 12 (Dec. 1). News Scarcity and Credibility on TikTok

Required Reading:

Ge, Chang, Nilay Gautam, Shreyas Vajjhala, Christina Ng, Ariel Hasell & Sabina Tomkins. (2026). "Exposure to News and Political Content on TikTok: A Case Study Around the 2024 US Election." In *Proceedings of the 2026 ACM Conference on Fairness, Accountability, and Transparency*, pp. 1–24. ACM.

Optional Reading:

Anter, Luise & Anna Sophie Kümpel. (2026). "Navigating Credibility on TikTok: How Young Adults Evaluate and Verify Information on the Platform." *International Journal of Communication* 20: 10508–1078.



Week 13 (Dec. 8). From Scrolling to Action: TikTok and Political Participation

Required Reading:

Moffett, Kenneth W. & Laurie L. Rice. (2024). "TikTok and Civic Activity Among Young Adults." *Social Science Computer Review* 42(2): 535–553.

Optional Reading:

Matthes, Jörg, Alon Zoizner, Andreas Nanz, David Nicolas Hopmann, Yannis Theocharis & Selina Noetzel. (2026). "The Relationship Between Incidental News Exposure and Political Participation: A Cross-Country, Multilevel Analysis." *Digital Journalism* 14(4): 573–592.

Week 14 (Dec. 15). Political Influencers: Who They Are and What They Do

Required Reading:

Klüver, Heike. (2025). "Social Influencers and Election Outcomes." *Comparative Political Studies* 58(13): 2973–2999.

Optional Reading:

Goodwin, Anastasia, Katie Joseff, Martin J. Riedl, Josephine Lukito & Samuel Woolley. (2023). "Political Relational Influencers: The Mobilization of Social Media Influencers in the Political Arena." *International Journal of Communication* 17: 1613–1633.