

DD218 Understanding Digital Societies – 15 June 2021

KAREN FOLEY: Welcome back to Student Hub Live. In this session, we're going to talk about understanding digital societies, which is the title of the new module DD218. And I'm joined by Umut Erel, who is a professor of sociology. Umut's research interests are in migration, racism, gender and citizenship. We have some word clouds we would love you to fill in for us. We're going to talk about those throughout today's session. And remember with our word clouds that you can just put one or two things in if you can't think of three, but you need to put something in each box, otherwise the results won't submit. So let us know what you use your mobile phone for and how you connect with your friends and your family. So Umut, welcome. How are you today?

UMUT EREL: Hi, Karen. Hi, everybody. Great to be here. I'm very well. Thank you.

KAREN FOLEY: Good, good. Excellent. We've been talking a lot about so many different things here, Umut. It's very challenging for our audience at home to talk from crime to geography and borders, et cetera. And now we're going to take a look at digital societies. So as a social scientist, why are we interested then in digital societies?

UMUT EREL: Yeah, so nowadays, digital technology is really part of most people's everyday life. Sometimes, we can ask whether it's technology that influences society or whether it's society that influences how we develop and how we use digital technologies. Now, what the module does is that it looks at these debates through a range of examples. And we look at different, different examples and study areas. The first block is about how everyday life and the digital come together. And there, you'll learn about the sociological imagination and about how people present themselves in online interactions.

Then in our second block, we look at society, technology, citizens and cities, where we look at mobile global communities and how they remain in contact with one another very much through the examples of cities, but also migration and transnational religion. And the third block looks at humans and machines. And that looks more specifically at how automation and how intelligent machines impact society. And the final block then looks at uses and abuses of the digital. That is we look at the technology and potential to cause social harms.

KAREN FOLEY: Very interesting. And these things, again - you know, we were talking about food very early on in the day, Umut, and saying, you know, how things like sausages or onions can, you know, convey a whole range of things. Here what we can see is something as simple as a mobile phone offering affordances into many other areas than would be initially there, as well. So, so do fill in our word cloud and let us know what you use your mobile for and how you stay in touch with your friends and family. The example I think from the module that you wanted to talk about is about Karen Gregory's research, isn't it? Do you want to tell us a little bit about that?

UMUT EREL: Yes. So earlier, I was saying, you know, one of the things that is interesting for social scientists is that digital technologies really make up a large part of our everyday lives nowadays. And the example that Karen Gregory, who's a researcher in Glasgow on digital

technologies and work, has given us that many people nowadays, we fall asleep by maybe listening to a podcast, maybe listening to music on our mobile phones, maybe checking the news, maybe checking our messages.

And the first thing in the morning is we are woken up by an alarm oftentimes, again, on our mobile phones. Again, we check maybe the weather, maybe the news stories, maybe whether we got any calls or - So, this I think is a really nice example of how digital technologies really become part of the most intimate spaces in our lives, you know so - When you're still lying in bed, you're reaching out first of all to your mobile phone, for example.

KAREN FOLEY: And as you say, you know, so many things are implicated in here. Things like citizenship, humans, and machines, and the uses and abuses of the digital. So lots and lots of aspects here. Let's see what people had to say when we asked them at home what they use their mobile phone for. And there might be some things here, Umut, that you want to pick up on.

Here what we can see is communication is absolutely central. But people are using other things, like keeping in touch, photographs, current affairs, web browsing, et cetera. I read to mine, photography, distraction, Twitter, social media, that sort of thing, travel information, internet access, reading their uni work as well, connections with other people, messaging, photos, web browsing, et cetera. So there are lots and lots of different uses here that we can see commonly associated with something like a smart computer.

Your research is very interesting, though, Umut, because you've been looking at refugees and their uses of mobile phones. And I wonder if you might want to pick up on some of the common uses that people at home are saying they use mobile phones for and perhaps pick up on some of the differences that the different populations may use with the same device.

UMUT EREL: Yes, absolutely. So my own research is more about migrants than refugees. Refugees being people who are forced to move. But definitely for refugees, the mobile phone has played a very important role. Perhaps, some of you can think back of the summer of 2015 when there were large movements of people across the borders of Europe. And for many of them, the mobile phone was really the most important piece of equipment that they carry. So that's the piece that they valued the most, that helped them with roots, helped them to make contact with people - well, with people who are often called smugglers, but also with regular, let's say, travel arrangements.

Also helped them to stay in touch with their families back home about whom they were worrying. It helped them to make plans about their journeys. So on the other hand, something that many of you have said is that you are using digital technologies for communications. And I saw that family was an important key word that popped up in that word cloud, as well. And that's something quite interesting, because many migrants have been using digital media for quite some time now to stay in touch with their families back home.

Oftentimes, when they migrate, they haven't got the, well both the financial resources - sometimes, they don't have the legal rights also to be travelling back and forth to their home

countries to see and visit their family members. And for that reason, these digital technologies really became an important part of how people connected with their families.

And so that's been really important for, oftentimes, for mothers, also fathers, who have left their children behind in the care of other family members, for example. So for them, it was really great to be able to connect, maybe through webcam, in an inexpensive way, and be able to see their children grow up, share family meals together. Sometimes, help them with their homework, for example. And for many mothers, especially, that was a great way of feeling more connected to their families and feeling that they were still mothering at a distance. So that's one example. Yeah. I can -

KAREN FOLEY: But it's very interesting here, because you're talking about some of the things that I think we would commonly use. And what's really interesting, though, is I think that the way that you're talking about how these devices are used has a different meaning when, for example, somebody may be in a foreign country that people can't understand. To be able to show your space, show your environment, but also perhaps to negotiate time. So for example, I know you were talking before about people who maybe were carers, for example, and didn't have a huge amount of time on their hands. They were being able to negotiate these devices quickly during breaks, et cetera, to do certain things. So, even though there are similar actions - like I might grab my phone, you know, when I'm between meetings, et cetera - they take on quite a different meaning and allow a different sort of communication and also expression of identity, isn't it?

UMUT EREL: Absolutely. So for example, there's some research by Danny Miller, who looked at how different people on the globe use digital technologies. And one really interesting example is an interview with a domestic worker, with a care worker. She's from Romania, but works in a small Italian village and cares for an elderly man. And her work means that she has to be available for very, very long hours at a stretch in that - in the home, in her employer's home. She's only got a small space, small personal space, let's say. But -

And it means that a lot of her work is based on waiting until her employer needs her. And those stretches of time can be really filled with perhaps boredom. And for her, it's a loss of her identity. And oftentimes, this type of work, this type of care work, especially for migrants who haven't got local social networks, has meant a great loss - loss of identity and loss of social connections, social isolation.

So what she does is first thing in the morning, whenever she can grab a break or a moment, she connects with her friends and family on Facebook. And that for her is a way to share what she calls her fun side, right, because during her work day she has to be serious, she has to be responsible. Here, she can show a different side of her personality.

And in her particular case, there's also another interesting aspect to this, because often when women migrate, people in the home countries might suspect them of perhaps breaking gender norms. Perhaps - so one thing that she says in that research is that people back home don't believe that you are who you say you are. So for example, they may - she says no one believes that you can make enough money just through care work and they may suspect her to be

engaging in sex work, for example. But living in that - you know, through her webcam, she can show her family and friends where she lives, where she works. She can share her everyday life with them. And that's an important way for her to assert her own identity, to assert her own self presentation, actually.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely. Damon, I know people at home are talking about a lot of different uses of technology. Let's just actually have a quick look at our world cloud. And then I'd like you to fill us in on what people are saying. So we can see when we asked people about how they connect with friends and family, it's a typical range of sort of platforms and devices doing different things like communicating in real time, sharing photos, et cetera, messaging, and also hearing voices. So a lot of auditory, visual sensations going on, in addition to the sorts of networks that allow us to quickly and simply communicate. But what are some of the other things people are saying about this topic, Damon?

DAMON MILLER: Yeah well, it's the uses that people have for their phones is, is fascinating. So Sandra thinks FaceTime is absolutely wonderful. And like Umut was saying, she can see her family and engage them. They don't live locally. So similar sort of situation, but more of a - yeah, I mean, similar situation pretty much. Nathan is - uses his for listening to podcasts, watching the news, doing the shopping, doing banking.

Carol says that she's tracking family on the phone is wonderful. Now I don't know whether that means she's got a widget on their phones so she knows exactly where they are at any given point. I don't know. Because you can do that with Google Maps, I've discovered. Very useful when I'm out running, because it means that my partner can find out where I am.

So yeah, there's a whole range of different uses. And it's fascinating. Just to, just to sort of pitch in, it's refugees week at the moment. And OpenLearn has some really good footage of the use of mobile phones that refugees have used to - on their travels to come to, to come Europe. So yeah, really interesting.

KAREN FOLEY: There's so much in the faculty. The work on refugees I was thinking about was Mary Gillespie's work. And that was, you know, a massive project, at the time when there was a huge infiltration of refugees. And so understanding how that technology was used was really helpful. Whereas Umut, your work is quite different, but nonetheless brings to light some very similar sorts of aspects around some of these big issues. Because they are things not just about migration, but also about transnational families.

And also the way that we're using these devices. Damon, you mentioned running, for example. But we're often using digital technologies to understand society in terms of health, for example. I've got so many apps that will track my heart rate, how I'm feeling, what I'm eating, you know. If I was inclined to put all that information in, which I can never quite remember to do. But, but there are these things that we can actually use to monitor our performance and our progress and help to set goals. So they take on quite different meanings, again, with the various criteria that the people who set those norms, you know, give us as targets.

UMUT EREL: Yes, absolutely. So that's a really interesting one. So I want to come back to, to the tracking of people that Damon mentioned one of you wrote in. So there's a really interesting example comes from Mirca Madianou's work. So again, she's been working with migrants who often spend years and years away from their families. And the way that these technologies allow them a sense of immediate connection with their families is really interesting.

So she compares it to the sense of - she calls it ambient call presence. So imagine you're, you're all at home, but people in different rooms of the house do different things. So someone - you know, a child might be playing in their bedroom, another child might be studying their bedroom, someone else might be cooking in the kitchen, and you're always aware of where they are and what they do. And this is something that, of course, if you were living in the same house, it seems to be very natural.

But this is something that digital technologies enable these migrants, who often haven't been in the same house with their family members for many, many years, simply through the way that people check in on Facebook. Let's say their teenage child is going to the mall, for example. Someone else is checking in or posting a selfie with their friends. So these are ways in which family members who are really far apart from each other, can still feel really connected and have that sense of ambience call presence, really, of being together, even at a long distance.

KAREN FOLEY: Edward says we could unite the whole world just by using our phones.

UMUT EREL: We probably could, said we are.

KAREN FOLEY: [LAUGHS] It's incredible. Well, that's wonderful. Damon, is there anything else we want to add in terms of what people have been talking about this afternoon, before we return to our little video break?

DAMON MILLER: Yeah, just quickly. Sandra has pitched in on the using the phone for health reasons. So as I said, I use mine for running. And she uses it to record her oxygen levels and blood pressure and heart rate. So I mean, it's almost like a mini diagnostic tool, I guess. I mean, if you think what the mobile phones used to be able to do and what they can do now, I think everyone has their entire lives invested in the thing that's on their - in their pocket nowadays, I think.

KAREN FOLEY: No, absolutely. And then, you know, you have to think, what are the implications of some of these things? Some diagnostic will say if you've got an abnormally high heart rate or maybe call for help, et cetera. So if you're out on your run and your watch is different to your phone, but still nonetheless, similar sort of concept, detects something and then it could maybe call the person who would then get your GPS device and be able to go and rescue you, et cetera. But then there are other things also, like for example, if you were doing an event or something and you did your diagnostic criteria and it said, you know, actually, Damon, you're not going to perform that well today because of your levels of this, that and the other, you know. Do you listen to that when, you know, it could be factual or do you ignore it? I mean, there are, you know, implications, I think, for looking at this information in the first place, as well as what it can actually track.

DAMON MILLER: I think it comes back to what we were saying in the last session about understanding what the, what the data means. So we're constantly bombarded. Our phones tend to shout at us quite a lot nowadays. And it's understanding what it is that it's telling you, you should or shouldn't do.

KAREN FOLEY: No, absolutely.

UMUT EREL: Absolutely.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely. Yes. I tend to ignore mine most of the time, when it's something I don't want to hear. And that, that's a very effective strategy, I find. But yeah, you're right. It is about understanding those things, because sometimes what on the surface level may, may seem statistically, you know, aligned with one viewpoint could actually not be the case at all. Gosh, so Umut, a very exciting module then. And one way we've really sort of taken that sort of particular aspect to think about how we might understand digital societies. So thank you for giving us a flavour of all of that today. Plenty to think about from there. And we have the link to that website in terms of our OU resources, which Damon has put in the chat for you to pick up on at home.

So we're going to have a quick video break. And now we're going to look at the post-graduate certification and global development management. And also we're going to hear from an OU post-graduate student, because we're going to be shifting our focus ever so slightly in terms of levels here. So we're going to look at some of the post-graduate perspectives. We're going to look at key challenges in global development next. Stay tuned. We've been discussing a lot of these issues that are going to come up in this next session. So I'll see you very soon for that.

[MUSIC PLAYING]