INFO 498C: Designing Social Media Futures

University of Washington Information School — Autumn 2026

Instructor	JaeWon Kim (jaewonk@uw.edu)
Office	Denny Hall (DEN) **[room number]**
Office hours	**[days/times, or "by appointment"]**
Class meetings	Mondays & Wednesdays, 3:30–5:20 p.m. Pacific Time, DEN 213
Credits	4
Prerequisites	None. Prior design coursework (e.g., INFO 360) is strongly recommended.
Course sites	Canvas (submissions, readings) and Discord (course community and the Social Media Design Assembly)

Course Description

Social media platforms are designed artifacts. Every feed, notification, default setting, and interaction pattern reflects choices, and those choices shape how people—especially young people—connect, compare, present themselves, and build community. This lab-based course develops two complementary capacities: the literacy to read platform design critically, and the design skill to build alternatives that reflect your own values.

The course runs as a studio, and it turns on a question asked in Week 4: what *is* social media? Until then, we study the platforms you already know—how their features shape behavior, break trust, and answer or fail the interpersonal needs of young people. After that, we widen the frame: alternative platforms, games and spatial technologies, speculative designs, and the question of whose values any of them embody. The last three weeks are yours to build, audit, and present a social media platform of your own design.

From the first week, you will take part in the Social Media Design Assembly, an international HCI/UX design collaboration linking you with university students outside the United States.[1] The Assembly is where you teach each other the readings and where you work out, collectively and across cultures, what "better" social media would even mean. That work is not preparation for the course. It is a substantial part of it.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this course, you will be able to:

1. Analyze how platform design shapes user behavior, with particular attention to which design patterns support—and which undermine—the developmental needs of youth online.
2. Articulate your own vision of "better" social media and situate it among competing visions, explaining where it aligns with and departs from other people's values.

[1] The Assembly will likely involve university students in South Korea and Ireland; partnerships will be confirmed before the quarter begins.

3. Design and build a working social media prototype that embodies an explicit set of design values.
4. Evaluate your own and others' designs with nuance, surfacing tradeoffs and tensions rather than collapsing them into a single verdict.
5. Collaborate and communicate across cultural contexts, and reflect critically on what that experience reveals about platform design.

How the Course Works

Class Sessions

Class time combines seminar discussion with hands-on studio work. Mondays generally emphasize concepts and discussion; Wednesdays generally emphasize studio activities, workshops, and project work. Expect to spend substantial time outside class on readings, reflections, Assembly participation, and your project.

The Social Media Design Assembly

You will be placed in a standing Assembly group of four: typically two UW students and two university students from outside the United States, all of whom are pursuing UX design coursework. There are no mentor–mentee roles; all group members participate as equal peers. Groups form in Week 1 and the collective inquiry begins immediately; Week 3 is your group's first sustained attempt at synchronous connection.

The Assembly has two threads, both graded. In the **reading exchange**, members take turns preparing and leading discussion of the week's material, so that each of you repeatedly learns by teaching. In the **collective inquiry**, the group works through open questions that no reading settles: what would better social media actually feel like? How would you know a design was working? Which platforms do you see thriving, and why? What were you hoping for when you joined the platforms you use? What are the unwritten rules of posting where you live, and do they hold where your groupmates live? Discussion questions accompany each week's readings below. The inquiry is cumulative: later questions ask you to look back at what your own group has become.

Assembly activity happens mostly asynchronously over Discord, with one or two synchronous video calls scheduled at times negotiated across time zones.

Communication

Use Discord for Assembly activity and general course conversation, Canvas for assignment submission, and email for private matters. I aim to respond to email within 48 hours on weekdays.

Assignments and Grading

Component	Weight	Cadence
Reflections	20%	Daily and weekly
Social Media Design Assembly	35%	Weekly
Final Project & Milestones	45%	Milestones across the quarter
Community Building (extra credit)	up to 5%	Ongoing

Reflections (20%) Two cadences, one component.

- **Daily reflections** (8%): short entries (roughly 100–150 words), at least three per week on different days, on your own social media use and on your experience building community with your Assembly group. Graded credit/no-credit on completion and good-faith engagement; your lowest week is dropped.
- **Weekly reflections** (12%): a longer structured response (roughly 400–600 words) to a weekly prompt connecting course concepts to your experience—for example, choosing one platform you think works well and one that does not, and analyzing what works and what fails in each. The final weekly reflection asks you to trace how your perspective on social media design changed over the quarter. Graded with a rubric covering depth of analysis, use of course concepts, and specificity of evidence from your own experience.

Social Media Design Assembly (35%) Your work in the standing Assembly group, across both threads.

- **Reading exchange** (20%): when you lead, you prepare a short teaching summary of the week's material and 3–5 discussion questions, facilitate the exchange, and afterward submit your materials plus a brief synthesis of what the discussion surfaced. Each member leads twice across the quarter. When you are not leading, you are assessed on the quality of your preparation and contributions.
- **Collective inquiry** (15%): sustained, substantive contribution to the group's ongoing discussion of the week's open questions (listed with each week below) and of the implicit norms, goals, and disagreements those questions surface. Assessed on the quality of reasoning, on engagement with what groupmates have already said, and on the specificity with which you draw on your own experience rather than restating the reading.

Final Project & Milestones (45%) You will critique existing platforms, design and build your own, audit it with CodesignStudio, and present what you learned.

- **M1 — Platform critique** (end of Week 2, 6%): a structured critique of an existing mainstream platform, identifying the design choices responsible for a specific behavioral or relational outcome.
- **M2 — Concept & design values statement** (end of Week 5, 7%): the community you are designing for, the problem with existing platforms you are responding to, and the explicit values your design will embody.
- **M3 — Design specification** (end of Week 7, 8%): core interactions, information architecture, and sketches or wireframes, with rationale tying each major choice to your stated values.
- **M4 — Working prototype** (end of Week 9, 10%): an interactive prototype implementing your core interactions.
- **M5 — CodesignStudio safety audit** (Week 10, 9%): results of simulating your platform in CodesignStudio, an LLM-agent sandbox for evaluating how a design behaves under realistic social dynamics. Report where the design honors your values, where it fails under pressure, and what the simulation surfaced that you had not anticipated.

- **Final deliverable** (finals week, 5%): revised prototype, a short in-class presentation, and an insights report.

Projects are individual by default; pairs may be approved by the instructor.

Community Building (up to 5% extra credit) Rather than a participation grade, extra credit is awarded for the work of making our three-country Discord into an actual community. Across the quarter I will post shared milestones and lightweight missions: rituals to try, channels to design, ways of welcoming someone new. Credit is earned by attempting them, by documenting what happened in your daily reflections, and by whatever you invent that no one asked for. The question is not whether you posted. It is whether the community was more alive because you were in it.

Grading Scale

Final course percentages convert to grades on the University of Washington's numerical grading system, in which instructors report grades from 4.0 to 0.7 in 0.1 increments (with 0.0 for failing work); see the UW Grading System page for details. The percentage-to-grade conversion table for this course will be posted on Canvas.

Weekly Schedule

Topics and readings below are tentative; the definitive schedule, with links to all readings, lives on Canvas. Each week lists questions for your Assembly group to work through alongside the reading.

Week 1 — Youth, Social Media, and the Wellbeing Debate

Where the public conversation stands; what the evidence does and does not show; how social media actually feels from the inside. Course overview; Assembly groups form and the collective inquiry opens.
Read: boyd (2014), *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens*, Introduction; Haidt (2024), *The Anxious Generation*, excerpt, paired with Odgers (2024), "The Great Rewiring" review, *Nature*.
Optional: Orben & Przybylski (2019), *Nature Human Behaviour*; Landesman et al. (2024), "I Just Don't Care Enough to Be Interested," IDC.
Assembly questions: What were you actually hoping for when you joined the platforms you use? Did you get it? Does the public story about social media and young people match what social media has done to you—and does it match what it has done to your groupmates, in their countries?

Week 2 — Inside the Mainstream Platform

Affordances and defaults; dark and deceptive patterns; the attention economy; algorithmic feeds, engagement metrics, and user agency. What Instagram and TikTok are built to do.
Read: Gray et al. (2018), "The Dark (Patterns) Side of UX Design," CHI; Seaver (2019), "Captivating Algorithms: Recommender Systems as Traps," *Journal of Material Culture*.
Optional: Lukoff et al. (2021), "How the Design of YouTube Influences User Sense of Agency," CHI.
Assembly questions: Name one feature on a platform you use daily that you believe was designed against your interests. How would you prove it? Which platforms do your groupmates see as thriving, and do you agree on what "thriving" means?
Due: M1 — Platform critique.

Week 3 — Synchronous Connection Across Technologies

No lecture this week. Your Assembly group has been in asynchronous inquiry for two weeks; now it attempts sustained real-time connection across three countries, using a rotating set of platforms—Discord, Zoom, Gather.town, and others of your choosing—and documents what each afforded, what each made impossible, and where connection actually happened.

Read: Kim et al. (2025), "Discord's Design Encourages 'Third Place' Social Media Experiences," preprint; Oldenburg (1999), *The Great Good Place*, Ch. 1.

Assembly questions: You have known each other asynchronously for two weeks. What did the first live call give you that Discord did not? What did it cost? Which platform made silence comfortable? Where did the time zones stop being a logistics problem and start being a fact about the relationship?

Week 4 — What *Is* Social Media?

The pivot. Fictional inquiry as a method for escaping the design templates of platforms we already know; alternative platforms and social technologies; speculative and value-sensitive design as ways of imagining otherwise.

Read: Kim et al. (2026), "Social Media Should Feel Like Minecraft, Not Instagram: Youth Visions for Meaningful Social Connections through Fictional Inquiry," preprint; Kim et al. (2024), "Envisioning New Futures of Positive Social Technology," CSCW Companion; Friedman & Hendry (2019), *Value Sensitive Design*, Ch. 1.

Optional: Dunne & Raby (2013), *Speculative Everything*, Ch. 1; Costanza-Chock (2020), *Design Justice*, Introduction.

Assembly questions: If you could connect with a distant friend using any magic you wished, what would you do—and why is it not a feed? Now: whose values are embedded in the answer you just gave? Compare across your group. Where do three cultures disagree about what a good connection feels like?

Week 5 — Identity, Self-Presentation, and Relational Needs

Imagined audiences and context collapse; authenticity as a design outcome; what adolescents developmentally need from social technology, and how platform structures shape who we are able to be.

Read: Marwick & boyd (2011), "I Tweet Honestly, I Tweet Passionately," *New Media & Society*; Kim et al. (2024), "'Sharing, Not Showing Off': How BeReal Approaches Authentic Self-Presentation on Social Media Through Its Design," CSCW.

Optional: Davis (2023), *Technology's Child*, selected chapters.

Assembly questions: BeReal tried to design authenticity into a platform and partly succeeded. What did it get wrong? Describe an unwritten rule about posting that everyone where you live understands and no one states. Does it hold in your groupmates' countries?

Due: M2 — Concept & design values statement.

Week 6 — Community, Belonging, and Governance

What makes online communities work; third places online; moderation, norms, and governance as design problems rather than afterthoughts.

Read: Kraut & Resnick (2012), *Building Successful Online Communities*, Ch. 1; Gillespie (2018), *Custodians of the Internet*, Ch. 1.

Optional: Zhang et al. (2020), "PolicyKit: Building Governance in Online Communities," UIST.

Assembly questions: Your Assembly group has been running for five weeks. What norms did you establish without discussing them? Who enforces them? What would you have to build into a

platform to make those norms hold among strangers?

Week 7 — Privacy, Safety, and Risk

Boundary regulation and trust; interpersonal versus institutional privacy; harassment in games and spatial platforms; age-appropriate design; what safety means when the risk comes from peers rather than strangers.
Read: Kim et al. (2025), "Trust-Enabled Privacy: Social Media Designs to Support Adolescent User Boundary Regulation," SOUPS; Kim et al. (2025), "Privacy as Social Norm: Systematically Reducing Dysfunctional Privacy Concerns on Social Media," CSCW.
Optional: Blackwell et al. (2019), "Harassment in Social Virtual Reality: Challenges for Platform Governance," CSCW; Freeman et al. (2022), "Disturbing the Peace: Experiencing and Mitigating Emerging Harassment in Social Virtual Reality," CSCW; Schulenberg et al. (2023), "'Creepy Towards My Avatar Body, Creepy Towards My Body': How Women Experience and Manage Harassment Risks in Social Virtual Reality," CSCW; Kou (2020), "Toxic Behaviors in Team-Based Competitive Gaming: The Case of League of Legends," CHI PLAY; Fiani et al. (2024), "Exploring the Perspectives of Social VR-Aware Non-Parent Adults and Parents on Children's Use of Social Virtual Reality," CSCW.
Assembly questions: Describe something you decided not to post, and why. Was the risk the platform's or a person's? What would have had to be different for you to post it? What could go wrong on the platform you are designing—and who would it happen to first?
Due: M3 — Design specification.

Week 8 — Studio: Build

Prototyping workshop; peer design review; individual consultations. No new readings. Your Assembly group continues its collective inquiry.
Assembly questions: Show your group the thing you are building. What are they worried about that you were not?

Week 9 — Studio: Build and Audit

Prototype completion; introduction to CodesignStudio; setting up your simulation and choosing what to test.
Read: Connor & Irizarry (2015), *Discussing Design*, excerpt; Nielsen (1994), "10 Usability Heuristics for User Interface Design."
Assembly questions: What is the worst plausible thing a user could do on your platform? Design the simulation that would surface it.
Due: M4 — Working prototype.

Week 10 — Audit, Synthesis, and Presentations

Running and interpreting your CodesignStudio audit; final presentations; manifestos for social media futures; closing the Assembly well.
Read: no new readings; final weekly reflection (perspective-change retrospective) due.
Assembly questions: What did the simulation reveal that you did not want to know? Has the Assembly changed what you think "better" social media means—and if so, when?
Due: M5 — CodesignStudio safety audit. Final deliverable due in finals week.

Course Policies

Attendance and Engagement

This is a studio course; much of the learning happens in the room and in your Assembly group, and it cannot be fully reconstructed afterward. If you must miss a session, let me know in advance when possible and coordinate with your Assembly group so their work is not disrupted.

Late Work

You have four grace days to use across the quarter on weekly reflections and project milestones, in any combination, no questions asked. Beyond grace days, late submissions lose 10% per day up to three days. Daily reflections cannot be submitted late (their value is in the moment), but your lowest week is dropped. Reading exchange leading cannot be rescheduled except by swapping with a groupmate in advance. If circumstances beyond your control interfere with your coursework, contact me early—we will figure something out.

Use of AI Tools

AI tools (including large language models) are permitted as design and development aids for your final project—for example, generating code, exploring visual directions, or debugging—provided you include a brief disclosure of how you used them in each milestone. AI tools may not be used to generate your daily reflections, weekly reflections, Assembly contributions, or reading exchange materials: those assignments assess your personal experience and thinking, and outsourcing them defeats their purpose. When in doubt, ask.

Assembly Conduct

The Assembly asks you to build relationships across cultures and time zones. Approach it with patience, curiosity, and generosity: assume good intent across language and cultural differences, honor your commitments to your group, and treat your partners' time as valuable. Concerns about group dynamics should come to me early, before they compound.

University Policies

Religious Accommodations

Washington state law requires that UW develop a policy for accommodation of student absences or significant hardship due to reasons of faith or conscience, or for organized religious activities. The UW's policy, including more information about how to request an accommodation, is available at Religious Accommodations Policy. Accommodations must be requested within the first two weeks of this course using the Religious Accommodations Request form.

Access and Accommodations

Your experience in this class is important to me. If you have already established accommodations with Disability Resources for Students (DRS), please share your approved accommodations with me at your earliest convenience so we can discuss your needs in this course. If you have a temporary health condition or a permanent disability that requires accommodations but have not yet set up services, contact DRS at 206-543-8924, uwdrs@uw.edu, or `https://disability.uw.edu`. Conditions requiring accommodation include, among others, mental health, attention-related, learning, vision, hearing, physical, and health impacts. DRS establishes reasonable accommodations through an interactive process between you, your instructor, and DRS, consistent with UW's commitment to accessible learning environments and with federal and state law.

Academic Integrity

The University of Washington Student Conduct Code (WAC 478-121) defines prohibited academic and behavioral conduct and describes how the University holds students accountable. I expect you to know and follow University policy on all forms of academic misconduct, including plagiarism, unauthorized collaboration, and falsification. In this course, the collaboration boundaries are set per assignment above; representing another person's (or an AI system's) work as your own reflective writing is a violation. Suspected misconduct is referred through the University's process; see https://www.washington.edu/cssc/ for details.

Safety

Call SafeCampus at 206-685-7233 anytime—no matter where you work or study—to anonymously discuss safety and wellbeing concerns for yourself or others. SafeCampus can connect you with specialists in risk assessment and safety planning and can coordinate with UW resources on your behalf.

Sexual Misconduct and Title IX

University policy, together with federal and state law, gives you the right to participate in UW programs and activities free from sex- or gender-based discrimination and harassment. For reporting options, supportive resources, and the current syllabus statement, see https://www.washington.edu/titleix/.

Beyond the Course

Students who engage actively and thoughtfully in this course will have the opportunity to develop their final project further and to co-author research growing out of the course. A second path is also open: running a version of this program with teenagers aged 13–17, as members of a youth advisory board. The course teaches you to design social media with young people rather than for them; the advisory board is where that becomes practice, and where the youth whose experience this research concerns get to set the terms. If either interests you, say so early—the course itself is good preparation, and I am glad to talk about pathways into research.

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