CS6724-S16
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Special Topics: Designing to Change Power and Authority

Why build a system unless there is something that you want to do differently? Computer Scientists build systems to change things in the world.   But as computer systems touch more and more aspects of life, it is not just all about efficiency.   It's very easy to design systems that get users to interact with computers in a way that satisfies some set of narrow goals, but the cost may be that we are constrained and even bullied by our systems. As recently 1994, Howard Rheingold claimed that the "internet promotes democracy," yet the ensuing 20+ years have begun to reveal more complex patterns, starting with the observation that we must be concerned now not with "the" internet, but with "this" internet [Dourish, 2015]. In a recent New York Times op-ed, Robert Reich (Former Secretary of Labor under President Clinton) notes that "while in 2001, the top 10 websites accounted for 31 percent of all page views in America, by 2010 the top 10 accounted for 75 percent" [Reich, NYT, 9/18/15]. Likewise, "Amazon is now the first stop for almost a third of all American consumers seeking to purchase anything." As Reich goes on to say, "Talk about power."

But the power of computer technology in society does not just lie at these institutional levels. It also lies in the ways that habitual practices in design result in the creation of computational systems that demand and reinforce ritualized behavior in the users. We can and ought to design differently! We can design to promote equity, inclusion, and freedom of action.

This project-based class designs and implements, taking into consideration such current movements as participatory design, critical design, adversarial design, feminist design, as well as Dr. Tatar's own understanding of the challenges that face the knowledge society in the next ten years. We will design systems to promote equity and inclusion, and we will inform our design activity with (1) an understanding of who and how people are currently marginalized and (2) design propositions about what we can do differently.