Faculty Spotlight

PROFESSOR’S NEW BOOK CONNECTS GEO-SOCIAL MEDIA TO A NEW GLOBAL MIDDLE CLASS

Since 2011 assistant professor Erika Polson has been teaching students to plug into the wider world around them through her research, her communication courses, and as the resident MFJS internship director.

Polson’s interests lie in critically studying the new forms of connectedness that are enabled and promoted through networked communication and globalization. She currently teaches classes in the International and Intercultural Communication graduate program and the Strategic Communication undergraduate major, working with students to widen their perspectives and make connections between their experiences and the experiences of others.

As internship director, she seeks to provide students with opportunities for mentorship, encouraging them to be proactive and to explore bridges to a meaningful career. Under her direction, MFJS students are placed in around 100 internships every year. “The fields that students specialize in through our department work well for finding internships,” she says. For journalism and strategic communications majors as well as all MFJS graduate students who do not write a thesis, this bodes well: serving in an internship is a requirement. While internships are optional for film and media studies majors, many pursue them.

Polson enjoys connecting students with potential internships and mentors: “It’s nice to see them thrive outside of the classroom,” she says.

Polson’s research also deals with connections, highlighting the use of social media to create and reinforce communities of diverse groups of mobile professionals in global cities.

Her forthcoming book, Privileged Mobilities: Professional Migration, Geo-Social Media, and a New Global Middle Class introduces readers to a new generation of expatriates, which - unlike counterparts in previous generations - seeks to build new international identities by joining a cosmopolitan community rather than seeking out their national cohorts abroad. It explores how today’s expats use digital media to access local social scenes in global cities, building a “global network” that Polson argues is key to social mobility within a new global middle class.

Groups using meetup.com and similar websites organize get-togethers all over the world. The book shows how participants use these social networks to recreate themselves as “international people” rather than simply living as strangers in a new place. Users of sites like meetup.com rely on their online connections to benefit both socially and professionally.

The book grew out of Polson’s doctoral dissertation, which began with an ethnographic study of expats in Paris, but grew in scope in later years to include research in Singapore and Bangalore.

Although the digital media landscape changes quickly, Polson believes her book is about much more than a new technology. “Digital media platforms are so dynamic,” she says, discussing the influx of new research on a topic that was mostly unexplored when she began writing her dissertation, “but my goal is to explore aspects of it that are enduring. I want to look past what’s new and place things in a larger societal and historical context.” Whereas journalistic coverage tends to focus on the latest in digital media, about what’s happening now, Polson asserts that scholarship “can put things in a larger perspective.” Privileged Mobilities will be released this summer by Peter Lang.
Polson will teach one course in fall 2016 and will be on sabbatical during Winter and Spring quarters, when she looks forward to working on new research. She spent time in Cuba in December 2015, researching cultural changes in relation to the new and growing access to Wi-Fi, and plans to return during her sabbatical.

She is also working on an edited book with DU Professor Lynn Schofield Clark that is tentatively titled *Media and Class in the 21st Century*. 