

Political Science 399.01, Spring 2017
Technology and Politics
MWF: Maybank 111
10-10:50

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“Men have become the tools of their tools.” –Henry David Thoreau

“There is general agreement among the sages of the peoples of the past ages, that if we are granted power commensurate with our will, we are more likely to use it wrongly than to use it rightly, more likely to use it stupidly than to use it intelligently.” –Norbert Weiner

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*Please note: I do not allow the use of computers or handhelds in my classroom. I have ample reasons for this, not least is the use of any device (even if you are sneaking and trying to hold your handheld in your lap) has been shown to affect those around you.

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You have grown up in a world that for the past two centuries has celebrated new technologies in one way or another. New technologies, we are told, will make our lives easier, even qualitatively better. But more extreme claims for them have been made.

- For example, when telegraphy was first introduced, many thought it would lead to world peace.
- Marshall McLuhan thought that television would unite all of us into a ‘global village.’ In 1954, and thus also lead to world peace.
- Lewis Strauss, the Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, predicted nuclear power plants would soon produce electricity ‘too cheap to meter.’

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This list could go on and on. With the advent of each new technology and the glowing predictions made for how it will change our lives, we forget every time that no technology has ever lived up to its promise. When it comes to its promise for a brighter future, we suffer from what Vincent Mosco calls ‘historical amnesia’ and subsequently embrace the next, new technology and its promise for a better future.

Though this claim of a bright technological future has been a persistent drumbeat for a long time, there is no argument that the pace of technological invention has quickened since the middle part of the twentieth century—a time span that includes the entirety of your lives.

New technologies almost always have a disruptive effect as they replace or supplant older devices. When these new technologies are ‘invented’ and supplant other technologies in shorter and shorter time-spans, these disruptive effects become a constant factor of life. For you, more and more constant disruption/invention is all you know as a way of life.

It is the goal of this course to help you develop a broad critical perspective on technology as a way fully understanding it. It should be stated at the outset that many new technologies have had wonderful results. Who can argue with a new technology that allows a paralyzed person to walk or a person suffering from advanced Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (Lou Gehrig’s disease) to “speak” to others via brain-implanted electrodes? I certainly do not. But that said, philosophers of technology tend not to celebrate such technological achievements because they get celebrated all the time. Philosophers, as Albert Borgmann states, point out the liabilities -- what happens when technology moves beyond lifting genuine burdens and starts freeing us from burdens that we should not want to be rid of?

The term “technology” has its roots in Greek—its was formed from the word *téchne*, meaning “art, skill or craft” and *logia*, meaning “the study of.” Given what we ordinarily interpret to be an “art, skill, or craft”, technology can be a number of things—and it is in modern times.

There are two fundamental ways of framing how we approach technology:

1. We can consider it as what are commonly called “artifacts;” that is, things, usually machines/tools.
2. We can consider it from a much broader perspective as a *way of thinking* in an engineering-like, mechanical way.

The first way is easy to think about. The second is more difficult. In one of the most important books of the twentieth century written from that perspective, Jaques Ellul (*The Technological Society*) defines “*la technique*,” as “the totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency . . . in every field of human activity.” Langdon Winner suggests such a definition corresponds to the term’s use in contemporary everyday English. In this sense, modern advertising is a ‘technology’ employed to get you to buy things and many political problems are relegated as issues or problems for technical experts to solve.

Technology is usually ubiquitous and though this course is ultimately about politics we cannot avoid understanding in a larger context. For example, since WWII a substantial amount of research monies devoted to creating new technologies is funded or subsidized by our government in the form of direct grants of money, tax expenditures, and protection from competition through granting patents. In many cases, governmental entities are the direct stimulus for new technologies. The Internet was originally created as a project of the US Defense Advanced Products Research Agency (DARPA). DARPA’s goal for the Internet was to find a way to maintain defense communications in the event of a massive disruption of the military’s normal communication technologies. Global Positioning Systems (GPS) was also a DARPA-stimulated technology to allow more locational precision in many applications including targeting data for missiles. In 2004, DARPA issued a “Grand Challenge” to inventors to develop driverless vehicles. The goal there was to use the technology to assist soldiers in a variety of ways. Technologies developed then are being employed by Google as

it pursues commercial applications for automobiles. In a less transparent way, the NSA is also doing what Facebook does along with five thousand other ‘data brokers’, as Edward Snowden told us. The highly secretive company in Silicone Valley, Plantir, is funded by the Central Intelligence Agency and used by the NSA, the CIA, the FBI, numerous police forces, American Express, and hundreds of other corporations, intelligence agencies, and financial institutions. Its algorithms allow for rapid analysis of enormous amounts of data from a vast array of sources like traffic cameras, online purchases, social media posts, friendships, and e-mail exchanges—the everyday activities of innocent people—to enable police officers, for example, to assess whether someone they have pulled over for a broken headlight is possibly a criminal. Or someday may be a criminal.

In your own research project for this course, you will be free to pursue any topic that relates to “technology” as we either broadly define it as ‘technique’ or narrowly as ‘artifacts.’ **Ultimately you will be responsible for connecting this with a political issue or topic.** Generally, I argue that even trivial technologies speak to the use of “power” which is at the core of all political studies. Interestingly, we frequently do not consider technologies to pose political questions or issues *per se*. But they almost invariably do. For example, since the middle of the twentieth century many think urban and suburban sprawl has been a growing problem. Sprawl requires we spend more time in our vehicles as we drive to and from work, shopping and entertainment—virtually everyone complains about the frustrations of rush hour gridlock. Moreover, dispersed suburban communities cost more to provide public services such as fire and police protection. Consider then, the distinct possibility that as driverless cars become commercially available that many will not think sprawl is so awful as we turn our private vehicles into rolling offices and work (or relax) on the way to and from work, shopping or entertainment.

Sometimes technologies present us with what we do see as collective, political problems. The controversy over genetically modified foods and crops has both pragmatic and ethical issues and artificial meat is close to commercial production. The same applies to stem cell research. As this syllabus is being prepared, many are deeply concerned about privacy issues in connection with the revelations that the National Security Agency (NSA) is using sophisticated data mining technologies to eavesdrop on our emails and Internet usage. The Federal Bureau of Investigation is currently employing fake cell phone towers to indiscriminately listen in on cell phone conversations.

For the purposes of full disclosure, I have two fundamental perspectives on technology—these are subject to debate but not as simple opinion:

First, all technologies are “biased:” In general, this means they “tend” or “lean” toward certain uses. This can be understood simply by pointing to Maslow’s observation that ‘if your only tool is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail.’ I admit that this perspective verges a bit on technological determinism (which is an important concept we will discuss a good deal), but I see it as subtler than this. For example, Neil Postman (*Amusing Ourselves to Death*) argues that TV is biased toward *entertainment*. Entertainment is fast-moving and well, entertaining. So, Postman argues that the requisites of TV have shaped modern political debates far more than vice versa. Vanderburg (*Living in the Labyrinth of Technology*) acutely observes that though TV is a visual medium, it is not analogous to our own “seeing.” Rather, no matter how big the screen, it still “frames” or “bounds” what it presents. More

importantly, “it inevitably places the visual dimension [of issues] in the foreground and relegates everything else to the background.” (355) ‘Everything else,’ in this case, means our senses of touch, smell, and taste. TV can and does reorder temporality—things happen and then a story presents what happened to make those things happen. It can and does ignore space—we can watch simultaneous events that occur in different countries. Most importantly, the images defy human experience. We see a street scene from a rooftop, then are whisked to an eye-level scene of it, then are whisked around the world to see something happening at the same time. Jerry Mander, in *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* terms these “technical events” and argues they are used very frequently in television to continuously tease our attention along. The point here is that TV producers have learned, over the years, that this is what makes TV *successful*. In politics, nowhere is this entertainment bias more in evidence than in broadcasting presidential debates (which are hardly that anymore). But, all that said, TV can be used to broadcast a video of sheet grazing in a pasture for hour after hour.

Second, following an earlier comment, any fair assessment of a technology should not just account for how it might be used for ‘good,’ but also be used for malicious purpose or produce undesirable side-effects. Only by doing this can we fairly assess and debate technology as a collective (political) issue. This fact is (from my perception) the source of many of the modern arguments/confusions about technology. In the early twenty-first century, observing what is happening in India and China, we can more readily see in accelerated fashion both the positive and negative aspects of industrialization (combined with capitalism). In our own country the number of EPA “Superfund” sites is well in excess of 1,200 (there are three in the Charleston area). On the good side, the companies that were once located on these Superfund sites produced some commodity that was deemed in some way, shape or form to be ‘of value.’ One Charleston site, the former MacCalloy plant, produced ferrochromium that was used in the manufacture of high-grade steel for DOD missiles. On the bad side, we are left with highly toxic chemicals in the ground that frequently are cost-prohibitive to remove or even mitigate and may affect life for generations to come. Another Superfund site, the former phosphate (fertilizer) factories—Koppers, Columbia Nitrogen, and Ashepoo Phosphate—have left residual phosphorus such that shrimp caught close by in the Ashley River have ingested and stored sufficient phosphorus to spontaneously combust when removed from the water.

http://www.postandcourier.com/news/special_reports/addressing-a-century-of-pollution-million-and-countless-tons-of/article_cff48040-e737-5e04-bc80-89325daaf457.html

Similarly, something that seems so “good” as antibiotics that save human lives also can spawn more and more resistant strains and increase the prospects of an uncontrolled pandemic that would also be facilitated by modern, globe-spanning modes of transportation. We know antibiotics are overprescribed.

In spite of the fact that there are usually these two sides to every technology, we frequently do not pose any systematic set of questions when we look at it, emerging or otherwise. Ellul (I will not require that you read *The Technological Society* but do recommend you put it on your reading list for life), posed what he termed “76 Reasonable Questions to ask about any technology,” put into nine categories. Some of Ellul’s questions clearly reflect his deep relig-

iosity (he was a Catholic priest) and some show a clear political bias—you can certainly demur with some, but I suggest not all, of them. You can find these questions at:

<https://www.bestsemester.com/locations-and-programs/76-questions>

Books: The following are required for this course:

Technology Matters: Questions to Live With (MIT Press) Reprint Edition, by David E. Nye

Rise of the Robots: Technology and the Threat of a Jobless Future (Basic Books) by Martin Ford

To Save Everything, Click Here: The Folly of Technological Solutionism (PublicAffairs) by Evgeny Morozov (Author)

Please note: Additional assignments will be created throughout the semester based on class discussion.

The reading list will take us to spring break. I have deliberately left the classes after that open so that you can participate in discussing what we will read after these three books. I likely will schedule some of those open classes to discuss specific topics such as modern weaponry (e.g., drones), GMOs, and the effect of technology on learning, and give appropriate reading or viewing assignments.

Class schedule:

1. Wed	Jan 11	Introduction: General Discussion – Discussion about the critical perspective in the class, what technologies to discuss.
2. Fri	Jan 13	An introduction to Social Acceleration: Read: Chapter 6, “The Speed of Liberal Democracy” in: Robert Hassan, <i>Empires of Speed: Time and the Acceleration of Politics and Society</i> . Note: This is an ebook you can read (free) online through the College Library Instructions: Go to library website and under the “Discover” tab type the Name of the book and click the author button underneath. That will take you to a page that will allow you to link to the book after you login using your college id.
3. Mon	Jan 16	No class: MLK Day
4. Wed	Jan 18	Read Hassan, Chapter 7, “Time For Politics: A Temporalized Democracy” Javier Jaén: “The Problem With “Self-Investigation in a Post-Truth Era” Found in NY Times Magazine, Dec 27 th , 2016 and on Oaks.

Fri	Jan 20	Read: Epstein, "How Google Could End Democracy" – available on Oaks Read: Google's Response to Epstein – available on Oaks Read: Epstein's Response to Google – available on Oaks
6. Mon	Jan 23	Read: Nye, Chapters 1 & 2 and Introduction
7. Wed	Jan 25	Read: Nye, Chapters 3 & 4
8. Fri	Jan 27	Read: Nye, Chapters 5, 6, & 7
9. Mon	Jan 30	Read: Nye, Chapters 8 & 9
10. Wed	Feb 1	Read: Ford, Chapters 1 & 2
11. Fri	Feb 3	Read: Ford, Chapters 3 & 4
12. Mon	Feb 6	Read: Ford, Chapters 5 & 6
13. Wed	Feb 8	Read: Ford, Chapters 7 & 8
14. Fri	Feb 10	Read: Ford, Chapters 9 & 10 and Conclusion
15. Mon	Feb 13	Read: Morozov, Introduction and Chapter 1
16. Wed	Feb 15	Read: Morozov, Chapter 2
17. Fri	Feb 17	Read: Morozov, Chapter 3
18. Mon	Feb 20	Read: Morozov, Chapter 4
19. Wed	Feb 22	Read: Morozov, Chapter 5
20. Fri	Feb 24	Read: Morozov, Chapter 6
21. Mon	Feb 27	Read: Morozov, Chapter 7
22. Wed	Mar 1	Read Morozov, Chapter 8
23. Fri	Mar	Read: Morozov, Chapter 9 and Postscript

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Mon	Mar 6	Spring Break
Wed	Mar 8	Spring Break
Fri	Mar 10	Spring Break
24. Mon	Mar 13	Term Paper Proposals Due: NO EXCEPTIONS
25. Wed	Mar 15	
26. Fri	Mar 17	
27. Mon	Mar 20	
28. Wed	Mar 22	
29. Fri	Mar 24	
30. Mon	Mar 27	
31. Wed	Mar 29	
32. Fri	Mar 31	
33. Mon	Apr 2	
34. Wed	Apr 4	
35. Fri	Apr 6	
36. Mon	Apr 9	
37. Wed	Apr 11	
38. Fri	Apr 13	
39. Mon	Apr 16	
40. Wed	Apr 18	
41. Fri	Apr 20	

41. Mon	Apr 23	
Wed	Apr 25	

Attendance: *Class attendance is a powerful predictor of your final grade—if you attend class, your grade trends up and if you do not, it goes down. I expect for you to attend class and a sign-in sheet will be passed for each class held.* Attendance will be taken (sign-sheets) for every class. You will be permitted up to three unexcused absences during the term with no penalty. Three absences will be allowed.

Requirements

Class Participation and Reading: At the **beginning** if I single you out I expect for me to tell the class your thoughts about the readings and any questions you might have. One or two of you will be singled out by a random selection process. A reponse from you that indicates that you have done the reading will be sufficient. I will record if your response is sufficient or insufficient and score accordingly. Please note that I do not rule out calling you out two classes in a row.

Examinations: Two exams will be given. Both will be essay format. Each will cover the material in that part of the course. Both will be take-home and submitted in a dropbox on Oaks. Answers will be typed, double-spaced, in APA format (without a title page or running header). I will try to give you some brief tutorials on APA format and prepare my own instructions. However, a comprehensive set of guidelines can be found at:

<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/560/01/>

Papers that have excessive grammatical errors (run-on sentences, incomplete sentences, misspellings **and especially fail to use paragraphs**) will be returned ungraded for you to make corrections and resubmit.

Paper: Each student will prepare a term paper. You have some options on this. One would be to read and comprehensively analyze a book. Another would be to pick a relevant topic and analyze it using articles (both scholarly and lay).

Grades will be calculated as follows:

Class participation: 10%
Exam 1: 25%
Exam 2: 25%
Term Paper: 40%

I reserve up to three total points on your final grade to reward class participation. In short, participation can mean the difference between what your average is and the next higher grade. No penalties will be factored in this consideration. I will also factor in whether or not your test scores show progressive improvement throughout the semester. If they do, then that will incline me to award you a point or so if you fall on a borderline grade.

Extra credit:

Extra credit assignments will not be given. You have a chance throughout the semester to earn extra credit by participating in class, or, as I find appropriate, attending a College sponsored event.

Final Grades will be calculated as follows:

93-100	A	90-92	A-
87-89	B+	83-86	B
80-82	B-	77-79	C+
73-76	C	70-72	C-
67-69	D+	63-66	D
60-62	D-	59 and below	F

Contacting me:

My telephone numbers/office hours are listed in the header.

For ordinary communication, email is accepted.

If you send me email, **put in the subject header POLI 399.01 (your name). Putting your name in is especially important if you send me a message from other than your CofC gmail account, e.g., you use another gmail account, hotmail, or whatever. If you do not put POLI 399 and your name in the subject line I often have no way of identifying you from any other email.**

Computers and texting: I consider texting to be the same as talking in class—call me old-fashioned if you will, but it is discourteous to me as well as your classmates. Moreover, there is ample experimental evidence that you cannot do two things at the same time . . . if you are texting, you are only paying partial attention to class. So, no texting is permitted either. Violation of either of these rules will result in punishment at my discretion.

Honor code: I expect you to adhere to the College's honor code. Violation of this code is serious and can result in your expulsion or the awarding of an administrative "F" for the course. More information can be found at:

<http://studentaffairs.cofc.edu/honor-system/>

Special needs: Any student with verifiable special needs should see me asap.