

**Technology and Culture**, J393S/INF 385T/AMS 391 (09149; 28864; 32009)  
Thursday, 12:30-3:00, CMA 6.174  
Sharon Strover, School of Journalism and Media  
Office Hours: DMC 3.368 Tuesday 9-11 and by appointment  
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### Course Description

In this course we will examine several influential books that address the interplay of media systems, technologies and society. The material we'll read during the term has been selected because it raises issues concerning the ways in which media systems old and new have defining powers that go beyond the superficial notion of how they operate or which "audiences" they attract. Our simplest goals will be to understand alternative ways of thinking about and researching technology. We will pay careful attention to authors' conceptions of how technology figures in various aspects of society, including its supposed "impacts" on society, its role in creating and shaping broad information and cultural systems and the attendant political and economic reverberations. Theories of society are foregrounded in some of the readings, and occupy central positions in other work even though they may be more implicit than explicit. Issues of class, race, ethnicity and gender are woven into many of these works and will figure into our discussions as well. We are reading primarily complete books in order to work with ideas and arguments that are fully worked out by their authors.

Our point of departure is that one cannot meaningfully discuss media systems without acknowledging the social context in which they reside, originate, function and evolve. Culture and cultural issues are defined and explored broadly as encompassing the common practices and rituals of everyday life as well as the long-standing patterns and values that characterize society. The ways in which media systems or technologies are synonymous with modernity, post-modernity or perhaps the Anthropocene will be addressed in many of our readings. Some of the theoretical and methodological approaches we will explore include social construction of technology, technological determinism, actor-network theory and the political economy of communication.

The course objectives include:

- Cultivating familiarity with methodological approaches such as historical, qualitative and ethnographic research in researching communication technology issues or problems;
- Exploring some of the dominant theories and frames associated with studying communication technologies;
- Developing a critical voice with respect to communication technology studies;
- Developing a publishable, original paper on a communication technology topic.

## Readings

Readings will include the following books:

Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1974; Susan Douglas, *Inventing American Broadcasting*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987; Gabriella Coleman's *Coding Freedom*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013; Tarleton Gillespie's *Custodians of the Internet*, Yale University Press, 2018; Virginia Eubanks, *Automating Inequality*, New York: St. Martins Press, 2017; Alissa Richardson's *Bearing Witness While Black*, New York: Oxford University press, 2020; Lee Humphries, *The Qualified Self*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2018.

Some articles available through electronic reserves will round out our readings.

I also recommend and may refer to other well-known books that have influenced how researchers talk about and research technology systems. Among them are: Leo Marx, *The Machine in the garden: Technology and the pastoral ideal in America*, Oxford University Press, 1964; Vincent Mosco, *To the Cloud: Big Data in a Turbulent World* (2014); Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: an introduction to actor-network theory*, 2007, Oxford: Oxford University Press; Safiya Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (2018); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, London: Verso, 1983; Carolyn Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New*; Langdon Winner, *The Whale and the reactor*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986; Shoshana Zuboff, *In the Age of the Smart Machine*, New York: Basic, 1984; *Signal Traffic*, edited by Lisa Parks and Nicole Starosielski (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2015); and Ithiel de Sola Pool's classic *Technologies of Freedom*.

You will find that several of the books we examine focus on particular media systems or technologies, and that their overall approach debunks the idea that communication technologies are independent, "exogenous variables" in equations of outcomes or influences. One of our goals in the course will be to carefully investigate how media systems and their effects are presented to the public at large and to the community of scholars. Theories of political economy and theories of economic and social development are fundamental to our work, as are conceptions of how what passes for progress (and the panoply of terms describing the hops, jumps, failures, and straddling that bind and explain innovation, science, technologies and cultural trajectories) becomes labeled as such. Please note that some ancillary materials will be housed on the electronic reserves site associated with this class.

## Grading

Students are expected to attend class having read the assigned material. Please be prepared

to discuss the material and to raise questions and issues. The course will be conducted as a seminar, and students will be responsible for certain questions or commentary on the readings.

I will ask you to write commentaries on our readings that will be posted in our online forum (Canvas), and these commentaries will be a point of departure for discussion purposes. Your commentaries could develop some point or question that you believe is important, and you should feel free to link your comments to other work that you have read. I do not expect you to do outside research in the commentaries; rather, they are a way for you to reflect on the readings of the week and to integrate them with other work and ideas you might have encountered in your graduate career. I expect you to spend no more than about an hour on each comment. While I will not give letter grades on the commentaries, I will read and sometimes respond to them (and record them as "inventive and reflective" or "did the reading" or "no credit"). They often become points of departure for in-class discussion.

You will be expected to take an active role in planning for seminar conversations. Each class member will work in a two-person team in order to compose a discussion prompt (just one or two, please) for each class meeting. **Please do work together** on the prompt rather than submitting separate questions/thoughts. That team also will initiate discussion on their prompt, working from their own online responses. It is fine to write about something else if you like; the prompt is there to jumpstart your thinking.

Prompts should be posted by the Sunday before the Thursday class; responses should be posted by the Wednesday 6:00 pm before each Thursday class.

A final term paper will allow you to explore one theme in depth. It is due on the final Friday of classes, but you should be prepared to discuss its broad outlines during our final class sessions. I would like you to submit a draft of the paper on November 11 so that I can provide some guidance before you complete it.

The written work for this course often has resulted in papers that can be presented at professional conferences and ultimately submitted for publication, and I urge you to strive for a high level of originality, professional writing, and careful research in your final paper. The paper should address some aspect of technology development in the context of the broader social environment, and I anticipate that one of the theoretical approaches we dissect will be developed in your work. It should include formal citations, preferably in APA style, and represent thorough conceptual development.

Grades will be assigned on the following basis:

Course participation: 15%

Final research paper: 45%

Commentaries: 40%

## Schedule

- Aug 26 Introduction to the course. Approaches to researching technology. Discuss Harari article (online).
- Sep 2 Technology, power, the state, and culture. Raymond Williams (1974), Television: Technology and Cultural Form. (Any edition is fine – different editions have different introductions by various scholars.) What are the boundaries of a cultural form? How might the concept of flow be updated – and apply to matters of journalism and information in contemporary times?
- Sep 9 Start reading Susan Douglas (1987), Inventing American Broadcasting, 1899-1922. Introduction through Ch. 5. NOTE: This book is available electronically through UT libraries.
- Control and commercial exploitation: the case of broadcasting. Consider how Douglas frames the roles of inventors, the press, and government in her history.
- Sep 16 Douglas, Inventing American Broadcasting, 1899-1922, remainder of book.
- Sep 23 The social construction of technology. Selected chapters from Wiebe Bijker, Thomas Hughes and Trevor Pinch (1989), The Social construction of technological systems. Cambridge: MIT Press. Additional materials on actor-network theory (Bruno Latour). These are available on our Canvas site.
- Sep 30 Richardson, Bearing Witness While Black.
- Submit a paragraph on intended research topic.
- Oct 7 Gillespie, Custodians of the Internet, first four chapters.
- Oct 14 Complete Gillespie.
- Discuss research paper ideas in class today.
- Oct 21 Extending the anthropology of Coleman, Coding Freedom through Part I.technology.
- Oct 28 Remainder of Coleman.

- Nov 4 Political economy and critical analyses. Virginia Eubanks, Automating Inequality. **Outline of final paper due.**
- Nov 11 Lee Humphries, *The Qualified Self*.
- Nov 18 Catch up and take a deep breath! Possible early presentations today. We also may consider the history of the ‘sublime’ in technology. The famous essay Henry Adams essay “The Virgin and the Dynamo” will be available on Canvas for reference.
- Nov. 25 HOLIDAY!
- Dec. 2 **Presentations**; one additional presentation day may be scheduled.

**Final version of papers due on Dec. 10**

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Contemporary online resources around Media & Technology Issues (compiled by Martin Riedl and Sharon Strover)

<https://www.aclu.org/issues/privacy-technology>  
 ars technica <https://arstechnica.com/>  
 axios <https://www.axios.com/>  
<http://cmsimpact.org/> Center for Media & Social Impact  
<https://cyber.harvard.edu/> Berkman Klein Center  
 boingboing <https://boingboing.net/>  
<https://www.brookings.edu/topic/telecommunications-internet/> Brookings Foundation  
 business insider <https://www.businessinsider.com/>  
 cnet <https://www.cnet.com/>  
 digiday <https://digiday.com/>  
<https://www.eff.org/> Electronic Frontier Foundation  
<https://www.epic.org/> Electronic Privacy Information Clearinghouse  
 engadget <https://www.engadget.com/>  
 fast company <https://www.fastcompany.com/>  
<https://www.freepress.net/> Free Press  
 futurism <https://futurism.com/>  
 gigaom <https://gigaom.com/>  
 gizmodo <https://gizmodo.com/>  
<https://itif.org/> Information Technology and Innovation Foundation  
 lifehacker <https://lifehacker.com/>  
 mashable <https://mashable.com/>  
 mit technology review <https://www.technologyreview.com/>  
 nextweb <https://thenextweb.com/>  
<https://www.publicknowledge.org/> Public Knowledge  
 readwrite <https://readwrite.com/>  
 recode <https://www.recode.net/>

tech crunch <https://techcrunch.com/>  
techradar <https://www.techradar.com/>  
techdirt <https://www.techdirt.com/>  
the verge <https://www.theverge.com/>  
wired <https://www.wired.com/>  
zdnet <https://www.zdnet.com/>

### Other Related Readings

Benkler, Y. (2006). The Wealth of Networks. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Bijker, W. and Law, J. (1992), Shaping technology, Building society: Studies in sociotechnical change. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.

Carlson, W. B. (1992). Artifacts and frames of meaning: Thomas A. Edison, his managers, and the cultural construction of motion pictures. In Bijker, W. and J. Law (Eds.), Shaping technology, Building society: Studies in sociotechnical change. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, pp. 175-200.

Fischer, C. (1994). America Calling: A Social history of the telephone to 1940. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Latour, B. (1987). Science in action: How to follow scientists and engineers through society. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, pp. 103-144.

Law, J. and W. Bijker, (1992). Postscript: Technology, stability, and social theory. In Bijker, W. and J. Law (Eds.), Shaping technology/Building society: Studies in sociotechnical change. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, pp. 290-308.

Marvin, C. When Old Technologies were New (1988). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

McGuire, P. and M. Granovetter (1998). Business and bias in public policy formation: The National Civic Federation and social construction of electric utility regulation, 1905-1907. Presented at the American Sociological Association conference, San Francisco.

Mumford, L. (1961). The City in history. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World.

Noble, D. (1984). Force of production: A social history of machine tool automation. New York: Alfred A. Knopf,

Nye, D. (1990). Electrifying America: Social meanings of a new technology, 1880-1940. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, pp. 287-338.

### A note on scholastic honesty

The General Information catalog of the University defines scholastic dishonesty on pages 171-172. Its definition includes but is not limited to cheating, plagiarism, collusion, falsifying scholastic records, and any act designed to give unfair advantage to the student, or the attempt to commit such an act. Each such act is further defined in the General Information section. Of particular relevance to graduate classes is the prohibition on **falsifying research data, laboratory reports, and/or other academic work offered for credit** and **plagiarism**, which is defined **the appropriation, buying, receiving as a gift, or obtaining by any means another's work and the submission of it as one's own academic work offered for credit**. As the section in the catalog points out, you can avoid plagiarism by clearly citing other peoples' work when you use it in your own written papers. Copying from published and unpublished (e.g., web works) can constitute plagiarism. Any incidence of scholastic dishonesty in this course will result in a failing grade for the class. The University's Honor Code is found at <https://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/conduct/academicintegrity.php> . Please let me know if you have any questions about how to use other people's work in your own efforts.

### Division of Diversity and Community Engagement

Students may request appropriate academic accommodations from the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement, Services for Students with Disabilities, 471-6259 and <http://www.utexas.edu/disability/> .

### Attending class and religious holidays

By UT Austin policy, you should notify me of your pending absence at least fourteen days prior to the date of observance of a religious holy day. If you must miss a class, an examination, a work assignment, or a project in order to observe a religious holy day, you will be given an opportunity to complete the missed work within a reasonable time after the absence.

### Mental Health Resources

The **Counseling and Mental Health Center, University Health Services** and the **Employee Assistance Program** are confidential as outlined by federal and state law. UT also offers private resources who are not confidential but are non-mandatory reporters to Title IX and the university. **Advocates, University Ombuds, Faculty Ombuds**, and the **Interpersonal Violence Peer Support Program** are all private resources, and safe spaces to ask questions and receive support without making an official report to the university. These services are there for you if you would like emotional support, would like to discuss options, or are in need of academic or financial assistance.

### Important Safety Information

If you have concerns about the safety or behavior of fellow students, TAs or Professors, call BCAL (the Behavior Concerns Advice Line): 512-232-5050. Your call can be anonymous. If something doesn't feel right – it probably isn't. Trust your instincts and share your concerns.

### Title IX Reporting

Title IX is a federal law that protects against sex and gender based discrimination, sexual harassment, sexual assault, sexual misconduct, dating/domestic violence and stalking at federally funded educational institutions. UT Austin is committed to fostering a learning and working environment free from discrimination in all its forms. When sexual misconduct occurs in our community, the university can:

1. Intervene to prevent harmful behavior from continuing or escalating.
2. Provide support and remedies to students and employees who have experienced harm or have become involved in a Title IX investigation.
3. Investigate and discipline violations of the university's relevant policies.

Faculty members and certain staff members are considered "Responsible Employees" or "Mandatory Reporters," which means that they are required to report violations of Title IX to the Title IX Coordinator. I am a Responsible Employee and must report any Title IX related incidents that are disclosed in writing, discussion, or one-on-one. Before talking with me, or with any faculty or staff member about a Title IX related incident, be sure to ask whether they are a responsible employee. If you want to speak with someone for support or remedies without making an official report to the university, email [advocate@austin.utexas.edu](mailto:advocate@austin.utexas.edu). For more information about reporting options and resources, visit [titleix.utexas.edu](http://titleix.utexas.edu) or contact the Title IX Office at [titleix@austin.utexas.edu](mailto:titleix@austin.utexas.edu).

### COVID Policies

To help preserve our in person learning environment, the university recommends the following.

- Adhere to university [mask guidance](#).
- [Vaccinations are widely available](#), free and not billed to health insurance. The vaccine will help protect against the transmission of the virus to others and reduce serious symptoms in those who are vaccinated.
- [Proactive Community Testing](#) remains an important part of the university's efforts to protect our community. Tests are fast and free.
- Visit [utexas.edu](http://utexas.edu) for more information.