TECHNOLOGY & SOCIETY
SC046/MI266/CS266
Fall Semester, 2010
Tuesday & Thursday, 4:30 – 5:45

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Course Description & Objectives

History offers and explains for us the course of social transformations. Today, the speed of global technological change is transforming contemporary society. In an accelerated global culture driven forward by dramatic developments in technology, no aspect of culture and society is left undisturbed. In national elections we talk of electronic voting. Digital technologies enable individuals to locate one another at any given time, raising new questions of ethics, privacy and social responsibility. Employment in the global economy is changing rapidly, having a major impact on how individuals prepare for employment, structure their daily lives, and think about the future.

This course is designed to enable students to focus on the experiential aspects of where technology intersects with their own lives. We will explore ways in which technology and technological change can be understood in an historical context. Through readings and class discussion, we will explore social, cultural, and political issues as they pertain to technological transformations. In the second half of the course, our explorations will be applied through analysis of a specific sociological study and individual/group projects.

Objectives for this course include:

1. To develop an appreciation for biography as the informative starting point of sociological reflection and analysis.
2. To develop a sociological perspective on technological change through readings, lectures, reflection, discussion, and course assignments.
3. To examine a technology and the respective social impact.

As a core course, this class will include discussions of sociology as a science and some of the original questions that faced founding sociologists. From the readings, in-class videos and class discussions we will address issues of multiculturalism as they relate to the use and construction of our understanding of various technologies and how issues of multiculturalism relate to technological develop and change. The books, articles, and essays represent a variety of sociological perspectives and research methodologies, the procedures followed by sociologists conducting research projects. We will examine the ways in which theoretical perspectives (e.g. Marxism, Symbolic Interaction) and methodologies (e.g. interviews, surveys, participant observation) shape the content and conclusion of the readings and research projects in general. In the second half of the course, our discussion of America Calling will provide an opportunity to consider both theory and methods in the context of a specific research study.

Throughout the course you will craft a number of papers in which you are encouraged to use your ‘sociological imagination’ to trace the connections between your own environment and the sociological issues which we address. In your paper, you will also be encouraged to develop skills of
critical sociological analysis in order to understand your own position as an active individual within the broader confines of the social order. You will also be challenged to critically examine your own position within our hierarchical society, to assess your past experiences in relation to your present attitudes and behavior, and to contemplate the kind of person you want to be in the future.

Required Texts


And additional assigned readings are listed in the syllabus and posted online.

The Rise of the Network Society, pp. 1-76
The Sociology of Georg Simmel, pp. 40-84
Sociability
Modified Sociability

Recommended, but not required

A Word on Course Readings

You are strongly encouraged to keep up with course readings. The quality of class discussion and your experience in the course will depend highly on your having made a serious attempt to get through the core readings. Class discussion will draw upon reading material in an integrated fashion along with other material, as opposed to simply being reviewed and discussed. Note, however, that whether or not reading material is discussed in class, you are responsible for all content.

Course Requirements & Grading

1. Class discussion, and its preparation, is an essential part of class work. Since we learn from our peers, and important insights emerge in our collective thinking/discussion, it is important that this shared work be valued. As such, class participation includes attendance, and participating in class discussions and in-class exercises. Participation reflects 15% of the course grade.

2. There will be a quiz on September 30 worth 5% of the course grade. On November 11 there will be an exam worth 10% of your course grade. In-class examinations reflect 15% of the course grade.

3. Three short essays (4-5 pages each). The first essay is a technology autobiography. You are expected to think about your relationship with technology by focusing on one specific technology. The task is to think creatively about some form of technology and then sociologically analyze your relationship with it and the ways in which it mediates and/or impacts your relationships. The first paper is due on October 7. The second and third essays are directly related to issues raised in class and the readings. The due dates are November 4.
and December 2 respectively. All paper submissions should be made through the course site. Each essay reflects 10% of the course grade (30% in total).

4. Each member of the class will develop (in small groups) a project that uses the sociological themes in the course to analyze a specific technology, evaluating the social context of a technology. Project topics and a brief work plan are due on October 14. Please note that topics should not be a direct duplication of any paper topic. While all projects should have some type of written submission (a brief one or two page summary), do not feel constrained by the written word. Writing and presentation in the context of other media such as digital imaging, theatrics, electronic art, video production, web technologies, etc., are encouraged. Project submissions (summaries and copies of presentations) are due when they are presented to the class. Class projects reflect 20% of the course grade.

5. A final take-home examination consisting of several essay-type questions related to the themes of the course will be handed out on the last day of class and is due by 5:00 pm on December 16. The final examination reflects 20% of the course grade.

Additional Course Policies

6. I draw your attention to Boston College’s policy on academic integrity - http://www.bc.edu/offices/stserv/academic/resources/policy.html#integrity. Plagiarism is a serious offense and is not tolerated in this course or elsewhere on campus. In this course you are encouraged to use a variety of source types and use material creatively, and are also free to use Internet sources. However, you are expected to adhere to University standards of academic integrity and to give proper credit to your source material.

7. Policy on late papers … there are no late papers in this class. Please plan your time accordingly.

Class Schedule

Sept. 7/9/14/16 – Technology & Society

Defining technology in a sociological perspective and an historical perspective

_readings: Society & Technological Change, Ch. 1-5; The Rise of the Network Society, pp. 1-76 (available in the course site)_


_readings: Society & Technological Change, Ch. 6-7; 13-14_

Sept. 30 – QUIZ

Oct. 5/7/12 – The Transformation of Work

_readings: Society & Technological Change, Ch. 8-10_

Assignments Due:

1st Essay – Technological Autobiography (10/7)

Project topic, team members, and brief work plan (10/14)
Oct. 14/19/21 – Digitally Shaping the Political Landscape

Readings: Society & Technological Change, Ch. 11-12; 15-17; A Whole New Mind, Daniel Pink, 2005

*** NOTE: NO CLASS ON 10/26

Oct. 28; Nov. 2/4/9/11 – A Study in Communication Technology: The Telephone
~ Sociability in relation to communication technologies ~

Readings: The Sociology of Georg Simmel, “Sociability: An Example of Pure, or Formal, Sociology,” pp. 40-8; Sociability (available in the course site)

Assignment Due
2nd Essay – Technology & Work/A Whole New Mind (11/4)

*** NOTE: NO CLASS ON 11/4

Nov. 11 – EXAM

Nov. 16/18/23/30 – A Study in Communication Technology: The Internet; Discussion of project format and expectations.

Readings: Always On
Recommended: Modified Sociability, pp 1-27.

Assignments Due
3rd Essay – Giving up a Technology (12/2)

Dec. 2/7/9 – Project presentations, Hand-out and discussion of the final exam

***Note: classes on project presentation nights may run later than the usual 5:45

Assignments Due
Project Presentations

Dec. 16 (by 5:00 pm) – TAKE-HOME FINAL EXAM DUE