

TECHNOLOGY & SOCIETY
SC 046.01 or CS 266.01
Spring Semester, 2008
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

America Calling: A Social History of the Telephone to 1940, Claude S. Fischer, University of California Press: Berkeley (1992)

Politics and Technology, John Street, The Guilford Press: New York (1992)

Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology, Neil Postman, Vintage Books: New York (1992)

A Whole New Mind: Moving from the Information Age to the Conceptual Age, Daniel H. Pink, Riverhead Books: New York (2005)

Better Off: Flipping the Switch on Technology, Eric Brende, Harper Collins Publishers: New York (2004)

A Word on Course Readings

Dates next to readings in the syllabus (below) indicate the days on which you should have completed a reading. The quality of class discussion and your experience in the course will depend on your having made a serious attempt to get through the core readings. Class discussion will draw upon reading material in an integrated fashion, as opposed to being reviewed and discussed. The suggested readings are not required, but are offered to deepen your understanding of a given subject and provide additional context.

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, participating in class discussions, participating in class exercises, and also any quizzes or other assignments. Participation reflects 25% of the course grade.
2. 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. The first paper is due on **January 31**. The second and third essays are directly related to issues raised in class and the readings. The due dates are **February 28** and **April 3** respectively. All paper submissions should be made through WebCT. Each essay reflects 10% of the course grade (30% in total).
3. Each member of the class will develop (individually or in small groups) a project that uses the sociological themes in the course to analyze a specific technology – evaluates the social context of a technology. Project topics and a brief work plan are due on **February 19**. 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, 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 25% of the course grade.

4. 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 (May 3) and is due by 5:00 pm on **May 8**. The final examination reflects 20% of the course grade.

Additional Course Policies

1. I draw your attention to Boston College's policy on academic integrity. <http://www.bc.edu/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 also expected to adhere to University standards of academic integrity and to give proper credit to your sources.
 2. **Policy on late papers** ... there are no late papers in this class. Please plan your time accordingly.
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Class Schedule

Jan. 15/17/22/24 – Technology & Society

Defining technology in a sociological perspective and an historical perspective

Readings: The Power of the Machine, pp. 1-43; pp. 197-251 (1/17); The Rise of the Network Society, pp. 1-76 (1/24)

All of this sections reading is available in the WebCT course site.

Jan 29/31, Feb. 5/7 – The Transformation of Work

Suggested Readings: The Overworked American, Schor (on reserve); The Jobless Future, Aronowitz and DeFazio (on reserve).

<http://www.epf.org/pubs/newsletters/1998/b980716.asp>

1st Essay Due (1/31)

Feb. 12/14/19/21 – TechnoStress & Cultural Transformation: Life in a Digital World

Readings: Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology, Neil Postman
pp. 1-106 (2/12); 107-199 (2/19)

Project topic and brief work plan due (2/19)

Feb. 26/28, March 18 – Digitally Shaping the Political Landscape

Readings: Politics & Technology, pp. 1-197 (2/26)

Readings: A Whole New Mind, Daniel Pink, 2005 (2/28)

2nd Essay Due (Feb. 28)

(*** Note, no class on March 11 & 13)

March 25/27, April 1/3 – 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. 40-84 (3/25); America Calling, pp. 1-85 (4/1); pp. 86-153 & pp. 175-272 (4/3), Better Off: Flipping the Switch on Technology, Eric Brende. 2004 (4/3)

3rd Essay Due (4/3)

April 8/10/15/17 – A Study in Communication Technology: The Internet; Wrap up; discussion of project format and expectations.

Readings: Sociability (4/8); Modified Sociability (4/10)

April 22/24/29/May 1 – Project presentations, Hand-out and discussion of final exam

(***Note, class times on April 29 and May 1 will be later than 5:45, and class may be held in a different location.)

May 8 – Final Exam Due