SOC 357 Sociology of Technology

Wednesdays, 1:30 to 4:20pm
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You are probably reading this course description on a computer, or in a book compiled and printed by a printing press. In a single day you might talk to your parents on your cell phone, buy books on the internet with a credit card, enter your student number to register for class, or drive to the store. Technology is everywhere, and even if we take it for granted it is easy to see that it influences our lives. But how do our lifestyles, our values and social norms influence technology in the first place? Where do new technologies come from, how are they picked up and used, and why are they crafted the way they are? Addressing these questions with examples from the bicycle to computers, from birth control to DRM, this course provides an introduction to the growing and important field of the Sociology of Technology.

Expectations

This one semester, seminar survey course provides an overview of the field of the Sociology of Technology, a focus area within Science and Technology Studies. Readings are organized around weekly themes to give students theoretical grounding in the field and provide interesting examples with scope for good discussion. From these readings and discussions, students will develop independent research projects on a relevant topic of their choice.

This is a seminar course: completion of readings prior to class, seminar attendance and participation are mandatory and graded.

The readings for this course are structured around ten themes that explore the relationship between technology and social values, behaviors and norms. The readings in normal type with a black bullet point are required readings for each seminar discussion, listed under the week in which they are due. These readings will be available in the course packet from the campus store.

Short responses to the week’s readings are due by email to the instructor before 8am Wednesday mornings. These should be a short, 1-2 page summary of the readings, including your thoughts or questions about them, or correlations you see between them or between a topic in a reading and technology in your daily life. I require 8 responses over the semester (you decide which weeks to skip).

An in-class midterm exam will require short answer questions.

The “final” is a 12-15 page research paper on a topic of the student’s choice. It is wise to use the readings and the Recommendation Service as a jumping-off point for exploring your topic of special interest. At individual conferences during week 4-5 we’ll discuss your ideas for the paper and give you guidelines and resources to proceed.

A paper proposal is due in Week 8 of the class. This should be a 2-3 page summary indicating your topic of interest and sources, and outlining your research and argument. Plan to include at least two in-class sources, and at least 4 other sources not listed on this syllabus.

In the final class, you will have five minutes to give a brief, informative, workshop-style presentation on the topic of your paper to your classmates. We will talk about these presentations, my expectations for them and their grading, in class.

The final paper is due DEAN’S DATE, by 5pm, by email or mailbox delivery. This paper must present a clear argument, employ at least 10 academic sources, and demonstrate engagement with the topics of concern to the course.
**Attendance and Participation Policy**

You are expected to come to class, having completed the reading and/or writing assignments due that day. If you have to miss a class, you must contact me beforehand with a valid excuse either by email at [jvertesi@princeton.edu], or by phone if an emergency at [258-9053]. After two unexcused absences, every further class you miss will subtract a third of a letter (i.e. A-, B+, B...) from your final grade.

**In-Class Computing Policy**

This is a course about the social effects and relationships with technology in our everyday lives. In order to achieve enough analytical distance from our machines, we will host an electronics-free classroom. No phones, laptops, media players, or digital readers. Cell phones will be permitted in cases of emergency only, by prior permission of the instructor.

**Grading Breakdown**

- 15% Seminar Attendance and Participation
- 15% Weekly Reading Responses
- 15% Midterm Exam
- 10% Paper Presentation: 5 minutes

**A Note on Sources**

Academia is all about using sources: reading them, talking about them, critiquing them or exploring them. But there is also the unacceptable use of sources, plagiarism: put simply, this is passing off someone else’s work or ideas as your own, without crediting them properly. Therefore, all sources - electronic and paper - must be referenced with the appropriate formatting. Whether you choose MLA, Chicago style, APA or typical formats in the sciences, please make sure you are consistent! Please note that I will consider your choice of sources in your paper towards your grade, so use your judgment wisely. Inappropriate use of sources will not be tolerated. Plagiarized assignments will result in a grade of zero, and will be subject to University policies on academic integrity. If you have any questions about what constitutes plagiarism, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Also note that the internet is not, wholesale, an academic source. Certainly, many academic sources can be found online, but not all are appropriate to use as sources in your college career. If you have any doubts as to whether or not a website constitutes a reliable source, send me an email with the URL and I will check it out for you as soon as I possibly can. To encourage you to cite responsibly, please note that no more than 1 out of every 5 of your sources may be information solely accessible on the internet. This includes personal, commercial and organizational websites, i.e. personal or academic pages, NASA’s public image database, etc. It does not include electronic versions of magazines, newspapers, books, journal publications, or conference proceedings.
Course Schedule

1. Introductory Class. No readings.

2. The Social Construction of Technology

How might we talk about technology sociologically? While we may take technological artifacts such as bicycles, bridges, or cars for granted, we don’t often think about how they influence our lives – or how our lives influenced them to begin with.


3. Technology as Social Force

As much as social worlds shape technologies, surely technology shapes our social world as well? These sociologists of technology suggest ways of approaching symmetry between humans and machines as equal and sometimes conflicting actors in social space.


4. Infrastructure and Experience

Technology isn’t always something shiny that fits in your pocket: it can be pervasive, networked, institutionalized, and ubiquitous. How do these large technological infrastructures mediate our experience with the world around us, when are they made visible to us, and what tools can we bring to bear to analyze them?

5. Technologies of Control

Whether state bureaucratic regimes or DRM on your iPod, technologies can impose existing forms of power, segregation, or legal action upon individuals. This week we look at two examples – apartheid classification infrastructures, and the development of recording protections – as well as an important argument about user resistance.


6. Digital Studies

The past 15 years have seen the development, implementation and widespread adoption of platforms for virtual engagement. How might sociologists explore and understand these virtual spaces? Where and how do the virtual and real worlds intersect? And how do our existing social categories translate to virtual systems?


7. [Fall Recess]

8. Gender and Technology (**Paper Proposals Due)**

This week we look at how concepts of gender and sexual identity are embedded in technological artifacts. Who decides how these technologies are built, what social and cultural arrangements inform their design, and how do technologies perform different understandings of gendered practices and experiences?

9. **Technology and Social Relations** (**In-class Midterm Exam**)

Basic social theory reminds us that societies are structured: race, class, gender and the organization of labor produce social categories and transgressions. How are these social categories and relations reproduced, enforced or challenged through technological means?


10. **Technology and Personhood**

Along with breakthroughs in medical technology and artificial intelligence come complex ethical dilemmas about personhood, experience, and even life. How do such technologies naturalize, efface, enlist, or control our understandings of the human body?

- Margaret Lock, “Technology in Extremis” and “Narrow Escapes,” Ch. 2 in *Twice Dead: Organ Transplants and the Reinvention of Death* (University of California Press, 1999), p.57-77.

11. **Expanding “the User” in Information and Communication Technologies**

In an age of globalization, there is an increased distance between technology designers and users. What can we learn about technology from observing how it is used, understood and deployed in transnational contexts?

12. Failures

Not everything works the way it is supposed to. What do we do when technologies fail, why do they fail, how do we determine risk and blame for their failure, and do these problems require technical, social, or hybrid fixes?


13. Presentations of individual research projects