

# **Sociology 320**

## **TECHNOLOGY, SOCIETY, & THE FUTURE**

Fall 2006, Mondays 7:30pm – 10:00pm

Professor Ira Silver

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Office Hours: PNE 329 on Mondays before/after class by appointment

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### **COURSE DESCRIPTION:**

This course explores the powerful roles that technology plays in contemporary social life and suggests some of the impacts that our ever-greater reliance on, and faith in, technology might have upon our lives. The course begins with a critical overview of the heralded promises that technology often carries; here, we explore some of the undersides of so-called "technological progress." The remainder of the course examines a series of debates about the impacts of particular technologies on social life. Our aim in looking at these debates is to get a handle on the implications that these technologies may have in the foreseeable future.

### **LEARNING OBJECTIVES:**

This course will enable you to:

- Think critically about the role that technology plays in our society and make informed judgments about its possible future impacts.
- See both sides of the debates surrounding various technologies.
- Become comfortable with expressing your ideas in front of your peers.
- Write with focus, clarity, and brevity.

### **TEACHING STYLE:**

The success of this course hinges on the productive exchange of ideas through discussions. While I will at times give short lectures, your active participation is essential. The more you each bring to class, the better it will go and the more that you will take from it. I may call on you to voice your ideas in the event that discussions begin to drag or if it becomes clear that only a handful of people are participating. My reason for taking this liberty is to convince you that what you have to say matters. In a liberal arts course, there are often not "right" or "wrong" answers. Therefore, just contributing something to the discussion can be very constructive in productively moving it along.

## **ATTENDANCE:**

I expect you to come to class consistently and on time. **IF YOU MISS MORE THAN ONE CLASS, YOUR GRADE WILL START TO SUFFER.** There is no need to bring a doctor's note or the like for those classes that you do miss. The point is that I want you to be in class, not to produce excuses for why you're not. If you are not in class on a particular day, it is your responsibility to ask me for any materials that I handed out.

## **READINGS:**        \* **Please bring assigned readings to class.**

All readings are in a photocopied packet, which is available free of charge from me. On occasion, I may distribute additional readings in class.

## **GRADING AND EVALUATION:**

Your final grade will be based on a paper, a take-home midterm, a take-home final, attendance and participation, and a class presentation. I will compute your final grade as follows:

20%	Paper
20%	Take-home midterm
30%	Take-home final
20%	Attendance and participation
10%	Class presentation

## **OVERVIEW: THE PROMISE AND PERIL OF LIVING IN A TECHNOLOGICALLY ADVANCED SOCIETY**

Sept 11<sup>th</sup>:            Course Introduction

Sept 18<sup>th</sup>:            Howard P. Segal, "The American Ideology of Technological Progress: Historical Perspectives." Pp. 28-48 in *Technology and the Future of Schooling*. Edited by Stephen T. Kerr. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

Alvin M. Weinberg, "Can Technology Replace Social Engineering?" Pp. 30-39 in *Technology and the Future*. Edited by Albert H. Teich. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993.

Sept 25<sup>th</sup>: Joe R. Feagin and Robert Parker, "The Rise and Fall of Mass Rail Transit." Pp. 421-26 in *Readings for Sociology*. Edited by Garth Massey. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2000.

John Seabrook, "The Slow Lane: Can Anyone Solve the Problem of Traffic?" *New Yorker*, September 2, 2002: 120-29.

"America's Great Headache." *The Economist*, June 2, 2005.

Ann Hulbert, "Speed Bump." *New York Times Magazine*, January 8, 2006.

Oct 2<sup>nd</sup>: **No class – Yom Kippur**

Oct 9<sup>th</sup> **No class – Columbus Day**

Oct 16<sup>th</sup>: Katie Hafner, "Comforts of Home Yield to Tyranny of Digital Gizmos." *New York Times*, April 28, 2002, Section 1, p. 1.

Katie Hafner, "For the Well Connected, All the World's an Office." *New York Times*, March 30, 2000, p. E1.

Oct 19<sup>th</sup>: **Paper due by 5pm via email.**

The film *The Chemical Kids* will be shown at 7pm at a location to be announced. If you would prefer to watch it on your own, it is available at the Knapp Media Center.

Oct 23<sup>rd</sup>: Kai Erikson, "Toxic Reckoning: Business Faces a New Kind of Fear." Pp. 453-62 in *Exploring the Social: Readings in Contemporary Sociology*. Edited by Peter Kivisto. Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2001.

Malcolm Gladwell, "Blowup." *The New Yorker*, January 22, 1996, pp. 32-36.

## EXAMINING DEBATES ABOUT THE IMPACTS OF TECHNOLOGY ON SOCIAL LIFE

### Is anti-terrorism surveillance compatible with democracy?

- Oct 26<sup>th</sup>: The film *Security Threat: Terrorism, Surveillance, and Civil Liberties* will be shown at 7pm at a location to be announced. If you would prefer to watch it on your own, it is available at the Knapp Media Center.
- Oct 30<sup>th</sup>: "USA Patriot Act Overview." U.S. Department of Justice.  
[http://www.lifeandliberty.gov/patriot\\_overview\\_pversion.pdf](http://www.lifeandliberty.gov/patriot_overview_pversion.pdf)
- "Remarks by President George W. Bush at Signing of the Patriot Act, Anti-Terrorism Legislation October 26, 2001. " U.S. Department of Justice.  
[http://www.lifeandliberty.gov/subs/speeches/p\\_bush\\_102601.htm](http://www.lifeandliberty.gov/subs/speeches/p_bush_102601.htm)
- Nancy Chang, "How Democracy Dies: The War on our Civil Liberties." Pp. 33-51 in *Lost Liberties: Ashcroft and the Assault on Personal Freedom*. Edited by Cynthia Brown. New York: The New Press, 2003.
- "Dispelling the Myths: Dispelling Some of the Major Myths about the USA PATRIOT Act." U.S. Department of Justice.  
[http://www.lifeandliberty.gov/subs/u\\_myths.htm](http://www.lifeandliberty.gov/subs/u_myths.htm)

### Should the U.S. continue to explore space?

- Nov 6<sup>th</sup>: President George W. Bush, "A Renewed Spirit of Discovery: The President's Vision for U.S. Space Exploration." January 2004. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/space/renewed%5Fspirit.pdf>
- Andrew Stephen, "America." *New Statesman*, February 2, 2004.
- Katha Pollitt, "Lost in Space." *The Nation*, February 2, 2004.

## Are genetically modified foods safe?

Nov 9<sup>th</sup>: The film *Harvest of Fear* will be shown at 7pm at a location to be announced. If you would prefer to watch it on your own, it is available at the Knapp Media Center.

Nov 13<sup>th</sup>: Lee Clarke, "Explaining Choices among Technological Risks." *Social Problems* 1988 35(1): 22-34.

William Greider, "A High-level Food Fight: European Union Resists Genetically Modified Foods" *The Nation*, November 3, 2003.

Tom Weir, "Going with the Grain: Americans Just Aren't as Suspicious of Biotech Foods as the Rest of the World. There's a Reason for That." *Progressive Grocer*, November 1, 2003.

Jane E. Brody, "Facing Biotech Foods without the Fear Factor." *New York Times*, January 11, 2005.

## Is genetic technology positively revolutionizing human life?

Nov 16<sup>th</sup>: **Midterm exam due by 5pm via email.**

The film *Gattaca* will be shown at 7pm at a location to be announced. If you would prefer to watch it on your own, it is available at the Knapp Media Center.

Nov 20<sup>th</sup>: Amy Harmon, "The Problem with an Almost-Perfect Genetic World." *New York Times*, November 20, 2005.

Elizabeth Weil, "A Wrongful Birth?" *New York Times Magazine*, March 12, 2006.

Francis Fukuyama, "Genetic Engineering." Pp. 72-83 in *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution*. New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Group, 2002.

John Evans, "Brave New World? How Genetic Technology Could Change Us." *Contexts* 2003 2(2): 20-25.

Diane B. Paul, "Eugenic Anxieties, Social Realities, and Political Choices." Pp. 142-54 in *Are Genes Us? The Social Consequences of the New Genetics*. Edited by Carl F. Cramer. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994.

### **Does the use of information technology need to have more defined boundaries?**

Nov 27<sup>th</sup>: Lee Humphreys, "Cellphones in Public: Social Interactions in a Wireless Society." *New Media & Society*, Dec 2005 7(6): 810-33.

Floy Scott, June Allestad, and Jaysen Ferestad, "Just Say No: Exploring the Norms of Cell Phone Use in Public." Paper presented at the Annual Meetings of the American Sociological Association, Philadelphia, 2005.

Wi-Fi Wars: Loiterers Can Be a Drag on Businesses' Bottom Line, By Alison Lobron, *Boston Globe*, July 9, 2006.

Jonathan D. Glater, Professor@University.edu, Subject: Why It's All About Me. *New York Times*, February 21, 2006.

### **Is greater Internet access a meaningful remedy to social inequality?**

Nov 30<sup>th</sup>: The film *Virtual Equality: The Information Revolution and the Inner City* will be shown at 7pm at a location to be announced. If you would prefer to watch it on your own, it is available at the Knapp Media Center.

Dec 4<sup>th</sup>:

Paul Attewell, "The First and Second Digital Divides." *Sociology of Education* 2001 74(3): 252-259.

Henry J. Becker, "Who's Wired and Who's Not: Children's Access to and Use of Computer Technology." *Future of Children* 2000 10(2): 44-75.

Michel Marriott, "Digital Divide Closing as Blacks Turn to Internet." *New York Times*, March 31, 2006.

Lisa J. Servon and Marla K. Nelson, "Community Technology Centers: Narrowing the Digital Divide in Low-Income, Urban Communities." *Journal of Urban Affairs* 2001 23(3-4): 279-290.

Lynette Kvasny, "The Role of the Habitus in Shaping Discourses about the Digital Divide." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 2005 10(2): 1083-6101.

### **Is technology-based learning good for education?**

Dec 11<sup>th</sup>:

Todd Oppenheimer, "The Computer Delusion." *The Atlantic* July 1997, pp. 45-62.

Neil Postman, "Technology as Dazzling Distraction." *Education Digest* April, 1994 59(8).

Claudia Wallis "The Multitasking Generation." *Time*, March, 27, 2006.

Barbara L. Stewart, "Online Learning: A Strategy for Social Responsibility in Educational Access." *Internet and Higher Education* 2004 7(4): 299-310.

Dec 18<sup>th</sup>:

**Final exam due by 5pm via email.**