

# Technology, Culture, and Power

## Course Syllabus

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Comm 850 – Spring 2016

Monday: 5:45 – 8:35pm

Location: New East 0301

### **Professor**

Torin Monahan, Ph.D.

Office: 308 Bingham Hall

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Office Hours: by appt.

### **Course Description**

This graduate seminar will serve as an advanced introduction to critical studies of modern technological systems. Drawing upon the fields of communication studies, science and technology studies, geography, anthropology, and gender studies, seminar participants will investigate the role of technologies in shaping social worlds and producing political orders. Attention will be given to the social construction of technological systems, the politics of mediation and resistance, and the encodings of power relationships within particular cultural contexts. Possible areas of inquiry include reproductive technologies, social media, environmental imaging, ubiquitous computing, surveillance, and universal design. Seminar participants will be expected to conduct close readings of theoretical texts and work to connect those texts to their own research projects.

### **Grading**

Critical Reaction Essay #1	15%
Critical Reaction Essay #2	15%
Book Review	15%
Discussion Facilitation	10%
Final Paper	30%
Participation	15%

### **Course Expectations**

*Attendance:* This class will be conducted as a seminar with a focus on in-class discussion. Because of this format, you are expected to attend all classes for the full scheduled time. Excessive tardiness will be counted as an absence. Provided you hand in all due materials on time, you can miss 1 class throughout the semester without penalty. Please let me know in advance if you are planning on missing a class.

*Reading:* Complete all readings (and other assignments) prior to the class meeting for which they are scheduled. Most of the readings will be drawn from the required texts for the course or articles posted to Sakai. You must bring readings (or copies of them) to class for the dates they are assigned. See the course outline below for details.

*Participation:* Through communication, ideas are formed, revised, borrowed, and developed. It is through argument, description, explanation, and improvisation – within a community – that individual learning flourishes. This course requires full participation (including active listening, facilitating, note-taking, and question-asking) to create an environment of open and shared learning. An effective participant is not someone who simply talks frequently, but someone who reliably offers thoughtful insights that help others to learn.

We will have weekly common readings around which we will focus our discussion. Each class meeting will begin with some contextual background provided by me and then proceed to a brief summary of the arguments made in the reading. Next, we will generate an in-depth critique of the arguments and then pursue questions sparked by the reading or discussion – as guided by the overarching course goals. Each student should prepare for these steps in advance of the seminar meeting.

*Discussion Facilitation:* Each student will be responsible for facilitating discussion for one week’s reading, in partnership with one other student. The facilitation should include two components: (1) highlighting and critically responding to a few dominant themes or concepts of the reading for the week **[10 minutes]**, and (2) posing reading-based questions to the rest of the seminar and guiding the discussion **[40 minutes]**. Please do not exceed the allotted time. This is not the place for summarizing the reading or making abstract connections to social or cultural phenomena—instead, keep the conversation focused on the texts and direct your colleagues toward critical insights about the strengths, tensions, and limitations of the work in question. A sign-up sheet will be distributed during the first few weeks of the semester.

*Technology:* Laptop computers and other portable technologies should be used in class only as learning-facilitation tools. During class, it is not acceptable to play games, send email, surf the web, answer cell phones, text message, tweet, or engage in other non-class-related activities. Your participation grade will be penalized if you break this rule. Why? Not only do these practices negatively affect your learning and participation, but they also distract others and create an environment of disrespect.

## **Course Assignments**

There will be four writing assignments in the course: two “critical reaction” essays (5-6 pages each) that analyze the reading for two or more weeks, aiming at comparison and integration across texts, leading to the development of a clear normative position on your part; one book review of an assigned book (5 pages); and one final paper (20 pages) that connects your research interests to technology studies themes and concepts.

The two essays are due no later than the following dates: (1) February 15; (2) March 7. The book review is due no later than April 4. You are encouraged to submit the essays and book review earlier if you’d like. The final paper is due April 25. You should meet with me early on in the semester to discuss ideas for your final project paper. I recommend that you approach this paper as an article that you are preparing for publication. Get an early start and maintain steady progress throughout the term in order to avoid the end-of-the-semester rush.

More information about these assignments will be provided in the seminar. No late writing assignments will be accepted.

I reserve the right to distribute unannounced quizzes on the reading or lecture material. Any missed points on these quizzes will be deducted from your participation grade. Quizzes may not be made-up if you are absent.

### **Writing Guidelines**

Please use 12-point Times New Roman font, 1" margins, and double-spaced lines. Do not use cover pages or folders of any kind. All papers must be stapled or they will not be accepted. No late or emailed papers will be accepted.

### **Academic Honesty**

In order to avoid plagiarism, your assignments must provide full citations for all references: direct quotes, summaries, or ideas. Make sure you put all quotes in quotation marks and include references. While you are encouraged to develop your thinking with your peers, you cannot use their material without citing it. Work from other courses will not be accepted in this course. Allowing your writing to be copied by another student is also considered cheating. Please review the Honor Code for complete guidelines on academic honesty: <http://studentconduct.unc.edu/>. If you have any questions about how to avoid plagiarism, do not hesitate to get in touch with me.

### **Gender-Fair Language**

Language structures thought and action. Biases in language can (and do) naturalize inequalities. Imprecise language also signifies un-interrogated values and sloppy thinking. For all of these reasons, the use of gender-fair language is expected in this course. For example, do not use words like “mankind” or “men” when referring to people in general; alternate between “she” and “he” instead of always using “he,” or construct sentences in the plural instead of the singular so you can use “they” or “them” and avoid the problem altogether.

### **ESL/LD Students**

Course requirements can be adjusted to serve the needs and capabilities of ESL and LD students. Please speak with the professor during the first two weeks of class to make arrangements. Students may be advised to attend additional sessions during the professor’s office hours so they can draw comparable value from the course.

## **Required Texts**

Brown, Elspeth H. 2005. *The corporate eye: Photography and the rationalization of American commercial culture, 1884-1929*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Browne, Simone. 2015. *Dark matters: On the surveillance of blackness*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Cowen, Deborah. 2014. *The deadly life of logistics: Mapping violence in global trade*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Crary, Jonathan. 1999. *Suspensions of perception: Attention, spectacle, and modern culture*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

Halpern, Orit. 2014. *Beautiful data: A history of vision and reason since 1945*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Leonardi, Paul M. 2012. *Car crashes without cars: Lessons about simulation technology and organizational change from automotive design*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

Marwick, Alice E. 2013. *Status update: Celebrity, publicity, and branding in the social media age*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Mosco, Vincent. 2014. *To the cloud: Big data in a turbulent world*. New York: Paradigm.

Murphy, Michelle. 2006. *Sick building syndrome and the problem of uncertainty: Environmental politics, technoscience, and women workers*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Schüll, Natasha Dow. 2012. *Addiction by design: Machine gambling in Las Vegas*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Takeshita, Chikako. 2012. *The global biopolitics of the IUD: How science constructs contraceptive users and women's bodies*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

## **Course Schedule (subject to revision)**

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### **Week One: Introduction to Technology Studies**

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January 11: Introductory Discussion

- Winner, Langdon. 1980. Do Artifacts Have Politics? *Daedalus* 109:121-136.
- Latour, Bruno. 1992. Where Are the Missing Masses? The Sociology of a Few Mundane Artifacts. In *Shaping Technology / Building Society: Studies in Sociotechnical Change*, edited by W. E. Bijker, and John Law. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 225-258.
- Bowker, Geoffrey C., and Susan Leigh Star. 1999. Introduction: To Classify is Human. In *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences*, by G. C. Bowker and S. L. Star. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1-32.

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### **Week Two: Martin Luther King, Jr. Day**

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January 18: **MLK Day (no class)**

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### **Week Three: Academic Networks**

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January 25:

- **No class meeting** (international conference)
- Agre, Philip E. 2005. *Networking on the Network: A Guide to Professional Skills for PhD Students*. [Recommended]

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### **Week Four: Reproductive Technologies and Politics**

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February 1:

- Takeshita, Chikako. 2012. *The global biopolitics of the IUD: How science constructs contraceptive users and women's bodies*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

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### **Week Five: Contested Illness, Space, and Modernity**

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February 8:

- Murphy, Michelle. 2006. *Sick building syndrome and the problem of uncertainty: Environmental politics, technoscience, and women workers*. Durham N.C.: Duke University Press.

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### **Week Six: Designing Machines / Programming People**

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February 15:

- Schüll, Natasha Dow. 2012. *Addiction by design: Machine gambling in Las Vegas*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- **Due: Critical Reaction Essay #1.**

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**Week Seven: Innovation and Simulation**

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February 22:

- Leonardi, Paul M. 2012. *Car crashes without cars: Lessons about simulation technology and organizational change from automotive design*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

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**Week Eight: Global Trade and Violence**

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February 29:

- Cowen, Deborah. 2014. *The deadly life of logistics: Mapping violence in global trade*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

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**Week Nine: Surveillance and Race**

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March 7:

- Browne, Simone. 2015. *Dark matters: On the surveillance of blackness*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- **Due: Critical Reaction Essay #2.**

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**Week Ten: Spring Break**

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March 14:

- **Spring Break (no class)**

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**Week Eleven: Visuality and Power I**

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March 21:

- Crary, Jonathan. 1999. *Suspensions of perception: Attention, spectacle, and modern culture*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

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**Week Twelve: Visuality and Power II**

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March 28:

- Brown, Elspeth H. 2005. *The corporate eye: Photography and the rationalization of American commercial culture, 1884-1929*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

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**Week Thirteen: Visuality and Power III**

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April 4:

- Halpern, Orit. 2014. *Beautiful data: A history of vision and reason since 1945*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- **Due: Book Review.**

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**Week Fourteen: Social Media and Celebrity**

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April 11:

- Marwick, Alice E. 2013. *Status update: Celebrity, publicity, and branding in the social media age*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

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**Week Fifteen: Politics of Clouds**

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April 18:

- Mosco, Vincent. 2014. *To the cloud: Big data in a turbulent world*. New York: Paradigm.
- Bratton, Benjamin. 2014. The Black Stack. *e-flux* (53). Available from <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/the-black-stack/> [accessed January 4, 2016].

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**Week Sixteen:**

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April 25:

- No class meeting.
- **Due: Final Papers.**