

# Technology & Social Justice

## Course Syllabus

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Comm 390-004 – Fall 2022

T/TH: 12:30 - 1:45pm

Location: Venable G307



Paolo Cirio, *Capture* (2020)

### **Professor**

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### **Course Description**

Technological systems permeate our lives. They facilitate communication, transportation, commerce, and governance. In these—and many other—ways, technologies can be enabling and enriching, bringing with them desirable conveniences and efficiencies. At the same time, the many technologies we depend upon also contribute to social and environmental problems. They can support precarious “gig economy” labor relations; drive the surveillance and policing of racialized groups; and promote energy dependencies that accelerate climate change. In order to actualize a more fair, just, and equitable society, it is essential that we hone an awareness of the “political” dimensions of technological systems and work toward the design of better ones. The goal of this course is to foster just such a critical technological literacy.

### **Learning Outcomes**

Students will

- Learn how technologies, individuals, and institutions mutually shape one another to the benefit and/or detriment of society.
- Acquire a sophisticated conceptual toolkit for analyzing issues of technology and social justice.
- Gain experience collaborating on research teams to empirically investigate technological problems in society.

## **Texts**

1. Benjamin, Ruha. 2019. *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*. Medford, MA: Polity Press.
2. Mullaney, Thomas S., Benjamin Peters, Mar Hicks, and Kavita Philip. 2021. *Your Computer is on Fire*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
3. Readings on Sakai or webpages

## **Grading**

Concept Library Entry	5%
Reaction Papers (3 total)	45%
Technology Justice Project	40%
Participation	10%

[Grading Scale: A =93-100, A- =90-92, B+ =87-89, B =83-86, B- =80-82, C+ =77-79, C =73-76, C- =70-72, D+ =67-69, D =63-66]

## **Course Platforms**

1. [Notion.so](https://www.notion.so). This collaboration platform will serve as the launchpad for all course resources, announcements, links, notes, and concept-sharing. Please check it regularly for updates and to review your classmates' contributions.
2. [Sakai](#). Through the course's Sakai site, you will be able to access course readings and the course gradebook.

## **Course Expectations**

*Attendance:* This class will be conducted with a focus on in-class discussions and activities. Because of this format, you are expected to attend all classes for the full scheduled time. Excessive tardiness will be counted as an absence. You can miss up to 2 classes throughout the semester without penalty, but you must turn in assignments ahead of time and arrange to get notes from a colleague. Your final grade will go down by 3 points (out of 100) for each additional class missed above these 4. Finally, if you fail to show up for a scheduled meeting with the instructor(s) without canceling 24 hours in advance, your participation grade will be docked 3 points.

- *COVID-19 Note:* Because we are currently in a global pandemic, exceptions will be made for COVID-related illness. Take care of yourselves and your loved ones first and foremost. If you are experiencing any COVID symptoms, please do not come to class. Also, to the extent possible, please practice social distancing in our classroom.

*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 textbooks, websites, or articles posted to Sakai. You must bring readings (or copies of them) to class for the dates they are assigned. In some cases, I may distribute photocopied readings to you in class. 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. The rubric for participation grades is as follows:

- Initiate (1-3 pts): you are present in class but seldom speak.
- Apprentice (4-5 pts): you actively listen and speak occasionally, but you don't explicitly connect your comments to the reading.
- Journey person (6-7 pts): you actively listen, contribute somewhat reliably, and usually connect your comments to the reading.
- Adept (8-9 pts): you actively listen, contribute regularly, and always make explicit connections to the reading.
- Expert (10 pts): you actively listen, contribute regularly, and always make explicit connections to the reading, often identifying themes *across* weeks too. Additionally, you *quickly* zero in on correct answers, allowing plenty of space for others to expand on your points or make their own contributions.

You are also encouraged to post “Collective Class Notes” to our [Notion site](#) (under “Course Resources” on the main page) to assist your classmates in processing the course lectures and discussions. Participation grades will be boosted if you regularly contribute in this way.

*Technology:* Laptop computers, tablets, and mobile phones 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 mobile 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**

### 1. Concept Library Entry:

You will be responsible to submit one entry to our collective “concept library” on the course’s [Notion site](#). For this assignment, draw upon our reading to select one concept for further exploration, and then clear your concept selection with the course’s TA to make certain that it’s not already taken by another student. When writing your concept entry: 1) succinctly define the concept, 2) offer an example of how it could be applied, 3) state how it relates to our focus on technology and social justice, 4) provide a full citation, and 5) include an illustrative photograph or diagram. Think about this assignment as providing a useful *resource* for your colleagues. Suggested length: 150 words. [Due: Anytime up until Week 13. But doing this assignment sooner will give you more options to choose from!]

### 2. Reaction Papers:

You are responsible for three reaction papers. Each paper is worth 15% of your grade (for a total of 45%). For each of these papers, you will write 4-5 typed pages (double-spaced, one-inch margins, please). These papers are based on clusters of readings and should critically engage the topics, themes, and course materials.

These papers should NOT be summaries of the readings. Instead, you should see these papers as an opportunity to compare the perspectives of multiple authors, react to the readings (with thoughtfulness as to *why* you reacted the way that you did), or trace a particular theme through the multiple readings. You are not required to complete any additional reading or research, but you are welcome to do so if you would like to develop your paper in a way that deviates from the material we have covered together in class. If you choose to do this, be sure to reference the readings that were assigned in class as well.

Due: September 15, October 13, November 10

I do accept **late papers**, but extensions must be negotiated prior to the assignments' due dates.

### 3. Technology Justice Project:

The final project will be a team-based research project and intervention due on December 2. (Teams will be formed in the second half of the semester and will have 4-5 people per team.) You will be asked to select a specific social justice concern with technology, formulate research questions, decide upon appropriate research methods to answer your questions, analyze collected data, and compose an accessible final deliverable (e.g., professional report, website, documentary video, community resources).

Sample areas of inquiry might include labor automation, police shootings, violence against women, algorithmic bias, workplace surveillance, healthcare inequities, climate change, racial discrimination in housing or employment, (in)accessible urban spaces, gig-economy exploitation, or other topics that appeal to you.

The final project is worth 40% of your grade (25% for the major deliverable your create, 10% for the presentation your team gives in class, and 5% for an individual group- and self-evaluation paper, which will be required of each group member.) The criteria for evaluating the group presentation are effective visuals or materials, time management, professional appearance, argument, evidence, and conclusion. Experimentation is highly encouraged for this project. Be creative and have some fun!

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, double-spaced lines, and one line space between paragraphs. Do not use cover pages or folders of any kind unless necessary to preserve your presentation (e.g., sketches or photographs).

### **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. We will also provide our preferred personal pronouns at the beginning of the course. It is important to respect and use correctly everyone’s preferred pronouns.

### **Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion**

The Department of Communication is committed to social justice, equity, and inclusion. This course reflects these commitments by creating an environment that fosters critical thinking, represents diverse viewpoints and ideas, and invites thoughtful, respectful, analysis of the issues and ideas that are discussed in the course. Each of us has the right be recognized for who we are, referred to in the identities that we inhabit, and included and represented in the course.

Acknowledging and mobilizing diversity is a powerful resource for learning and growth. At the same time, we must be respectful of any of our differences whether they are due to race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexuality, disability, age, socioeconomic status, nationality, religion, and/or culture. We all make mistakes in what we say or even what we do not say, and it’s important to hold each other accountable in a respectful way that can ensure that the classroom space is one where everyone contributes—regardless of whether it is always comfortable or easy.

### **Counseling & Psychological Services**

CAPS is strongly committed to addressing the mental health needs of a diverse student body through timely access to consultation and connection to clinically appropriate services, whether for short or long-term needs. Go to their website: <https://caps.unc.edu/> or visit their facilities on the third floor of the Campus Health Services building for a walk-in evaluation to learn more. (source: Student Safety and Wellness Proposal for EPC, Sep 2018)

### **Title IX Resources**

Any student who is impacted by discrimination, harassment, interpersonal (relationship) violence, sexual violence, sexual exploitation, or stalking is encouraged to seek resources on campus or in the community. Reports can be made online to the EOC at <https://eoc.unc.edu/report-an-incident/>. Please contact the University’s Title IX Coordinator (Elizabeth Hall, interim – [titleixcoordinator@unc.edu](mailto:titleixcoordinator@unc.edu)), Report and Response Coordinators in the Equal Opportunity and Compliance Office ([reportandresponse@unc.edu](mailto:reportandresponse@unc.edu)), Counseling and Psychological Services (confidential), or the Gender Violence Services Coordinators ([gvsc@unc.edu](mailto:gvsc@unc.edu); confidential) to discuss your specific needs. Additional resources are available at [safe.unc.edu](http://safe.unc.edu).

### **Accessibility Resources & Services**

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill facilitates the implementation of reasonable accommodations, including resources and services, for students with disabilities, chronic medical conditions, a temporary disability or pregnancy complications resulting in barriers to fully accessing University courses, programs and activities.

Accommodations are determined through the Office of Accessibility Resources and Service (ARS) for individuals with documented qualifying disabilities in accordance with applicable state and federal laws. See the ARS Website for contact information: <https://ars.unc.edu> or email [ars@unc.edu](mailto:ars@unc.edu). (source: <https://ars.unc.edu/faculty-staff/syllabus-statement>)

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

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### **Week One: Introductions**

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Tuesday, August 16:

**Readings:**

- No Readings.

Thursday, August 18:

**Readings:**

- D'ignazio, Catherine, and Lauren F. Klein. 2020. The Power Chapter. In *Data Feminism*. Cambridge, MA: MIT press. (pp.1-32) [SAKAI]
- Social Justice: <https://www.humanrightscareers.com/issues/what-does-social-justice-mean/>

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### **Week Two: Technological Politics & Power**

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Tuesday, August 23:

**Readings:**

- Winner, Langdon. 1980. Do Artifacts Have Politics? *Daedalus* 109:121-136. [SAKAI]
- Weinberg, Alvin M. 2003 [1966]. Can Technology Replace Social Engineering? In *Technology and the Future*, edited by A. H. Teich. Belmont, CA: Thomson/Wadsworth, 23-30. [SAKAI]

Thursday, August 25:

**Readings:**

- *Race After Technology*, Preface & Introduction (pp. ix-48)
- I Can See Your Data Trail! (in-class activity)

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### **Week Three: Robotic Bias**

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Tuesday, August 30:

**Readings:**

- Noble, Safiya Umoja. Your Robot Isn't Neutral. (*Your Computer Is on Fire*, pp.199-212)
- *Race After Technology*, Cht.1 (pp. 49-76)

Thursday, September 1:

**Readings:**

- Lawrence, Halcyon M. Siri Disciplines. (*Your Computer Is on Fire*, pp.179-197)

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### **Week Four: Gendering Assistance**

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Tuesday, September 6:

**Well-being Day: No Class or Readings**

Thursday, September 8:

**Readings:**

- Woods, Heather Suzanne. 2018. Asking more of Siri and Alexa: feminine persona in service of surveillance capitalism. *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 35 (4):334-349. [SAKAI]

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## Week Five: Default Discrimination

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Tuesday, September 13:

**Readings:**

- *Race After Technology*, Cht.2 (pp. 77-96)
- Watch Video: “Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Racial Justice”:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ic-RKkahD1o&t=918s> [S. Craig Watkins on structural racism, technology, and the quest for fairness.]

Thursday, September 15:

**Reaction Paper #1 due.**

**Readings:**

- No reading.
- Data Profiling, Digital Decisions (in-class activity)

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## Week Six: Technology & the City

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Tuesday, September 20:

**Readings:**

- Graham, Stephen, and Simon Marvin. 2001. *Splintering Urbanism*, pp.1-16. [SAKAI]

Thursday, September 22:

**Readings:**

- Monahan, Torin. 2021. Recoding the City: Cultural Mediation of Short-term Rental Platforms in the US. *Cultural Studies* 35 (4/5):946-967. [SAKAI]

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## Week Seven: Disability & Design

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Tuesday, September 27:

**Readings:**

- Siebers, Tobin. 2009. What Can Disability Studies Learn from the Culture Wars. In *The Design Culture Reader*, edited by B. Highmore. New York: Routledge, 132-140. [SAKAI]
- NEA Disability Design Report (1-26) [SAKAI]
- What is the difference between accessible, usable, and universal design?  
<https://www.washington.edu/doit/what-difference-between-accessible-usable-and-universal-design>

Thursday, September 29:

**Readings:**

- Carefully review 3-4 of the tech-fix designs on these pages and be prepared to share your critical analysis of them in class:
  - <https://www.dezeen.com/tag/accessible-design/>
  - <https://www.dezeen.com/tag/accessible-design/page/2/>
  - <https://www.dezeen.com/tag/accessible-design/page/3/>

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**Week Eight: Environmental Costs of “Clean Tech”**

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Tuesday, October 4:

**Readings:**

- Crawford, Kate. 2021. Earth. In *The Atlas of AI: Power, Politics, and the Planetary Costs of Artificial Intelligence*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 23-51. [SAKAI]

Thursday, October 6:

**Readings:**

- Monserrate, Steven Gonzalez. 2022. The Staggering Ecological Impacts of Computation and the Cloud: <https://thereader.mitpress.mit.edu/the-staggering-ecological-impacts-of-computation-and-the-cloud/>
- Cho, Renee. 2021. Bitcoin’s Impacts on Climate and the Environment: <https://news.climate.columbia.edu/2021/09/20/bitcoins-impacts-on-climate-and-the-environment/>

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**Week Nine: Amazon & Labor**

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Tuesday, October 11:

**Readings:**

- Ensmenger, Nathan. The Cloud is a Factory. (*Your Computer Is on Fire*, pp.29-49)
- Sadowski, Jathan. 2020. *Too Smart: How Digital Capitalism is Extracting Data, Controlling our Lives, and Taking over the World*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 90-96. [SAKAI]
- Kantor, Jodi, and Karen Weise. 2022. How Two Best Friends Beat Amazon. *New York Times*. [SAKAI]

Thursday, October 13:

**Reaction Paper #2 due.****Readings:**

- No reading.
- Technological Justice Project Planning (in-class)

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**Week Ten: Coding for Justice?**

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Tuesday, October 18:

**Readings:**

- Abbate, Janet. Coding is Not Empowerment. (*Your Computer Is on Fire*, pp.253-271)
- Sarkar, Sreela. Skills will Not Set You Free. (*Your Computer Is on Fire*, pp.297-311)

Thursday, October 20:

**Fall Break: No Class or Readings**



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## Week Eleven: Healthcare Inequities & Control

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Tuesday, October 25:

**Readings:**

- Braun, Lundy. 2021. Race Correction and Spirometry: Why History Matters. *Chest* 159 (4):1670-1675. [SAKAI]
- Houghtaling, Ellie Quinlan. 2022. Pulse oximeters often miss low blood oxygen levels in Black patients: [https://www.upi.com/Health\\_News/2022/07/12/pulse-oximeter-Black-patients/1941657560168/](https://www.upi.com/Health_News/2022/07/12/pulse-oximeter-Black-patients/1941657560168/)

Thursday, October 27:

**Readings:**

- Packer-Tursman, Judy. 2022. Concerns mount over accuracy of online abortion information, privacy of searches.: [https://www.upi.com/Health\\_News/2022/07/01/Internet-abortion-information-Internet-online/7831656609505/](https://www.upi.com/Health_News/2022/07/01/Internet-abortion-information-Internet-online/7831656609505/)
- Morrison, Sara. 2022. Should I delete my period app? And other post-Roe privacy questions. <https://www.vox.com/recode/2022/7/6/23196809/period-apps-roe-dobbs-data-privacy-abortion>

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## Week Twelve: Policing and Criminal Justice

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Tuesday, November 1:

**Readings:**

- Caplan, Robyn, Joan Donovan, Lauren Hanson, and Jeanna Matthews. 2018. Algorithmic Accountability: A Primer. Data & Society report. (28 pages) [SAKAI]
- Brayne, Sarah. 2021. *Predict and Surveil: Data, Discretion, and the Future of Policing*. New York: Oxford University Press, 37-55, 60-73. [SAKAI]

Thursday, November 3:

**Readings:**

- *Race After Technology*, Cht.3 (pp. 97-136)

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## Week Thirteen: Data Justice

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Tuesday, November 8:

**Readings:**

- D'ignazio, Catherine, and Lauren F. Klein. 2020. Unicorns, Janitors, Ninjas, Wizards, and Rock Stars. In *Data Feminism*. Cambridge, MA: MIT press. (pp.1-26) [SAKAI]

Thursday, November 10:

**Reaction Paper #3 due.**

**Readings:**

- *Race After Technology*, Cht.5 (pp. 160-197)
- Review these websites:
  - Stop LAPD Spying: <https://stoplapdspying.org/>
  - Data for Black Lives: <https://d4bl.org/>

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**Week Fourteen: Project Workshopping**

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Tuesday, November 15:

- No Readings

Thursday, November 17:

- No Readings

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**Week Fifteen: Project Presentations**

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Tuesday, November 22:

- No Readings

Thursday, November 24:

- **Thanksgiving Break: No Class or Readings**

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**Week Sixteen: Project Presentations**

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Tuesday, November 29:

- No Readings

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**Final Exam Period: Will be spent sharing final papers**

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**Final Reports Due: Friday, December 2 @ 12:00pm**

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Credits:

- The [Our Data Bodies](#) group has produced a fabulous “[Digital Defense Playbook](#),” which I draw upon for course activities.
- [Shannon Mattern](#) alerted me to the terrific pedagogical potential of collaborative platforms like Notion.