

Technology, Culture, and Power

Course Syllabus

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Comm 850 – Spring 2020

Monday: 5:45 – 8:35pm

Location: Greenlaw 0106

Professor

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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, cultural studies, geography, anthropology, sociology, 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 urban 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	20%
Critical Reaction Essay #2	20%
Book Review	20%
Final Paper	30%
Participation (including discussion facilitation)	10%

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 one 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 electronic 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**]. (For the first component, please also produce a 2-page handout that outlines the key themes and some illustrative quotes; these handouts should be copied and shared with your fellow seminar participants.) 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 3; (2) March 2. The book review is due no later than April 6. You are encouraged to submit the essays and book review earlier if you’d like. The final paper is due April 20.

You should meet with me early on in the semester to discuss ideas for your final project paper. This final assignment should be approached as an academic journal article, and it will be

evaluated using comparable criteria; for instance, it should be roughly 7,000-8,000 words in length (including footnotes and references) and adhere to typical article genre conventions (e.g., include an abstract, literature review, presentation and analysis of examples, conclusion, references, etc.). 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

Atanasoski, Neda, and Kalindi Vora. 2019. *Surrogate Humanity: Race, Robots, and the Politics of Technological Futures*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Beauchamp, Toby. 2019. *Going Stealth: Transgender Politics and U.S. Surveillance Practices*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Benjamin, Ruha. 2019. *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*. Medford, MA: Polity Press.

Bratton, Benjamin H. 2016. *The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press

Braun, Lundy. 2014. *Breathing Race into the Machine: The Surprising Career of the Spirometer from Plantation to Genetics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Fouché, Rayvon. 2017. *Game Changer: The Technoscientific Revolution in Sports*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Jasanoff, Sheila, and Sang-Hyun Kim, eds. 2015. *Dreamscapes of Modernity: Sociotechnical Imaginaries and the Fabrication of Power*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Mattern, Shannon. 2017. *Code and Clay, Data and Dirt: Five Thousand Years of Urban Media*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Murphy, Michelle. 2017. *The Economization of Life*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Reeves, Joshua. 2017. *Citizen Spies: The Long Rise of America's Surveillance Society*. New York: New York University Press.

van Dijck, José, Thomas Poell, and Martijn de Waal. 2018. *The Platform Society: Public Values in a Connective World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Vostral, Sharra L. 2018. *Toxic Shock: A Social History*. New York: New York University Press.

Course Schedule (subject to revision)

Week One: Technology and Inequality

January 13:

- Benjamin, Ruha. 2019. *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*. Medford, MA: Polity Press.
- Recommended:
 - o Winner, Langdon. 1980. Do Artifacts Have Politics? *Daedalus* 109:121-136.

Week Two: Martin Luther King, Jr. Day

January 20: **MLK Day (no class)**

Week Three: Cyborg Sports Systems

January 27:

- Fouché, Rayvon. 2017. *Game Changer: The Technoscientific Revolution in Sports*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Week Four: Racial Economies of Technoscience

February 3:

- Braun, Lundy. 2014. *Breathing Race into the Machine: The Surprising Career of the Spirometer from Plantation to Genetics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- **Due: Critical Reaction Essay #1.**

Week Five: Surrogate Workers

February 10:

- Atanasoski, Neda, and Kalindi Vora. 2019. *Surrogate Humanity: Race, Robots, and the Politics of Technological Futures*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Week Six: Reproductive Technologies and Politics

February 17:

- Vostral, Sharra L. 2018. *Toxic Shock: A Social History*. New York: New York University Press.

Week Seven: Biopolitical Governance

February 24:

- Murphy, Michelle. 2017. *The Economization of Life*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Week Eight: Interrogating Technological Progress

March 2:

- Jasanoff, Sheila, and Sang-Hyun Kim, eds. 2015. *Dreamscapes of Modernity: Sociotechnical Imaginaries and the Fabrication of Power*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- **Due: Critical Reaction Essay #2.**

Week Nine: Spring Break

March 9:

- **Spring Break (no class)**

Week Ten: Surveillance Studies I: Citizen Policing

March 16:

- Reeves, Joshua. 2017. *Citizen Spies: The Long Rise of America's Surveillance Society*. New York: New York University Press.
- Monahan, Torin, and David Murakami Wood. 2018. Introduction: Surveillance Studies as a Transdisciplinary Endeavor. In *Surveillance Studies: A Reader*, edited by T. Monahan and D. Murakami Wood. New York: Oxford University Press, xix-xxxiv.

Week Eleven: Surveillance Studies II: Gender and the State

March 23:

- Beauchamp, Toby. 2019. *Going Stealth: Transgender Politics and U.S. Surveillance Practices*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Week Twelve: Material Media

March 30:

- Mattern, Shannon. 2017. *Code and Clay, Data and Dirt: Five Thousand Years of Urban Media*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Week Thirteen: Digital Platforms

April 6:

- van Dijck, José, Thomas Poell, and Martijn de Waal. 2018. *The Platform Society: Public Values in a Connective World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Murakami Wood, David, and Torin Monahan. 2019. Editorial: Platform Surveillance. *Surveillance & Society* 17 (1/2):1-6.
- **Due: Book Review.**

Week Fourteen: Planetary-scale Computation I

April 13:

- Bratton, Benjamin H. 2016. *The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp.1–189.

Week Fifteen: Planetary-scale Computation II

April 20:

- Bratton, Benjamin H. 2016. *The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, **pp.191–365**.

Week Sixteen:

April 20:

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