Fall 2023. Sociology 166: SOCIETY & TECHNOLOGY

CLASS HOURS       Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays 11am-12pm
LOCATION          101 Morgan

INSTRUCTOR        Joseph Klett
EMAIL             jklett@berkeley.edu (Read this, and include “SOC166” in subject line)
OFFICE HOURS      Tuesdays 10a-12p (by Zoom)
                   Wednesdays 2p-3p (in Social Sciences Building XXX)

COURSE DESCRIPTION
What is the relationship between society and the stuff we call technology? Rather than accept that technology develops through some set of natural laws around which society can only react – an idea we call technological determinism – a sociological perspective reveals that society and technology are mutually constituted through a history of emerging constructions, conflicts, and coincidences. We will study a variety of cases about the social nature of technology in areas ranging from the factory to the home, the hospital to the ocean, and the desert to the internet. Through these cases we will consider questions of culture, politics, and ethics. Our goal is to discover the dynamic role of technology used in society, and the role of society in making those technologies. Remember the slogan: it could always be otherwise.

We begin by exploring the social aspects of the technological world at various scales (Part I). At the human level, there is the work of engineers who must negotiate the wants of machinery to ensure the technology “works.” Engineers enjoy a special authority and access – as well as responsibility – to design the gadgets and gizmos that shape the lives of consumers. The products of engineering are always found in large technological systems, where the smallest change in one area will inadvertently change the conditions for all other elements in the system. This interdependence in turn generates unique cultural artifacts, for example, when rail travel and the industrial extraction of gold alter the language of film-making at the turn of the 20th century. The volatility of systems means that technology always entails some degree of risk. Accidents are a regular feature of the technological world, and society must negotiate its desire for technological advancement with its aversion to catastrophic failure – especially when the stakes are nuclear.

Following this overview at scale, we adjust focus to the social roles that technology produces (Part II). We may assume that technology is meant to serve the people who use it. But closer inspection reveals how technology produces its users through equal parts seduction and entrapment. This fact is vivid in the construction of interfaces, particularly those used in
exploring outer and inner spaces otherwise hostile to human bodies. But we needn’t look to the vacuum of space to appreciate how technologies enforce certain identities on its users and non-users: as feminist theorists have argued, technologies carry a long history of inclusion and exclusion which provide certain frontiers while blocking many others. Design ideals like modernism have notoriously created a technology indifferent toward the embodiment of its users. Such oversight has created categories of disability by demanding an impossible standard for what a human should be. For instance, we will consider the conflict inherent in hearing technologies which frame deafness as a disability, and counter-narratives from deaf culture which reject those technologies as solutions without a problem.

Once we have accounted for the scope of technologies and the social relationships they create, we turn our attention to the immediate technological situation that we find ourselves in today (Part III). Digital devices shape much of social interaction today. While often empowering, these technologies also require a new kind of presence in society which clashes with historical states of being in the world. That we have fully entered a period of machine learning, where algorithms evolve to guide our thoughts and dreams, is not merely a new mode for delivering old information. Algorithmic behavior now shapes our political and economic horizons. Dreams of rationality built from perfect information have been rekindled by talk of “big data.” Yet data collection and processing cannot outrun the limits of the humans who facilitate these processes, and this means digital technologies will continue to reproduce the biases of people. Ironically, pursuing broad sets of data to teach machines has led to an even broader forgetting of so much pre-digital information deemed irrelevant by the narrow purview of engineers.

And who are these engineers? Not to ascribe too much power to individuals, but the industrial leaders and cultural icons of Silicon Valley have done much to authorize our digital age. This includes an emphasis on society as a network made to resemble the technological systems which power and link our many devices. Yet elevating networks creates higher stakes for those who get left out, for example, by a digital divide which empowers a stratum of technological ‘haves’ over an already impoverished underclass of technological ‘have-nots’. This economic inequality is made even more volatile by the precarious role of digital infrastructure, a widely-neglected yet essential aspect of life in today’s large technological systems.

In our final week of instruction we consider the future (Part IV). The more we understand about the relationship between society and technology, the better we can appreciate that there is not one future, but many possible futures. By reflecting on historical actions and alternative stories of technology, you will leave this course more knowledgeable about the future of our technological world and how life inside survives.
COURSE REQUIREMENTS (% of final grade; all work submitted after the deadline will receive a 5% deduction per 24 hours unless excused)

A) Weekly memos (33%): You will write memos connecting class material to a recent phenomenon of your choosing. For each memo you will summarize your chosen phenomenon and provide a citation. You will then explain this phenomenon using a concept from that week’s lectures. Last, you will pose one unanswered question about the phenomenon that you would like to explore further. Memos will be assigned to weeks 2-7 and 9-13.

B) Reading responses (36%): You will complete three reading responses (2-3 pages each) that illustrate class material with an example of your choosing. These are due at the end of weeks 4, 7, and 13. Complete instructions will be provided in week 2.

C) Midterm (15%): You will complete a take-home midterm consisting of three short-answer (1-2 page) prompts covering the first half of class.

D) Final (15%): You will complete a take-home final consisting of three short-answer (1-2 page) prompts covering the second half of class.

ACADEMIC HONESTY
You are expected to follow the University guidelines for academic honesty. Violations include cheating and plagiarism, as well as self-plagiarism (submitting your own work from a different assignment). Attribution and proper citations are expected for all ideas that are not your own. If you have any doubts, please speak to me or your TA before your work is due.

SPECIAL NEEDS AND ACCOMMODATIONS
All students should be able to participate in this course. Please address any special needs you may have with me at the beginning of the semester, or when a challenge arises. If you qualify for accommodations because of a disability, please submit your accommodation plan from the Disabled Students’ Program (DSP) to me by email, preferably within the first two weeks of the semester. Contact the DSP by phone (510) 642-0518 or by email to dsp@berkeley.edu.
COURSE OUTLINE
Readings should be completed prior to the class meeting to which they are assigned. All readings can be found on bCourses.

WEEK.DAY      DATE: Topic

1.1           Wednesday 1/18: Introduction

1.2           Friday 1/20: The Social Construction of Technology

PART I: The Technological World

2.1-2.2       Monday 1/23 & Wednesday 1/25: Engineering

2.3           Friday 1/27: Shaping Things
                2. WATCH: Objectified (2009, dir. Gary Hustwit)

3.1-3.2       Monday 1/30 & Wednesday 2/1: Systems

3.3           Friday 2/3: Cultural Artifacts
                1. WATCH: Dawson City/Frozen Time (2016, dir. Bill Morrison)

4.1-4.2       Monday 2/6 & Wednesday 2/8: Accidents

4.3           Friday 2/10: (Nuclear) Power
2. WATCH: *Chernobyl* (2019, dir. Johan Renck)

**Sunday 2/12:** Reading response #1 due

**PART II: The Sociality of Machines**

5.1-5.2 **Monday 2/13 & Wednesday 2/15:** Users

5.3 **Friday 2/17:** Interfaces

**Monday 2/20: NO CLASS**

6.1 **Wednesday 2/22:** Feminist Technoscience
   1. [Links to an external site.](#)

6.2 **Friday 2/24:** Inconvenient Bodies

7.1-7.2 **Monday 2/27 & Wednesday 3/1:** Disability

7.3 **Friday 3/3:** The Electronic Ear
2. Christina Jewett. 2022. “FDA Clears Path for Hearing Aids to be Sold Over the Counter.”
3. WATCH: The Sound of Metal (2019, dir. Darius Marder)
Sunday 3/5: Reading response #2 due

8.1 Monday 3/6: Midterm Review I (online)

8.2 Wednesday 3/8: Midterm Review II (in class)

Friday 3/10: TAKE-HOME MIDTERM (due Sunday 3/12)

PART III: The Digital Age


9.3 Friday 3/17: Attention Deficits

3. WATCH: How Algorithms Shape Our World (2011, Kevin Slavin, TED Global)

10.3 Friday 3/24: Terminal Velocity
2. WATCH: Money & Speed (2011, dir. Marije Meerman)

Monday 3/27, Wednesday 3/29 & Friday 3/31: NO CLASS

11.1-11.2 Monday 4/3 & Wednesday 4/5: Big Data
11.3 Friday 4/7: Digital Amnesia
2. WATCH: Digital Amnesia (2014, dir. Bregtje van der Haak)

12.1-12.2 Monday 4/10 & Wednesday 4/12: Silicon Valley

12.3 Friday 4/14: Infrastructure


13.3 Friday 4/21: The Digital Divide
1. Andrew Spaulding. 2015. “I used a 56K modem for a week and it was Hell on Earth.”
3. WATCH: The Internet’s Own Boy (2014, dir. Brian Knappenberger)

Sunday 4/23: Reading response #3 due

PART IV: The Future

14.1-14.2 Monday 4/24 & Wednesday 4/26: Futures

14.3 Friday 4/28: Life in the Future

15.1 Monday 5/1: Final review I (online)

15.2 Wednesday 5/3: Final review II (in class)

Friday 5/5: TAKE-HOME FINAL (due Monday, 5/8)