

SOC 776: Inequality and Technology

Course Description

No endeavor is more fundamental to sociological inquiry than theorizing, measuring, and understanding inequality. Sociologists have asked why some groups receive greater access to education, jobs, citizenship, housing, and status. Increasingly, people pursue education, jobs, citizenship, and housing through digitally-mediated technological tools and platforms. Many of those tools and platforms have the concept of status built-into their organizing logic, e.g. friends, followers, likes, favorites, Klout, etc. Despite technology's bald appeal to "social", sociology has not yet created an integrated approach to understanding the myriad ways that digital infrastructure, platforms, and networks shape how individuals and groups access critical resources like health insurance, mortgage applications, college applications and all manner of bureaucratic processes now conducted in online spaces. But, the threads are there and there exists an emerging body of work in *digital sociology*. This course will offer a sociological context to the development and use of technologies in our social world. To do this we will focus on the ways in which history meets biography and how technology intervened at several significant points in the development of major sociological trends in the U.S. We will primarily take a *structural* perspective to 1) the history of labor, nation-states, and technology 2) contemporary issues of digital technologies and stratification by race, class, gender, and citizenship.

Course Objectives

The course has three objectives: 1) understand technology broadly across primary socio-historical points of social change in the U.S. 2) consider how technology and digital spaces are socially-constructed 3) critically engage how the material, social and political architecture of the Internet and social media platforms are reconstituting inequality regimes.

Readings

Scholz, Trebor, ed. Digital labor: The Internet as playground and factory. Routledge, 2012.

Daniels, Jessie. Cyber racism: White supremacy online and the new attack on civil rights. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009.

Resources

[SociologyConcepts](#) is an online resource that explains sociological concepts.

SocCinema is an online resource that explores sociological concepts through popular media and film.

SocImages is another online resource that explores sociological concepts through images and pictures, many from pop culture.

In addition, there will be weekly current event readings posted to blackboard and the class blog. These readings are denoted by an *, with original source noted in the course schedule. Each reading not specific to the three required texts will be uploaded to blackboard under "Course Readings". These readings should be read for both content and evidence (both implicit and explicit) of the social processes we are discussing in class.

Assignments

Writing assignments are an endeavor in applied sociology. They should present an argument, evidence, and a clearly articulated relationship to the question posed. We will discuss forms of argumentation and evidence in class. I grade for adherence to the assignment guidelines *and* application of concepts from lectures, class discussion, and readings. Assignments should be submitted via blackboard BEFORE the start of the class period in which they are due or a printed copy can be submitted during class on the due date. Please see my policy on late assignments and the university process for obtaining student accommodations. All citations should follow ASA guidelines. Scholarly and popular press sources are encouraged but they should conform to our discussion of "vetting a source" scheduled for Jan 22, before your first written assignment is due.

Exams

There are three exams in this class, inclusive of the mid-term and final. The first two exams will pertain to the key concepts of the corresponding section. The final exam will be cumulative. Exams draw on readings, discussion, and all content covered in class. Exams are a combination of short answer questions and matching terms learned in class to definitions. You should consider the critical analysis assignments as necessary exam prep. The same attention to analysis, supporting arguments by citing relevant works from class readings, and identifying social processes and structures will apply in exams.

Policies

Exams

If there is a legitimate and unavoidable scheduling conflict that you are aware of in advance, or if an unexpected emergency prevents you from making it to class the day of an exam, you are responsible for demonstrating these circumstances in writing and discussing arrangements with me as soon as possible. **These are the only conditions under which I give make-up exams.** If you are late to class for

some other reason, such as oversleeping, you will have to complete the exam during whatever class time remains.

Late Assignments

Turn in all assignments to me by the close of class on the date for which they are due. Where indicated on the syllabus, assignments can be posted to blackboard but should be done so before the start of class on the day the assignment is due. All other written assignments are to be submitted in paper, in class, on the day the assignment is due. If an assignment is late due to exceptions granted by College policy (e.g. College sporting events, accommodations or illness) they will be graded. Assignments that are late for any other reason will be returned to you ungraded and will not receive credit.

Expectations

All matters of the course fall under the rubric of the honor code. E.g., " Honor Code: The Emory University honor code applies fully to this course. When you sign an exam or submit your assignments, you are pledging to the honor code. For reference, please consult http://www.college.emory.edu/current/standards/honor_code.html."

- You are expected to:
 - attend class regularly, arrive on time, and turn cell phones off before class begins;
 - be respectful and tolerant of others' comments and opinions in class;
 - stay current with the course by following the course schedule and being aware of important dates.
- If you cannot attend a class meeting, you are responsible for checking in to see what you missed (handouts, etc.) and for getting notes, if desired, from a classmate. I will not, under any circumstances, directly provide lecture notes to students.
- There is no such thing as a stupid question. I strongly encourage you to speak up and ask for clarification whenever necessary, both in class and during office hours if necessary.

Technology Policies

I do not ban laptops. Therefore, I consider all technology used during class time to be used in service to the discussion. This policy is rooted in my belief that learning is a collaborative process. I invite all of us to use technology to do that. This includes googling a source, looking up a concept, or helping to guide a class discussion. However, texting is rarely necessary for class engagement so cellphones and smartphones should be on silent and put away. I reserve the right to revisit the technology policy on a rolling basis if class conditions require. I will employ a range of social media tools to enable discussion. Students are not required to use these

tools from personal accounts out of respect for individual positions on how you choose to use social media. I will not consider social media participation in grading.

Accommodations

I will make necessary accommodations for students who have been in conversation with the Office of Disability Services. Students with disabilities must contact the Office of Disability Services (404-727-6016) to obtain proper documentation if special accommodations are needed. In addition, please be sure to inform me of these accommodations in a timely manner (i.e., at the beginning of the semester, not the day of the exam).

SECTION ONE: TECHNOLOGY AND CAPITALISM

Alondra Nelson and others have argued that to understand technology and inequality regimes we need a broader definition of technology. That definition would include our common rendering of it as tubes, hardware and information. But it also considers technology as lived practices, adaptation, and historically situated modalities. Historian Seth Rockman says of slavery and capitalism that, “to understand technological innovation, entrepreneurship, speculation, sanctified property rights, and market integration it is necessary to take Mississippi and South Carolina as seriously as Massachusetts and New Hampshire.” We will start by interpreting “technology” broadly to consider a cursory history of how technology shaped the foundational axes of inequality in the U.S. We will begin with the primitive accumulation of wealth and its relationship with slave labor. That is followed by critical interrogation of prevailing debates about labor, inequality, and technology.

Readings and Lectures

Technology and Social Change. Lecture.

Rockman, Seth. "[The Future of Civil War Era Studies: Slavery and Capitalism.](#)"

Winant, Gabriel. "[Slave Capitalism.](#)"

Scholz, Trebor. “Why does digital labor matter now?” in *Digital labor: The Internet as playground and factory*. Routledge, 2012.

Weber and Marx primer. Lecture.

Chapter 2 of Dyer-Witheford, Nick. *Cyber-Marx: Cycles and circuits of struggle in high-technology capitalism*. University of Illinois Press, 1999.

Cook, Lisa, D. "[Violence and Economic Activity: Evidence from African American Patents, 1870-1940](#)"

Ross, Joel, Lilly Irani, M. Silberman, Andrew Zaldivar, and Bill Tomlinson. "Who are the crowdworkers?: shifting demographics in mechanical turk." In CHI'10 Extended Abstracts on Human Factors in Computing Systems, pp. 2863-2872. ACM, 2010.

Aytes, Ayhan. "Return of the Crowds: Mechanical Turk and Neoliberal States of Exception" in *Digital labor: The Internet as playground and factory*. Routledge, 2012.

SECTION TWO: SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF TECHNOLOGY

We tend to think of technology as a utility but how might we think of technology as socially constructed? In what ways do sociological processes, norms, and stratification define what constitutes technology, how we use it and how does the technology act back on how we construct social processes? We will cover classic social theory from Mead and Goffman and consider the implications for digitally-mediated group practices, particularly as they relate to social media.

Readings and Lectures

Mead and Goffman primer. Lecture.

Pinch, Trevor and Ronald Kline, "Users as Agents of Technological Change: The Social Construction of the Automobile in the Rural United States," *Technology and Culture* 37 (1998): 763-95.

McPherson, Tara. "[U.S. Operating Systems at Mid-Century: The Intertwining of Race and UNIX](#)" in *Race After the Internet*.

Jurgenson, Nathan. "[The Disconnectionists](#)."

Carrigan, Mark. "[What is Digital Sociology?](#)"

Nelson, Alondra and Jeong Won Hwang. "Roots and Revelation: Genetic Ancestry Testing and the YouTube Generation" in *Race After the Internet*.

The Post-Racial Promise of Technology. Lecture.

Daniels, Jessie. "[Race and Racism and Internet Studies](#)"

[The Case of Brown Twitter Bird](#). Lecture.

Sanders, Sam. "[How Black People May or May Not Use Twitter](#)."

Toxic Twitter Feminism: Intersectionality Wars Online. Lecture.

Media Differentiation, Social Media Logics, and Stratification. Lecture.

SECTION THREE: INEQUALITY AND THE MACHINE

Of course, when we talk about technology commonly we most often mean it as a generic placeholder for computers and the Internet. The popular narrative has the Internet revolution springing forth from the genius of mostly white men with names like Jobs, Gates, and Zuckerberg. But there is a more complex history of how these technologies were built, adopted, and diffused. To understand the complexity of that history it is useful to employ an intersectional frame and its intellectual history in black feminist thought. We will discuss how technology is (re)made from various social locations and end by interrogating the ways in which digitally-mediated access to public and private goods reshape critical social processes differently by status groups.

Readings and Lectures

Black Feminist Thought, Technology, and Social Locations. Lecture.

[The Matrix of Domination](#). Excerpt from Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), pp. 221–238

Nakamura, Lisa. "[Indigenous Circuits](#)"

Landrum, Shane. "[Early African American Women in Science and Math.](#)"

Daniels, Jessie. "Rethinking cyberfeminism (s): Race, gender, and embodiment." *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (2009): 101-124.

Biakolo, Kovie. "[Whose Internet is it Anyway? A Dialogue on Race, Gender and the Digital Space.](#)"

Boyd, Danah. "White flight in networked publics." *How Race and Class Shaped American Teen Engagement with MySpace and Facebook. Race After the Internet.* Ed. L. Nakamura, P. Chow-White. New York: Routledge (2011): 203-22.

McMillan Cottom, Tressie. "[Micro-Power: Inequality Regimes, Micro-blogging and the Political Economy of Social Media.](#)"

Craig Watkins, S. "[Digital divide: Navigating the digital edge.](#)"

Tufekci, Zeynep. "'Not This One' Social Movements, the Attention Economy, and Microcelebrity Networked Activism." *American Behavioral Scientist* 57, no. 7 (2013): 848-870.

Kwok, Irene, and Yuzhou Wang. "Locate the Hate: Detecting Tweets against Blacks." In Twenty-Seventh AAAI Conference on Artificial Intelligence. 2013.

Algorithms, Big Data, and Inequality. Lecture.

Share Economy, The Case of AirBnB and Racism. Lecture.

Fourcade, Marion, and Kieran Healy. "Classification situations: Life-chances in the neoliberal era." *Accounting, Organizations and Society* 38, no. 8 (2013): 559-572.