**SS389 – The Digital Age and Its Discontents**

**Fall 2016**

**Classroom - TBA**

**MW 9:00-10:15**

**Instructor:** Taylor Dotson

**Office:** Fitch 205

**Phone:** x5211

**E-mail:** tdotson@nmt.edu

**Office Hours:** TBA

**Course Description:**

Digital technologies are routinely touted as unequivocally desirable in popular media and discourse. Yet, few other technologies evoke as much ire and lament with respect to their perceived effects on the human condition. To many citizens in advanced technological societies, digital technologies appear to be simultaneously liberators and masters. How should “we” think about contemporary networking and communication devices? Are they Faustian bargains? Akin to Frankenstein’s monster?

The aim of this course is to examine digital technologies as politically consequential things. That is, students will explore such technologies as influencing who gets what, when, and how, especially in regards to happiness and “the good life,” meaningful social relationships, economic arrangements, and the practice of democracy. Through the analysis of digital age scholarship and dystopian imaginaries, such as those presented in the British program Black Mirror, students will reflect upon the risks, double-binds, and injustices of contemporary digital technologies. Finally, students will explore possibilities for achieving more desirable digital modernities.

**Pre-requisites/Co-requisites:** ENGL 112 or permission of instructor.

**Place in Curriculum**: General Education Core requirement, Area 4 – Social Sciences

**Course Learning Outcomes**:

This course explores the political dimensions of science and technology. By the end of the course, it is anticipated that students will be able to: (1) Critically reflect upon their own experiences of the digital age, informed by philosophical and social scientific concepts (2) Explain the risks posed by digital technologies for certain conceptions of meaningful social connection, human thought, and/or the good life, (3) Critically examine claims regarding digital technologies’ potential to support political and economic liberation, (4) Imagine alternative digital societies and/or dystopian possibilities and how they would be socio-politically enabled.

**Program Learning Outcomes**:

Students will:

1. Identify, describe, and explain human behaviors and how they are influenced by social structures, institutions, and processes within the contexts of complex and diverse communities.

2. Articulate how beliefs, assumptions, and values are influenced by factors such as politics, geography, economics, culture, biology, history, and social institutions.

3. Describe ongoing reciprocal interactions among self, society, and the environment.

4. Apply the knowledge base of the social and behavioral sciences to identify, describe, explain, and critically evaluate relevant issues, ethical dilemmas, and arguments.

**Course Requirements**:

**Required Texts:**

1) Turkle, Sherry. 2011. *Alone Together.* New York, NY: Basic Books

2) Morozov, Evgeny. 2011. *The Net Delusion.* New York, NY: PublicAffairs

3) One book of your choosing that analyzes life in the digital age (see below for suggestions)

**Assignments**

The structure of this course requires careful reading in preparation for engaged class discussion. Students will be expected to have extracted the main arguments and evidentiary basis for claims within the readings, taking notes, prior to that day’s class. Doing so will help ensure that more class time can be devoted to going beyond the readings rather than merely reviewing them.

Students missing more than two classes will incur a significant attendance grade penalty (full letter grade per day). Absences will also negatively affect the student’s participation grade. Penalties can be avoided by completing a writing assignment on a reading provided by the instructor.

This course consists of readings, class discussions, reading notes, short personal reflections, film review, book review, and a final group project.

**Participation:** Students will be graded on their appearing prepared to discuss and respond to questions regarding that day’s reading, which entails comprehending the author’s main claims, logic, and evidentiary bases. Periodically, students will be asked to be prepared to discuss the following day’s readings at length so as to ensure a broad distribution of participation.

**Students on their laptops or otherwise preoccupied with a digital device will receive a zero for that day’s participation grade**. Students are encouraged to take handwritten notes so as to avoid the alluring pull of computerized distractions. Listening attentively but otherwise not participating will earn students a non-zero (but also non-passing: e.g., <50%) participation grade. Finally, students should put their phones on vibrate and keep them in their book bags or pockets.

**Reflection Essays:** Students will individually write two (2) 800 word essays in which they reflect upon the material covered so far and draw connections between it and their own life experiences and/or observations. The point of these is to test comprehension of course material and the ability to use it to analyze the world outside our classroom.

**Film Review:** Pairs of students will watch and analyze a sci-fi/dystopian film that contains some elements of social and technological critique. They will produce a 1500 word written review.

**Book Review:** Pairs of students will read a book of their choosing (with instructor approval) dealing with the digital age. Students will present on their book in-class (~20 minutes) as well as provide a 1500 word written review (due the final day of presentations)

**Group Project:** Students will be divided into small groups and dedicate the last weeks of class researching some facet of the digital age in more detail. Options for the resulting page include: 1) An analysis of how certain digital technologies pose challenges to or present new potential for achieving a better civilization and how technological development might be steered to maximize benefits and lessen harms 2) An annotated script of a dystopian film of the students’ own creation that critiques facets of contemporary digital life.

**Course Schedule**:

**PART I: DIGITALITY, RELATIONSHIPS AND THE GOOD LIFE**

**Mon Aug 22 –** Review of Course & Syllabus – Conceptualizing Technology and Its Effects – Skim Introduction of Turkle

**Wed Aug 24 –** Turkle, Ch. 1-2 “Nearest Neighbor” and “Alive Enough”

**Mon Aug 29 –** Turkle, Ch. 3-5 “True Companions,” “Enchantment,” and “Complicities” Black Mirror – “Be Right Back”

**Wed Aug 31 –** Turkle, Ch. 5-6 “Love’s Labor Lost” and “Communion”

**Mon Sep 5 – No Class – Begin Thinking About Personal Reflections**

**Wed Sep 7**– Turkle, Ch. 8, 10 “Always On” and “No Need to Call”

**Mon Sep 12 –** Turkle, Ch. 11-12, “Reduction and Betrayal” and “True Confessions” Black Mirror – “The Entire History of You”

**Wed Sep 14 –** Turkle, Ch. 13 “Anxiety” and Conclusion “Necessary Conversations”

**[First Personal Reflection Due Friday at 5pm]**

**Mon Sep 19 – TBA [Select and buy books for review]**

**PART II: POLITICAL DIMENSIONS OF THE DIGITAL AGE**

**Wed Sep 21 –** Morozov, Ch. 1-2, “The Google Doctrine” and “Texting Like It’s 1989”

**Mon Sep 26 –**Morozov, Ch. 4 & 6, “Censors and Sensibilities” and “Why the KGB Wants You to Join Facebook”

**Wed Sep 28 –** Morovoz, Ch. 5, “Hugo Chavez Would Like to Invite You to the Spinternet” Black Mirror – “The National Anthem”

**Mon Oct 3 -** Morozov, Ch. 7 “Why Kierkegaard Hates Slacktivism”

**Wed Oct 5 –** Morozov, Ch. 3, “Orwell’s Favorite Lolcat”

**Mon Oct 10 – See** **videos on Canvas – Begin Thinking about Personal Reflections** Black Mirror – “Fifteen Million Merits”

**Wed Oct 12 –** Morovoz, Ch. 10-11, “Making History” and “The Wicked Fix”

**[Second Personal Reflection Due Friday at 5pm]**

**PART III: EXTENSION AND APPLICATION**

**Mon Oct 17 –** Thinking About Sci-Fi and Social Commentary [Picking Films]

**Short readings on Canvas**

**Wed Oct 19 –** Book Review Workshop **[Books Mostly Read by Now]**

**Mon Oct 24 –TBA**

**Wed Oct 26 – Student Presentations**

**Mon Oct 31 – Student Presentations**

**Wed Nov 3 – Picking Groups and Final Projects**

**Mon Nov 7 – Student Presentations**

**Wed Nov 9 – Student Presentations**

**[Sci-Fi Analysis Due Friday at 5pm]**

**PART III: FINAL PROJECTS**

**Mon Nov 14** **–** Workshop

**Wed Nov 16 –** Workshop **Mon Nov 21 –** Workshop

**Wed Nov 23 –** Workshop? Day before Thanksgiving

**Mon Nov 28 –** Workshop

**Wed Nov 30 – [Group Presentations I]**

**Mon Dec 5 – [Group Presentations II]**

**Wed Dec 8** – **[Group Presentations III; Papers Due Friday at 5pm]**

**[Finals Week]**

**Grading**:

A = 100-94%; A- = 93-90%: B+ = 89-87%; B = 86-84%; B- = 83-80%; C+ = 79-77%; C = 76-74%; C- = 73-70%; D = 69-60%; F=<60%

**Breakdown:**

Attendance and Participation 20%

Reflection Essays (2) 20%

Film Review 15%

Book Review 20%

Final Project 25%

**Counseling and Disability Services:**

**Reasonable Accommodations**

New Mexico Tech is committed to protecting the rights of individuals with disabilities. Qualified individuals who require reasonable accommodations are invited to make their needs known to the Office of Counseling and Disability Services (OCDS) as soon as possible. To schedule an appointment, please call 835-6619.

**Counseling Services**

New Mexico Tech offers mental health and substance abuse counseling through the Office of Counseling and Disability Services. The confidential services are provided free of charge by licensed professionals. To schedule an appointment, please call 835-6619.

**Academic Honesty**: New Mexico Tech’s Academic Honesty Policy for undergraduate students is found starting on page 60 of the NMT Undergraduate Catalog, <http://www.nmt.edu/images/stories/registrar/2014-2015_UNDERGRADUATE_Catalog_FINAL.pdf>

New Mexico Tech’s Academic Honesty Policy for graduate students is found starting on page 59 of the NMT Graduate Catalog, <http://www.nmt.edu/images/stories/registrar/2014-2015_GRADUATE_Catalog_FINAL.pdf>.

You are responsible for knowing, understanding, and following this policy.

**Respect Statement:** New Mexico Tech supports freedom of expression within the parameters of a respectful learning environment. As stated in the New Mexico Tech Guide to Conduct and Citizenship: “New Mexico Tech’s primary purpose is education, which includes teaching, research, discussion, learning, and service. An atmosphere of free and open inquiry is essential to the pursuit of education. Tech seeks to protect academic freedom and build on individual responsibility to create and maintain an academic atmosphere that is a purposeful, just, open, disciplined, and caring community.”

**Book Options:**

Economics

Rushkoff, Douglas. 2016. *Throwing Rocks at the Google Bus: How Growth Became the Enemy of Prosperity.* New York, NY: Portfolio/Penguin.

Dyer-Witheford, Nick. 2015. *Cyber-Proletariat: Global Labour in the Digital Age.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Lanier, Jaron. 2014. *Who Owns the Future?* New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

Brynjolfsson, Erik and Andrew McAfee. 2014. *The Second Machine Age.* New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company.

Keen, Andrew. 2015. *The Internet is Not the Answer.* New York, NY: Grove/Atlantic.

Pasquale, Frank. 2015. *The Black Box Society: The Secret Algorithms That Control Money and Information*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Söderberg, Johan. 2008. *Hacking Capitalism: The Free and Open Software Movement*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Politics

Harcourt, Bernard E. 2015. *Exposed: Desire and Disobedience in the Digital Age.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

McChesney, Robert. 2013. *Digital Disconnect: How Capitalism is Turning the Internet Against Democracy.* New York, NY: The New Press.

Morozov, Evgeny. 2014. *To Save Everything, Click Here: The Follow of Technological Solutionism.* New York, NY: PublicAffairs.

Eubanks, Virginia. 2011. *Digital Dead End: Fighting for Social Justice in the Information Age.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Hindman, Matthew. 2009. *The Myth of Digital Democracy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Mental Life

Carr, Nicholas. 2010. *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains.* New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company.

Carr, Nicholas. 2015. *The Glass Cage: How Computers are Changing Us.* New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company.

Wajcman, Judy. 2015. *Pressed for Time: The Acceleration of Life in Digital Capitalism.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Crawford, Matthew B. 2015. *The World Beyond Your Head: On Becoming an Individual in an Age of Distraction.* New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Social Life

Turkle, Sherry. 2015. *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age.* New York, NY: Penguin Press.

Boyd, Danah. 2014. *It’s Complicated: The Social Life of Networked Teens*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Mayer-Schönberger, Viktor. 2009. *Delete: The Virtue of Forgetting in the Digital Age.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Culture/Multiple Facets

Phillips, Whitney. 2015. *This Is Why We Can’t Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship Between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Gillespie, Tarleton. 2009. *Wired Shut: Copyright and the Shape of Digital Culture*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Mosco, Vincent. 2016. *To The Cloud: Big Data in a Turbulent World.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Coleman, Gabriella. 2012. *Coding Freedom: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Hacking.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

**Sci-Fi/Dystopias**

*The Zero Theorem*

*Gattaca*

*The One I Love*

*Strange Days*

*Minority Report*

*Artificial Intelligence*

*Ex Machina*

*Surrogates*

*Elysium*

*Her*

*Transcendence*

*In Time*

*Wall-E*

*Videodrome*

*eXistenZ*

*High-Rise*

*Snowpiercer*

*Brave New World*

*2001: A Space Odyssey*

Can also choose another episode of *Black Mirror*