Technology & Society
Sociology 120A – Spring 2016
Mondays 2:00-4:50 pm – Pearlman 203

Prof. Edward J. Hackett
ehackett@brandeis.edu
Office: Bernstein-Marcus Building
Office hours: T 1:00-2:00
Email: ehackett@brandeis.edu & by appointment
781.736.2131

Technology is neither good nor bad; nor is it neutral.
Melvin Kranzberg, 1986

Technology is a powerful force. It has been hailed as a way to cure everything from world hunger to bad breath. Some would say it made us human, and has not yet finished the job. But technological change is not an unqualified blessing: Technologies frequently have negative effects for particular people, at particular times, or in particular circumstances. Some negative consequences are unanticipated, some are predictable, and some are intentional features of the design or implementation. But because technologies are indispensable for solving problems and improving the quality of life, societies invest in their design and development.

This course will explore the relationship between various technologies and various aspects of society. We will continually pose four important questions. First, where do technologies come from and why do they work as they do? Technologies are human creations, and so their forms and uses reveal the interests and purposes of the people, institutions, and societies that build them. Second, how do technologies shape our world? We will explore the variety of ways by which machines and techniques become embedded in society and thereby shape institutions, interactions, and values. Third, what kind of future do we want? Many of the articles we will read argue that certain values are essential to a just society, which challenges us to consider which values we should hold most dear and defend. And fourth, how can we make decisions about technologies that will get us to the future we want? Once we understand the role of technology in society and the world we want to build, we must develop strategies for getting us from here to there.

Much of the semester’s readings will be found in Johnson & Wetmore’s Technology and Society: Building Our Sociotechnical Future (MIT Press, 2008). Students may not need to purchase this book as all readings are available electronically, but it does have some additional information and introductions that you may find useful throughout the semester. And books are a wonderful and enduring technology.

Learning Goals

If the course succeeds, by the end of the semester you will:

Understand technologies as human creations that have, in turn, helped make us who we are;

Perceive and analyze the social values and power relationships built into technologies;
Identify ways to guide or shape emerging technologies in ways that promote equity and justice;

Improve critical thinking, complex reasoning, and communication (writing, speaking) abilities.

**Course Requirements**

Class meetings will combine discussions that explore ideas and their implications with brief “lectures” that explain, integrate, and present new material. In order to benefit from our classes, you will need to prepare. Simply reading the required articles is necessary but hardly sufficient: you will also need to think about them. To encourage reflection, please write a one-page commentary or reflection about the course reading. These are commentaries, not summaries, and so we wish to read what you thought about the reading, how you connect or compare it to other course ideas, current events, or other things you have learned. We expect the papers to demonstrate your understanding of the readings by the way you use the ideas and arguments they offer. The papers will be graded credit/no credit, must be handed in on paper at class time, and will not be accepted late (or early, or by email or owl). Taken altogether they are worth 30% of your course grade.

During classes we will explain, explore, extend, and integrate ideas from the readings and current events, and so it is very important that you attend and participate. Each student will be asked to choose an article relevant to course topics and share it with us. Class attendance and participation are worth 10% of your course grade.

Your major academic work for the course will be to write a 12-to-15 page (typed, double-spaced) research paper and to present an early version of the paper in class. The paper will allow you to explore in greater depth one of the themes of the course or a case study of the relationship between a particular technology and a particular aspect of society that interests you. This assignment has several parts:

1. A 2- to 3-page prospectus that will include a brief description of your topic, an explanation of how you will approach it, and the resources you will be using (10% of your course grade).
2. A draft of the complete paper for in-class review and advice (10%);
3. An in-class presentation of your research (10%)
4. A final version of your paper that will be due in class (and submitted through Turnitin on Latte) and will be worth 30% of your course grade.

You really want to write the best drafts you can because the better your work the more helpful the feedback you will receive.

Grades will range from A+ to E, with +s and –s.

**Attendance** Please come to every class prepared to discuss the readings. If other activities (sports, debate, job interviews, etc.) will interfere with your class attendance, we should talk about this during the first week of classes.

**Late Assignments**
Unexcused late assignments will not be accepted, and recurrent excuses for late assignments will be discussed in person with the professor.
**Academic Integrity**

You are expected to adhere to Brandeis’s Student Code of Conduct. All work that you turn in must be your own and must not be copied from published sources, including the Internet. Google makes it easy for students to find material on the web and equally easy for professors to identify its source. It is not worth the risk.

All students are responsible for reviewing and following Brandeis’s policies on academic integrity, which may be found in Section 4 of Rights and Responsibilities from the Brandeis Student Handbook. If you fail to meet the standards of academic integrity in any of the criteria listed on the university policy website, sanctions will be imposed by the instructor, school, and/or dean. Academic dishonesty includes borrowing ideas without proper citation, copying others’ work (including information posted on the internet), and failing to turn in your own work for group projects. Please be aware that if you follow an argument closely, even if it is not directly quoted, you must provide a citation to the publication, including the author, date and page number. If you directly quote a source, you must use quotation marks and provide the same sort of citation for each quoted sentence or phrase.

Students with documented disabilities who are entitled to an accommodation should discuss this with me and present their letter of accommodation as early as possible in the semester. If you have questions about documenting a disability or requesting an academic accommodation, please contact Beth Rodgers-Kay in Academic Services at 736-3470 (brodgers@brandeis.edu).
Course Calendar

“Monday,” January 20th

Opening class

Introductions, what we’re about…aims and plans.

Monday, January 25th


One-page paper due in class on the week’s readings

Monday, February 1st


Lewis Mumford, “An Appraisal of Lewis Mumford’s Technics and Civilization” (online)

One-page paper due in class on the week’s readings

Monday, February 8th


Joel Tarr, “The City and Technology” (online)

Add reading on wired city—Pentland

One-page paper due in class on the week’s readings

Monday, February 15th

Presidents’ Day—no class

Monday, February 22nd

Bruno Latour, “Where Are the Missing Masses?”


David Bromwich, “The Hi-Tech Mess of Higher Education’ (online)

One-page paper due in class on the week’s readings

Monday, February 29th

Judy Wajcman, “From Women and Technology to Gendered Technoscience”


Rachel Weber, “Cockpit design…”

One-page paper due in class on the week’s readings

Monday, March 7th

Daniel Sarewitz, “Pas de Trois: Science, Technology, and the Marketplace”


STEPS Manifesto (online)
Paper Prospectus Due in Class for Discussion

Monday, March 14th


Kim Tallbear, Tribal Housing, Co-Design & Cultural Sovereignty

One-page paper due in class on the week’s readings

Monday, March 21st


Michael Specter, “A Life of Its Own” (online only)

Synthetic Biology Ethics—selected parts

One-page paper due in class on the week’s readings

Monday, March 28th

HOLIDAY—no class

Monday, April 4


Internet of Things

Several short robotics articles from *Science*

One-page paper due in class on the week’s readings

Monday, April 11

Raffi Khatchadourian, “A Star in a Bottle”

Patrick McCray, “Globalization with Hardware”

Sharlissa Moore, “Envisioning the Social and Political Dynamics…” (online)

Bill McKibben, “Power to the People” (online)

One-page paper due in class on the week’s readings

Monday, April 18th

Research Presentations

Paper Drafts Due in Class for Discussion

Monday, April 25th

Break! No class

Monday, May 2nd

John Gilliom and Torin Monahan, “Everyday Resistance” (online only)


Final one-page paper due in class

Final research paper due on a date tba