

INFORMATION & SOCIETY

School of Information

I-290 (Section 2): 3 Units

Spring 2016

Monday 3-6; Room 107 South Hall

Instructors

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Overview

Much as Adam Smith saw his own age as marked by its engagement with "commerce" and thereby distinguished from all ages that had come before, it has become conventional to see our own era as a break from all that has preceded it, and thus distinguished principally by its engagement with information and computing technologies. Scholars have labeled the contemporary era as the "post-industrial," "postmodern," or "network society," but probably the most widely used and enduring characterization distinguishes the present day as the "information age" or "information society." This course will explore the notion of an "information society," trying to understand what scholars have held to be the essential and distinguishing features of such a society, how these views compare with classic theories of society or with alternative accounts of the present age, and to what extent different conceptions of the "information age" are compatible. In pursuing this investigation, we shall bear in mind the admonition of the legal scholar James Boyle that while the idea of an

"information age " may be "useful ... we need a critical social theory to understand it." In the process of developing a critical, social, and political-economic analysis of this idea, we hope to assemble a corpus of information society readings.

Course Structure and Requirements

We will proceed by reading theorists in contrasting pairs in each class seeking to understand and compare the ways in which society is characterized in each account. All students will be asked to post their thoughts on the readings before the each class and each student will be expected to take responsibility for guiding the discussion in one class and .

Every few weeks, we will pause to consider how to apply these theoretical perspectives in our own research and writing, at which time students will be required to submit a one-page essay reflecting on how these theorists use and construct theory and how the student might rely on or challenge these theories in the student's own work

Each student will be required to submit a final paper exploring a subject to be agreed on with the instructors that relates to the works and discussions of the course. Papers should be 20 pages long and submitted by the last day of exam week (December 16).

Grading:

Class submissions 20%

In-class participation 20%

Final paper 60%

SYLLABUS

Aug 39: Introduction

Please try to read the following brief essay before coming to the first class.

Webster, Frank. 2014. "Introduction," pp. 1-9 in *Theories of the Information Society*. Oxford: Routledge. [Sainsburybooks.co.uk].

Sept 6: Information and Labor

Though more usually associated with the phrase "post-industrial society," Daniel Bell was also an early proponent of the designation "information society," and in the previous week's

reading Webster aptly puts Bell at the head of a list of information-society theorists (p. 4). In a move that will seem familiar today, Bell sees the character of the age manifest in the changing relations of labor, which he sees as increasingly shaped and subordinated by information technology. This technology, he concludes, “opens the way to alternative modes of achieving individuality” and by extension collective society. Bell’s essay was part of a collection proposing a “Twenty-Year View” of the “Computer Age” and drew a sharp response from the computer scientist Joseph Weizenbaum, who suggests, on the basis of prior predictions, that social scientists might almost be incapable of anticipating the sort of changes that the computer will introduce. (He is almost as acerbic about some of his MIT colleagues.) In this class we will discuss both the contents of these arguments and the disciplinary challenges of trying to assess technologically driven social change.

Reading:

Bell, Daniel. 1981 [first published 1979]. "The Social Framework of the Information Society" pp: 500-549 in Tom Forrester, ed., *The Microelectronics Revolution: The Complete Guide to New Technology and its Impact on Society*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press.

Weizenbaum, Joe. 1981. "Once More, the Computer Revolution" [reply to Bell] Forrester, ed., *The Microelectronics Revolution* pp. 550-570.

Bell, Daniel. 1981. "A Reply to Weizenbaum" Forrester, ed., *The Microelectronics Revolution* pp. 571-533.

All available online at [[IEEEExplore](#)]

Background Reading:

Bell, Daniel. 1973. *The Coming of Post Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Dertouzos, Michael L. & Joel Moses, eds. 1979. *The Computer Age: A Twenty-Year View*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Weizenbaum, Joe. 1976. *Computer Power and Human Reason: From Judgment to Calculation*. San Francisco: W.H. Freeman.

Sept 13: Space/Time

In accounts of the “information society, Space and time are among the most controversial concepts. Both popular and academic writing has claimed that the increasing velocity of

"Internet time" has brought about the "death of distance" (e.g., Cairncross 2001). Yet the significance and endurance of social difference in the access to modern communications infrastructure raises significant questions about the extent to which space and time have "collapsed" for all. Thus we will begin by looking at Manuel Castells's influential *Rise of the Network Society*, with its conception of the emergence of a "network society" constructed through a placeless "space of flows." In the following week we will contrast this view with Doreen Massey's contemporaneous *Space, Place and Gender*, which, among other things, questions the "ethnocentricity of the idea of time-space compression."

Reading:

Castells, Manuel. 1996. "The Space of Flows," "The Edge of Forever," "The Network Society," chch 6, 7, and Conclusion in *The Rise of the Network Society*. Oxford: Blackwells. [[ebrary](#)]

Massey, Doreen. 1994. "Space, Place, and Gender," Part III of *Space, Place, and Gender*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. [[ebrary](#)]

Background Reading:

Cairncross, Frances. 2001. *The Death of Distance: How the Communications Revolution Is Changing Our Lives*. Revised Edition. Harvard Business Review Press.

Harvey, David. 2007. *Limits to Capital*. 2nd ed. London: Verso.

Mann, Michael. 2012. *Globalizations, 1945-2011*. Vol 4 of *The Sources of Social Power*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. [[ACLS](#)]

Sept 20: Communication

The modern era has also come to be defined by its mechanisms of communication and the ways in which these can appear to make access to information ubiquitous and instantaneous. In this class, we will sample Marshall McLuhan's now classic account in *Understanding Media* of modern communications systems and how by "abolishing both space and time" they are leading to the "final phase of the extensions of man." McLuhan's account was challenged by communications theorists from Raymond Williams to James Carey, who looked, as McLuhan had done, at the "media" of their day. Robert McChesney, who we will read in contrast to McLuhan, is their modern day heir, so where they looked at television and the press, he looks at the Internet. Like Williams and Carey before him, McChesney challenges accounts of technology that isolate technology from the political and economic circumstances of the day.

Reading:

McLuhan, Marshall. 1964. "Introduction," "The Medium is the Message," & "Hybrid Energy," from *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

McChesney, Robert. 2013. "How Can the Political Economy of Communication Help Us Understand the Internet?" & "Journalism is Dead: Long Live Journalism," & "Revolution in the Digital Revolution," chch 3, 6, & 7 in *Digital Disconnect: How Capitalism is Turning the Internet Against Democracy*. New York: New Press.

Background Reading:

Carey, James W. 1989. *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society*. Boston: Unwin Hyman.

Eisenstein, Elizabeth. 1983. *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Innis, Harold. 1991. *The Bias of Communication*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Williams, Raymond. 1961. *The Long Revolution*. London: Chatto & Windus.

Sept 27: Pause for reflection

— *Using Social Theory* 1.

"Asking Questions" Part I of Michael Pryke & Gillian Rose & Sarah Whatmore, eds. 2003 *Using Social Theory: Thinking Through Research*. London: Sage & Open University. [[ebrary](#)]

Assignment, due Oct 22 by 12 pm.

Oct 4: The Public Sphere

Our discussion of communications theory will provide background to this class, in which we will consider assumptions that, as information is as important to democratic decision making as it is to economic decision making, an "information society" is as likely to lead to a perfect democracy as to a perfect market. One of our readings, Jurgen Habermas profoundly influential *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, has been used to suggest that technology today is allowing us to fulfill the democratic promise of the Eighteenth Century Enlightenment. While Habermas cannot be held responsible for how he has been used, José van Dijck's contrasting vision in *Critical History of Social Media* will allow us to assess the

extent to which “social media” have already or can perform the role that many see as laid out by Habermas.

Reading:

Habermas, Jürgen. 1989. "Introduction: Preliminary Demarcation of a Type of Bourgeois Public Sphere," "Political Functions of the Public Sphere," & "The Transformation of the Public Sphere's Political Function," Sections I, III, & VI of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Trans. by T. Burger and F. Lawrence. Cambridge, MA: Polity Press. [[googlegroups](#)]

José van Dijck. 2013. “Engineering Sociality in a Culture of Connectivity” & “The Ecosystem of Connective Media: Lock In, Fence Off, Opt Out?” chch 1 & 8 in *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Background Reading:

Williams, Raymond. 1976. "Community" in *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Anderson, Benedict. 2006. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism, New Edition*. 2nd ed. Verso. [[ACLS](#)]

Oct 11: Control

Any social theory must be able to address questions of power and control. In this class, we will read from James Beniger's *Control Revolution*, which argues that rise of modern information processing systems is intricately intertwined with the requirements of hierarchical systems of power, both state and corporate, and the need of each to control ever-more-complex organizational processes and the information processing related to them. Placing this account in a social-theoretical context, we will contrast that account with Foucault's argument in *Discipline and Punish*, which, analyzing the seeming opposition between hierarchical and distributed systems of power, allows us to ask: if power is structured through technology, then how does technology structure power?

Reading:

Beniger, James R. 1986. “Towards an Information Society: From Control Crisis to Control Revolution” Part III (pp. 289-438) of *The Control Revolution: Technological and Economic Origins of the Information Society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. [[ACLS](#)]

Foucault, Michel. "Panopticism" & "The Carceral," pp. 194-229 and pp. 293-308 in *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Pantheon Books. [[Social Theory](#)]

Background Reading:

Bayly, C.A. 1998. *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. [[ACLS](#)]

Jo Freeman. "Tyranny of Structurelessness." [[Jofreeman.com](#)]

Hardt, Michael, and Antonio Negri. 2000. *Empire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Oct 18: Pause for reflection

— *Using Social Theory 2*.

"Investigating the Field" Part II of Michael Pryke & Gillian Rose & Sarah Whatmore, eds. 2003 *Using Social Theory: Thinking Through Research* London: Sage & OU. [[ebrary](#)]

Assignment, due Oct 23 by 12 pm.

Oct 25: Embeddedness

On the assumption that information is key to the efficient functioning of markets, it is often assumed that information technology will bring us closer to realizing the "free market" and by extension a fair and meritocratically structured society. Hence this week we will read Erik Brynjolfsson and Andrew McAfee's *Second Machine Age*, a recent account of how modern information technology will help us attain sought after market efficiencies that will in turn lead to an efficient society. Such arguments tend to assume that markets are independent of society and that society must be willing to submit to market (and by extension technological) forces. Thus, in dialogue with this efficient-market account, we will look at Karl Polanyi's contrasting argument in *The Great Transformation* that, rather than independent and dispositive, markets are embedded in society, and must be understood as being structured through social relationships, rather than purely economic calculation.

Reading:

Brynjolfsson, Erik & Andrew McAfee. 2014. "The Big Stories," "Innovation: Declining or Recombining," "Artificial Intelligence in the Second Machine Age," "The Spread," chch 1,5,6, & 9 in *The Second Machine Age*. New York: W.W. Norton. [[Ch 1. Norton](#)]

Polanyi, Karl. 2001 [1944]. Introduction (by Fred Block) pp. xviii-xxxviii, Chapter 6, pp.71-80, Chapter 21, pp. 257-268. in *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*. 2nd ed. New York: Beacon Press. [ebrary]

Background Reading:

Block, Fred. 2003. "Karl Polanyi and the Writing of 'The Great Transformation.'" *Theory and Society* 32 (3) (June): 275-306.

Cowen, Tyler. 2013. *Average is Over: Powering America Beyond the Age of the Great Stagnation*. New York: Dutton.

Granovetter, Mark. 1985. "Economic Action and Social Structure: The Problem of Embeddedness." *American Journal of Sociology* 91 (3) (November): 481-510.

Jessop, Bob. 2007. "Knowledge as a Fictitious Commodity: Insights and Limits of a Polanyian Perspective." In *Reading Karl Polanyi for the Twenty-First Century: Market Economy as Political Project*, edited by Ayse Bugra and Kaan Agartan, 115-134. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Krippner, Greta R., and Anthony S. Alvarez. 2007. "Embeddedness and the Intellectual Projects of Economic Sociology." *Annual Review of Sociology* 33 (1): 219-240.

Picketty, Thomas. 2014. *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.

Nov 1: Commons

In contrast to market-based accounts of society, the rise of information technology has given rise to notions of a "commons for knowledge," supported by technology but giving rise to non-monetary, non-hierarchical social structures. Thus in this class, we will look at Yochai Benkler's *Wealth of Networks*, with its account of "commons-based peer production." Where Benkler looks exclusively at information goods, Elinor Ostrom's *Governing the Commons*, which we will read in dialogue with Benkler, looks at material goods and sees the social and organizational (rather than communications) infrastructure as critical. The differences between these two authors are essential to understanding the nature of the commons, and thereby of the conditions under which the commons may continue to remain a central component of an "information society."

Reading:

Benkler, Yochai. 2007. Chapters 1-4, pp.1-127 in *The Wealth of Networks*. New Haven, CT: Yale

University Press. [[ebrary](#)]

Ostrom, Elinor. 1990. Chapters 1-2, pp. 1-57, Chapter 6, pp. 182-216. *Governing the Commons*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Background Reading:

Benkler, Yochai. 2003. "Coase's Penguin, or Linux and the Nature of the Firm," *Yale Law Journal*, 112(3): 369-446. [[Yale.edu](#)]

Raymond, Eric. 1999. *The Cathedral and the Bazaar: Musings on Linux and Open Source by an Accidental Revolutionary*. Cambridge, MA: O'Reilly. [[Safari Books](#)]

Takhteyev, Yuri. 2012. *Coding Places: Software Practice in a South American City*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. [[IEEE](#)]

Nov 8: Innovation and the Information Society

This class will attempt to bring our discussions home with a discussion of the changing nature of labor, a running theme of the course, in the context of today's "innovative industries."

Gina Neff's book considers the role of information industry workers, and Whyte's famous account of "organization man" will allow us to contrast Neff's vision with an account of the workplace and worker from before the "Information Revolution" began.

Readings

Neff, Gina. 2012. "The Social Risks of the Dot-Com Era," "Being Venture Labor," and Conclusion: Lessons from a New Economy for a New Medium," chapters 1, 3 and 6 of *Venture Labor: Work and the Burden of Risk in Innovation Industries*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. [[ebrary](#)]

Whyte, William H. "Introduction" and "Conclusion," chapters 1 and 29 of *The Organization Man* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013 [first published 1956]). [[ebrary](#)]

Nov 15: Pause for reflection

— *Using Social Theory* 3.

"Writing Practices" Part III of Michael Pryke & Gillian Rose & Sarah Whatmore, eds. 2003 *Using Social Theory: Thinking Through Research* London: Sage & OU. [[ebrary](#)]

Assignment, due Nov 13 by 12 pm.

Nov 22: Conclusion

In the final class we will try to draw some conclusions about explicit and implicit claims from the works we have read concerning the transformation or "revolution" that has brought about the information society.

Reading:

MacKenzie, Donald. 1998. "Marx and the Machine" pp. , 23-47 in *Knowing Machines: Essays on Technical Change*. Boston, MA: MIT Press. [[Cognet](#)]

Marx, Karl. [1846-7]. "Fuerbach, Opposition of the Materialist and Idealist Outlook," §1 in *The German Ideology*. [[Marxists.org](#)]

Nov 29: Presentations

Presentations/discussion of final papers