

The Information Society

Fall 2017

3 Units

School of Information

Instructors

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Wednesday 9-12; 107 South Hall

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 so distinguished 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 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 a critical, social, and political-economic analysis of this idea, we hope to assemble a corpus of information society readings.¹

We will proceed by first tracing the history of ideas leading to cyberlibertarianism, from post-war cybernetics and systems thinking, to modern notions of freedom through technology. This intellectual tradition assumes a social world structured through emergent behaviours and structures composed of autonomous individuals exchanging "information." We will then follow a parallel history of thinking from the Left - which leads to remarkably similar conclusions about

¹ Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting* (New York: Basic Books, 1973); Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society. Vol 1 of The Information Age: Economy, Society, Culture* (1994-1998) (Oxford: Blackwells, 1996); David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1990); Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Post-Modern Condition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985); Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964); James Boyle, *Shamans, Software, and Spleens: Law and the Construction of the Information Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

the relationship between power, technology, and society - through an examination of autonomism, postmodernism, and poststructuralism. Finally, we will conclude by offering critiques of these positions, through an examination of a variety of issues, including labour, the nation state, and space. Through the discussion of these various intellectual projects, we hope to arrive at a collective understanding of the assumptions underlying theories of the "information society," and how we might go about productively interrogating and reformulating these theories.

Course Structure and Requirements

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. Students 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 8th).

Grading

Class submissions	20%
In-class participation	20%
Final paper	60%

SYLLABUS

August 23: Introduction

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

Frank Webster, "Introduction," pp. 1-9 in *Theories of the Information Society*. Fourth Edition. (Oxford: Routledge, 2014).

August 30: Cyberlibertarianism - Cybernetics

Norbert Wiener, "Communication, Secrecy, and Social Policy" and "Role of the Intellectual and the Scientist" pp. 112-135 in in *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1954).

Geoffrey Bateson, "Cybernetic Explanation" and "Redundancy and Coding" pp. 407-433 in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972).

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

September 6: Cyberlibertarianism - Control

James R. Beniger, "Introduction" & "Part 3: Towards an Information Society: From Control Crisis to Control Revolution" pp. 1-26 & 294-435 in *The Control Revolution: Technological and Economic Origins of the Information Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986).

Daniel Bell, "Who will Rule: Politicians and Technocrats in the Post-Information Society" pp. 339-369 in *The Coming of Post Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1973/1999).

September 13: Cyberlibertarianism - Freedom

Yochai Benkler, "Policies of Freedom at a Moment of Transformation" pp. 379-473 in *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

Kevin Kelly, "Deep Progress," "Ordained Becoming," "Inevitability," and "Listen to the Technology" pp. 73-174 in *What Technology Wants* (New York: Viking, 2010).

September 20: Cyberlibertarianism - Wrap

Fred Turner, "The Triumph of the Network Mode" pp. 238-260 in *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2006).

Katherine Hayles, "Contesting the Body of Information: The Macy Conferences on Cybernetics," "Liberal Subjectivity Imperiled: Norbert Wiener and Cybernetic Anxiety," and "From Hyphen to Splice' Cybernetic Syntax in Limbo," "The Second Wave of Cybernetics: From Reflexivity to Self-Organization" pp. 50-160 in *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

September 27: Postmodernism, Poststructuralism, Autonomism

Jean-François Lyotard, "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?" pp. 71-82 in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984).

Michel de Certeau, "Spatial Practices" pp. 91-130 in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988).

October 4: Postmodernism, Poststructuralism, Autonomism

Jeanne Baudrillard, "Requiem for the Media" pp. 164-184 in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (St Louis: Telos, 1981).

October 11: Postmodernism, Poststructuralism, Autonomism

Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri, "The Decline and Fall of Empire" pp. 353-413 in *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

Francis Fukuyama, "The Last Man" pp. 287-339 in *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Avon, 1998).

October 18: Postmodernism, Poststructuralism, Autonomism - Wrap

Nick Dyer-Witheford, "Postmodernists" pp. 362-406 in *Cyber-Marx: Cycles and Circuits of Struggle in High-Technology Capitalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1999).

October 25: Responses - State and Nation

James Scott, "Nature and Space" pp. 11-52 and "Cities, People and Language" pp. 53-84 in *Seeing Like a State* (Yale University Press, 1998).

Benedict Anderson. "Introduction", "Cultural Roots", and "The Origins of National Consciousness" chapters 1, 2, and 3 in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2nd ed (Verso, 2006).

November 1: Responses - Labour

Gina Neff. "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, 2012).

November 8: Responses - Space, Time, and Infrastructure

Tung-Hui Hu. "Introduction", "The Shape of the Network," and "Time Sharing and Virtualization," pp ix-xxix, 1-36, and 37-72 in *A Prehistory of the Cloud* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015).

Nicole Starosielski. "Gateway: From Cable Colony to Network Operations Center" chapter 3 in *The Undersea Network* (Duke University Press, 2015).

November 15: Responses - Communication

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

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

November 22: Holiday

November 29: Wrap course

Final paper outline presentations

Final papers due by December 8th.