Culture, Organization and Technology: Deliverance or Disruption in the Age of Globalization and Technological Change?

Prof. Todd M. La Porte
Associate Professor
Office: Room 552
Office hours: Tues. 2-4 pm, and by appt.
(202) 903-6464 (before 8 pm)
tlaporte *at* gmu.edu (preferred)

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The powerful potential of technologies to effect organization and cultural change is frequently misunderstood and can generate as much social and political conflict as it can deliver improvements to material well-being.

At the same time, lack of knowledge of cultures and organizations frequently results in conflict or program or policy failure. Rapid change is sweeping all three domains of culture, organizations and technologies, via economic globalization, technology diffusion, and cultural exchange, as can be seen in the dramatic rise of digital culture and politics around the world. And as interactions among technologies, organizations and cultures intensify, conflict in politics, society and culture intensifies as well.

Effective policy analysis, program design, implementation, and management depend on understanding the essence and dynamics of these domains. This course is designed to provide practical and intellectual skills, not only to help minimize such failures, but to maximize success in administrative, policy and political contexts.

Thus, the objectives of the course include learning to:

- Become aware of the nature and extent to which socio-technical systems shape human life and have an impact on the planet
- Observe and describe technologies, organizations and culture at micro and macro levels
- Identify institutional and cultural barriers and enablers to effective policy development, program design, and implementation
- Examine the role of institutions in shaping technologies, and vice versa

Students will also be introduced to various methodological skills and will participate in selected exercises:

- Organizational and cultural observation and analysis
- Open-ended interviewing
- Participant observation
The course teaches students pertinent approaches to the study of technologies, organization and culture, from the analysis of technologies and organizational structures, to that of belief systems and identities.

One aspect of the course examines culture and cultures in terms of two primary units of analysis: cultures as nations or social-political-economic identifiable sub-societies (e.g., “American,” “Muslim,” “Amish” or “Appalachian” culture); and cultures as social-political-economic organizations, communities or groups embedded or situated in national or trans-national units (e.g., the culture of digital society, of business consultants or engineers, of the FBI or the Department of Transportation).

Finally, the course will look at the dynamics between technologies, organizations and culture through a close look at how technologies underpin work and social life. We’ll also look at how technologies shape and are shaped by organizational forces, culminating in an introduction to how powerful but hazardous technologies challenge economic and social arrangements, and how they become embedded in familiar national patterns of industrial, social and cultural life. We will emphasize the issue of control of technology as a policy matter.

Requirements, Grades and Examinations

There are three main requirements for the course: three assignments, a final exam, and participation in class discussions.

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<th>Writing assignments (2)</th>
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Assignments

The first assignment is to analyze the social properties of technologies by giving up and doing without material, energy, or information technology. Examples include (and there are countless others) electricity, mobile telephone, television, computer, automobile, and the like. Individual self-observation and analysis of technical systems in contemporary use is the focus of this assignment. For examples collected by the New York Times for a similar challenge, see: [https://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/08/15/the-unplugged-challenge-readers-respond/](https://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/08/15/the-unplugged-challenge-readers-respond/) and selected videos: [http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2010/08/02/technology/unplugged.html](http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2010/08/02/technology/unplugged.html)

The second assignment is to observe, if possible, and extensively interview someone about their culture (or subculture) of origin, in the same spirit as Vance, Hochschild or Venkatech do in their respective books. The main goal of the interviews is to learn how your interviewee’s culture works, and what pressures are on it arising from changes in technology or work (or both). This exercise cannot be done in a few weeks but will require attention over the course of the entire semester.

Participant observation techniques will be used in this assignment, including establishing an interview protocol, negotiating permission to interview where necessary, keeping detailed interview notes, and analyzing your data to find patterns and gain insight.

Detailed guidance about how to do these assignments will be provided in class.
Participation in class discussion is essential. You will be expected to review carefully in advance the material assigned for each class and be prepared to discuss the important aspects of the readings in class (see “Blackboard Posting and Reading Discussion” section below). My role in this process will be to get the discussion started, assist the class in laying out the facts of the case, pose questions, and help the class to discover general principles running through the case that might be applicable in other situations.

The final will be an open-book, open-note, take-home exam. It will emphasize mastery of the materials in the cases and the readings, particularly your ability to synthesize the material and analyze cases and examples.

Texts

The course is based on the following course texts, available at the Arlington Campus Bookstore. However, I recommend looking first at used book websites, such as Alibris: http://alibris.com. Also try Addall, which searches about 30 new and used books sites and lists results by price: http://www.addall.com.

Required books


Class discussions

I will ask students to compose one or two questions about the evening’s session before each class, and post them on Blackboard, to start off our discussions. The most useful questions are those that synthesize the material and connect it to the substance of previous class sessions.

Composing questions like this has a pedagogical purpose: it will help you review and summarize what was discussed during the previous class. It will be very helpful to take good notes to help formulate questions.

Group work

I strongly encourage you to join with students in your own study groups to discuss the material.
No laptops or mobile phones in class

Laptops and mobile phones are not welcome in class. Despite our heavy reliance on them, they turn out to be detrimental to learning in classrooms. The “always connected” feature of information technologies means that users’ attention is diverted to monitoring these devices, and there is a spill-over effect from any one user to the rest of the class. When devices are present, even those belonging to someone else, grades are lower by a full point.

The researchers hypothesized that, because students can type faster than they can write, the lecturer’s words flowed right to the students’ typing fingers without stopping in their brains for substantive processing. Students writing by hand had to process and condense the spoken material simply to enable their pens to keep up with the lecture. Indeed, the notes of the laptop users more closely resembled transcripts than lecture summaries. The handwritten versions were more succinct but included the salient issues discussed in the lecture (Dynarski, 2017).

The only exception to this policy is if you have permission from the Office of Disability Services. Here are links to the research:


Writing expectations

This course demands a lot of writing. Writing is essential in the policy world, and good writing will serve you well in your career. I offer the following observations to help focus your attention on the importance of good writing.

Most common writing problems:
- Poorly formed arguments. Citations and references used out of context.
- Failure to utilize concepts from course literature to make observations, frame arguments, etc.

Writing abilities I expect:
- Produce well-crafted paragraphs that work together to produce strong and clear arguments, well supported by facts, data, observations.
- Write succinct but lively sentences and paragraphs that are appropriate length for their purpose. Employ correct grammar and usage.
- Use the best literature or sources. Use citations and references to support non-trivial arguments. Use concepts from course literature in observations, framing arguments, etc.
The one writing skill all students should acquire: **Write grammatically and logically.** Don't make your reader work to understand what you are saying. If you yourself don't have a clear idea, your reader won't either.

Getting your mind in shape: How to read in graduate school

This will be (I hope) a fascinating but (I know) demanding class. There is a larger than normal reading load, as befits a 4-credit course. Video and audio program are also required from time to time; they break up the routine of readings. The material itself is compelling: time flies when the reading is good. *Group work is strongly encouraged as a way to manage the workload, as well as to connect with fellow classmates.* If you have concerns about the time required to get all this done, please let me know.

But there is a larger issue associated with the work this course demands: **graduate school should be thought of as a way of getting your mind in shape.** It is more about learning how pose cut-to-the-core questions than it is about finding specific answers. It is more about learning to learn, a skill that never loses its currency, and less about learning concrete but often time-limited information. It is more about making an investment in critical thinking than it is about the consumption of entertaining stories or factoids. And, in keeping with the remarks above reading well is critical for writing well.

Getting in shape intellectually takes a lot of work. Some activities help, others get in the way:

**Read widely, from various political perspectives, to avoid political tunnel vision.** If there is one think the 2016 presidential election told us, it's that we live in a divided country, where large groups of people simply don't understand the perspectives of other groups, be they liberal-conservative, rural-urban, white-non-white, Christian-non-Christian, citizen-non-citizen, rich-middle-class-poor, etc. The way to avoid surprises, and to bring more light and less heat to political and policy discourse is to understand better the concerns and perspectives of others, no matter how uncomfortable or difficult that experience is.

**Read hard copies of the best daily newspapers.** Digital editions are great, but they risk allowing you to over-tailor your exposure to the specific slants or issues news, which can contribute to intellectual myopia. There is nothing like flipping through actual pages of the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, or the *Economist*, glancing at stories you thought you'd never be interested in, and finding something that grabs your attention.

**Read books and long-form journalism, not just summaries or newsfeeds.** Reading sustained treatments of arguments, ideas or stories exercises the mind by exposing it to nuance, subtlety, and complexity. Thinking critically depends on knowing more, and more deeply, than thin or hypertextually-linked articles that give little context or depth. Serious professionals don’t ignore less-demanding media, but they limit its reach. Skim the book review pages of the *Times* or the *Journal*, and make it a point to read the *New Yorker* or the *Atlantic Monthly*. Visit a good bookstore, sign up for their newsletter and attend author events from time to time. Frequent the University or your community library, and browse widely and borrow frequently.

**Avoid substituting commercial television for serious journalism or academic writing.** Commercial television is a wonderful medium in its place and time, but is a serious impediment to improved understanding of public issues. It attracts and distracts viewers by raising anxiety levels by surrounding
news and reporting about ideas with sensationalist techniques, compresses information into extremely short sound and image bites, and tailors its coverage to the implicit, and sometimes explicit, interests paying advertisers.

**Sign up for electronic newsletters for publications in your field.** Every profession or occupation has a trade publication specializing in news and analysis pertinent to the field. Make it a point to subscribe and at least skim the contents on a regular basis. Watch for conferences or reports on specific topics that interest you, and develop an understanding of what experts consider the pressing issues of the day. This is the best route to becoming a leading participant yourself. The librarians here at GMU can help you identify which publications to subscribe to, and in many cases can provide access for free.

**Use libraries and other professionalized research assistance rather than relying too heavily on Internet search.** The Internet has revolutionized access to information, but has not yet solved the problem of acquiring knowledge or, even more difficult, wisdom. Google searches are so convenient that most of us indulge ourselves with snippets of instantly-discovered information, but put off doing real research using vetted, peer-reviewed or otherwise well-chosen sources that often reside in library databases. The temptation to do a quick search online is like the challenge to public health posed by junk food: the fat, salt, and sugar are so attractive and the marketing is so overwhelming that it is difficult to resist. But a healthy intellectual “diet” should also seek out the fruits and vegetables of critical analytical thinking, and is necessary to give your mind a vigorous mental workout.

**Talk about what you are reading and thinking about with family, friends and classmates.** Most of what you will actually learn you will learn from people you interact with. Teachers can serve as guides to what to learn, and can provide some feedback on how you are doing. But by and large it is your classmates and friends that provide the best sounding board for what you think about what you are reading. Explaining new ideas to others is a form of teaching and learning: by talking to others, by teaching them, you are learning the material yourself. Doing so helps you see how new information fits with what you already know, and helps you find gaps in your knowledge. Talking about what you’re reading helps you better master the material.

**Spend time every day unplugged from an information device, and use it to think.** The power of being unplugged is immense: all my best thinking is done while I’m alone without my phone or computer. Many people have noted the addictive nature of information appliances, gently urging us to not let them take control of our lives, to the detriment of the people and things we love, as well as our own health. Check out: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OINa46HeWg8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OINa46HeWg8) as well as the web collection from the New York Times, “Your Brain on Computers.”

**Blackboard and library databases**

Book chapters and some other readings will be available through Blackboard. Journal articles are available through the Library’s databases (journals or newspapers: use E-journal finder).

Login to Blackboard at [http://mymasonportal.gmu.edu](http://mymasonportal.gmu.edu).
Blackboard posting and reading discussions

As noted above, we will use the public Discussion Board function on Blackboard to jumpstart the class discussions of the weekly readings. Comments and critiques online will give you time to consider what your classmates have to say about the readings, and help us focus on core issues more quickly. Blackboard comments can also be useful as summaries and discussions of readings, useful for preparing for the final exam.

There are two kinds of comments: Start-off Comments and Response Comments. The class will be divided into two groups of roughly the same number of students. **People whose last names begin with letters A through K are in Group A, everyone else is in Group B.**

Students in each group will post Start-off or Response Comments on alternate weeks, that is:
- Group A will post Start-off Comments on weeks 2, 4, 6, etc.; in those weeks Group B will post Response Comments;
- Group B will post Start-off Comments on weeks 3, 5, 7, etc.; in those weeks, Group A will post Response Comments.
- There will be no posting on readings for week 1.

**Start-off Comments** are to be posted to Blackboard **no later than 6 pm, 48 hours before class.** Your contribution should be about 300-400 words, in which you:
1. Articulate ideas or insights that week’s reading has given you, or any issues or problems you are having with it;
2. Raise one question you would like your classmates to reflect on and discuss in class – stick closely to the readings as you frame your thoughts;
3. Begin to analyze and synthesize the ideas our authors introduce. Do so within a session, by discussing how readings relate to one another) and across the course, by discussing how weekly themes relate to one another.

**Response Comments** are to be posted by the group that has not posted Start-off Comments that week. They must be posted **no later than 6 pm, 24 hours before class,** and should also be about 300-400 words. Response Comments respond to the Start-off Comments and begin (not end!) discussion on the topics raised.

Do not post attachments of documents; paste from documents into Blackboard directly. This is so we can all read discussion threads without leaving the Discussion Forum area.

**Posting weekly is required.** Your comment group will be verified on the first day of class.

**Late comments.** I take a dim view of late comments: by not posting on time, you deprive your classmates of the benefit of your thoughts while you have the benefit of theirs. Accordingly, I cannot give full credit for late comments.
Writing help

If you would like help with learning about how to compose your arguments or write more clearly, please contact the University Writing Center, http://writingcenter.gmu.edu, or see me.

Disabilities

If you are a student with a disability and you need academic accommodations, please see me and contact the Office of Disability Services (ODS) at 993-2474. All academic accommodations must be arranged through the ODS.

Grading criteria

To do well in this course, it is essential that you write well and use the literature we’ve read as a foundation for your arguments.

Grades of A or A- are reserved for sustained excellence and outstanding performance on all aspects of the course. B and B+ are used to denote mastery of the material and very good performance on all aspects of the course. B- denotes marginal quality work that is not quite up to graduate level standards. C means work that is adequate for undergraduate performance, but is not acceptable at the graduate level. The grade of F means the failure to perform adequately.

See details about grading criteria in the separate document on Blackboard.

I will occasionally return substandard work to students to revise and resubmit. Comments on written work are to be taken as general guides and feedback, not specific problems that need fixing.

Missed class sessions

Missing class is strongly discouraged, and I will not admit students who do not attend the first session, even with notice. More than one absence may jeopardize your grade, if not your ability to keep up with our rapid pace.

If for some reason you cannot attend a class, your participation grade can be maintained by providing me a 750-word summary and analysis of the week’s reading, with special attention to the critical questions they raise. This is to ensure that you have dug into the material, and will therefore have less risk falling behind the rest of the class.

Plagiarism

All work must be your own. In general, where the work of others is used, even in paraphrased form, it must appropriately referenced. When in doubt, cite! Plagiarism is an Honor Code violation: http://www.gmu.edu/facstaff/handbook/aD.html

The main things to keep in mind:

- Know your sources and what they say.
- Keep track of your sources when you copy and paste, and cite them accurately.
If you quote a key source, explain what the author says in your own words.

Avoid the temptation to simply change a few words or sentence order in a copied text. This is not original writing, but instead is incorrect paraphrasing, which is a form of plagiarism.

If deadline pressure leads you to even consider passing off others’ work as your own, DON’T DO IT. Contact me to discuss your situation. There are better ways to deal with stress that don’t risk expulsion.

If you have any questions about correct citation, paraphrasing and writing, let me know. The following resources will also help:

GMU University Writing Center: Plagiarism
https://writingcenter.gmu.edu-guides/plagiarism

Washington State University
http://www.wsulibs.wsu.edu/plagiarism/main.html

Indiana University: Plagiarism: What It is and How to Recognize and Avoid It
http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/pamphlets/plagiarism.shtml

Here follows the official Schar School Policy on Plagiarism:

The profession of scholarship and the intellectual life of a university as well as the field of public policy inquiry depend fundamentally on a foundation of trust. Thus any act of plagiarism strikes at the heart of the meaning of the university and the purpose of the Schar School. It constitutes a serious breach of professional ethics and it is unacceptable.

Plagiarism is the use of another’s words or ideas presented as one’s own. It includes, among other things, the use of specific words, ideas, or frameworks that are the product of another’s work. Honesty and thoroughness in citing sources is essential to professional accountability and personal responsibility. Appropriate citation is necessary so that arguments, evidence, and claims can be critically examined.

Plagiarism is wrong because of the injustice it does to the person whose ideas are stolen. But it is also wrong because it constitutes lying to one’s professional colleagues. From a prudential perspective, it is shortsighted and self-defeating, and it can ruin a professional career.

The faculty of the Schar School takes plagiarism seriously and has adopted a zero tolerance policy. Any plagiarized assignment will receive an automatic grade of “F.” This may lead to failure for the course, resulting in dismissal from the University. This dismissal will be noted on the student’s transcript. For foreign students who are on a university-sponsored visa (e.g. F-1, J-1 or J-2), dismissal also results in the revocation of their visa.

To help enforce the Schar School policy on plagiarism, all written work submitted in partial fulfillment of course or degree requirements must be available in electronic form so that it can be compared with electronic databases, as well as submitted to commercial services to which the School subscribes. Faculty may at any time submit student’s work without prior permission from the student. Individual instructors may require that written work be submitted in electronic as well as printed form. The Schar School policy on plagiarism is supplementary to the George Mason University Honor Code; it is not intended to replace it or substitute for it.
'Nuf said.

COURSE SYLLABUS

All reading and viewing is required to be completed before we meet for the first session.

Session 1: Introduction to the Topic and Overview of Course

As the semester starts, I’d like to get your intellectual and public policy juices flowing with some provocative materials. We’ll talk about how the course will connect the three seemingly disparate themes of culture, organizations and technology, which are connected in fascinating ways.

Be prepared to discuss these materials during our first class session.

Burtinsky’s work focuses on large-scale industrial artifacts, built and managed by vast, complex organizations and systems. The film shows a vast landscape of technological, social and cultural change being worked out on the land in visually striking ways. Venkatesh’s popular account of how he came to understand how a drug gang in Chicago, including its economic aspects. Pay attention to how race and class interact to produce social and economic outcomes for people in the projects in the city.

Vance’s recent book has been hailed as a must-read in post-Obama America. His poignant account of growing up white and poor in Appalachia and Ohio contrasts but also compares to Venkatesh’s narrative about growing up black and poor.

Finally, Friedman’s short piece, an excerpt from his recent book Thank You for Being Late, dwells on the perils of living in an age of technological acceleration, where stable social and economic, even political arrangements are being constantly disrupted by technological and organizational change. This is a major theme in this course.

Questions for reading: What does Burtinsky want his viewers to take away from his work? After seeing his photographs, what do we know about the modern industrial, and industrializing, world that we didn’t before? How does Venkatesh see gang members: criminals, rational economic actors, socially trapped minorities? How do the accounts Venkatesh and Vance compare, with respect to how economic opportunity is shaped by the wider society and culture? Finally, what does the acceleration Friedman writes about look like from where you sit? How do you cope with it? What are some of the outcomes of acceleration? What might we do as a society do to manage change better?

Manufactured Landscapes [film about work of Edward Burtinsky], Jennifer Baichwal, director, Foundry Films and the National Film Board of Canada, 2007, [http://gmu.njvid.net/show.php?pid=njcore:30594](http://gmu.njvid.net/show.php?pid=njcore:30594) or [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=adS-Q3rvUg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=adS-Q3rvUg)


Friedman, Thomas, “Dancing in a hurricane,” New York Times, November 19, 2016,

Session 2: Paradigms of Technology, Organization and Culture: Automobiles, Food, and Digital Information Systems in Modern America

This session starts out with a close look at several of the most influential and powerful technology systems the world has ever known: the gas-powered, internal combustion automobile, the modern American food system, the rise of the surveillance society, and the advent of ubiquitous information and communications networks of digital society.

In this session, we will take aim at the importance of technological systems, as contrasted to technological artifacts or “gadgets.” This difference in perspective is important, for much of the “wow” factor in contemporary technology focuses on single elements of much more complex systems that have important social and political properties that far outweigh their importance as cool gizmos. The implications of all-encompassing or totalizing systems become increasingly apparent as we move from older technical systems to newer ones, epitomized by the technologies and organizations that make up the Internet.

Studying automobiles, food, and the societal aspects of the Internet as complex technological, organizational and cultural systems is not just an end in itself. These systems are also paradigms for looking at any large technological system, in any society and at any level of development.

Questions for reading: Pacey gives us a graphic example of how technologies are related to other aspects of social life. Take one of our paradigmatic systems, and “map” it schematically on paper. Try to include as many aspects of the system as you can: organizations, economic structures, political elements, societal components, etc. (We’ll do more of this mapping in class, so make sure you have your own diagram). Do the other authors provide policy suggestions about how to shape the systems they write about in specific ways? What outcomes would they like to see?


Session 3: Technology and Progress

Thinking about technology means thinking about progress. Most people have no doubt that technology is good, and that more is better. It almost goes without saying that innovation and economic growth based on technological development has meant rising material welfare, and greater national economic, political and military power. The evidence of the truth of this is apparent all around us.

But this conventional assessment is also superficial. There is a lot more going on in how people and technologies interact, and in how people think of them. The very idea of progress has undergone significant change, and will continue to evolve.
In addition, technological changes affect nearly everyone, and the pace of change is picking up. Scale, complexity and unintended consequences of technological development are accelerating at an alarming rate.

**Questions for reading:** So, what is a technology? How should we think about technological change: inevitable? Inevitably beneficial? Are there alternative objectives of progress, and how do technologies fit into them? Can Buddhists or the Amish survive in an Internet-powered world? Chaplin’s *Modern Times* is a classic silent film about industrial society that resonated with many in the early 20th century. If he were alive today and were to make a film about our own “modern times,” what might it be like? What themes would he develop?


Lanchester, John, “The case against civilization: Did our hunter-gatherer ancestors have it better? The New Yorker, September 18, 2017, [https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/09/18/the-case-against-civilization](https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/09/18/the-case-against-civilization)

*Modern Times*, Charles Chaplin, dir., 1936, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oJvlVOD6mNg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oJvlVOD6mNg)

**Session 4: Technological Choices, Sponsors and Politics**

*Group B post Start Off Comments, Group A Response Comments*

Entrepreneurs in Silicon Valley are fond of declaring that their mission is “to change the world,” “make the world a better place,” and do so by engaging in “creative destruction” and breaking down ineffective or obsolete organizations and practices. In this view, technologies make a big difference to how society functions, and that there are specific social or political values associated with technologies and technological change. This is a controversial idea, imbuing technology with political agency: in terms of politics of guns and gun control (an old established technology), supporters of the 2nd Amendment often argue: “guns don’t kill people, people do.”

To get a handle on this debate, we need to consider “who” as well as “what” technologies are, and how technologies fit into organizations, economics, politics, society and culture. And this leads us to the question, how are technologies chosen, and whose interest? Consumers? Producers? Workers? Owners? Specific interest groups?

**Questions for reading:** How are technologies chosen? Is it the case that the “best” technology wins out over its competitors, as celebrated in the old phrase “build a better mousetrap and the world will beat a path to your door”? Or are there other factors at play, such as path dependence, economic power, lobbying and marketing, bureaucratic politics, and the like, that help determine the outcome? What are technology sponsors, and how do they work? Are there matters of social justice and democratic politics at stake?
**Technology sponsors, technological politics, and technological persistence**


**Cases**


**Session 5: Shaping How We Think and Act: Technology, Power and Culture**

*Group B post Start Off Comments, Group A Response Comments*

Language shapes what we think, what we believe in, and how we act. In the past, the church or state played a predominant role in shaping how people think. But with industrialization and mass media, it is now the market that leaves the biggest mark. This session will look at language, values and politics, and examine some of the institutional features that shape their use and development, particularly in market-based societies.

With these readings, we set the stage for understanding how certain kinds of political discourse emerged as ways to manage society in the early 20th century, as the productive power of industry began to create tremendous economic and social changes in the developed societies. This story is a harbinger for the present Internet-saturated present, where information engineering and psychology are powerfully shaping contemporary society, economics, politics and culture, and on a global scale.

**Questions for reading:** What is “mass society,” and what concerns did it present to early 20th century “captains of consciousness”? Who was Edward Bernays, and why is his work important in this context? Does advertising work? What does Lindblom’s discussion of “imprisoned thought” add to our understanding about the nature of our political choices?


Pollay, Richard W., “Propaganda, puffing and the public interest,” *Public Relations Review*, vol. 16, 1990, pp. 39-54, [http://legacy.library.ucsf.edu/cgi/getdoc?tid=zkh84c00&fmt=pdf&ref=results](http://legacy.library.ucsf.edu/cgi/getdoc?tid=zkh84c00&fmt=pdf&ref=results)
Session 6: Social Cohesion or Social Corrosion?

“Social capital” and “social networks” are terms that describe key aspects of modern society. Putnam’s work firmly put these ideas on the radar of the policy community two decades ago, amidst a concern that fragmentation and alienation were threatening our civic lives. Even earlier, Granovetter wrote about the paradoxical “strength of weak ties” in communities that had greater success in helping members get better jobs, protect livelihoods, etc.

Technologies are often the most concrete manifestation of new social and cultural phenomena, and commenters often make the mistake of attributing social and cultural change to the technologies themselves, while ignoring the deeper issues of economic and political power. Depending on how they are designed, digital technologies can enhance social connectivity, or can render them more atomistic and market-like, and can introduce dramatic changes in society, economics and politics, as we shall see in the following weeks.

Questions for reading: What exactly is Putnam’s social capital, and how is it different from Granovetter’s weak ties? Is the Internet or other information technologies, such as television, helpful or harmful to social connectedness? How do they affect elemental social arrangements, such as social networks and communities? Turkel’s accounts are sobering: do you have experiences similar to those of her interviewees? Or is she off base? Is Brooks concern about the future of dating trivial, or more fundamental? What policy difference does all this make?


Putnam revisited: Review the figures from Bowling Alone, and “150 Things You Can Do to Increase Social Capital,” posted on Blackboard.
Session 7: Knowledge, Institutions, and the Future of Understanding

*Group B post Start Off Comments, Group A Response Comments*

This session we’ll look at how digital technologies are affecting what we know, as a society, how we know it, and what it means for institutions that we rely on. Knowledge used to be relatively scarce, and was accumulated, vetted and transmitted by experts and formal institutions.

Now, everything is in flux, information is ubiquitous and often “free.” Institutions like universities, newspapers, music labels, retailer, established firms and many more are evolving or disappearing at an alarming rate. Even received notions of the truth have yielded to “truth” or even “truthiness,” and we find ourselves in the midst of dangerous culture wars.

The consequences of all this are unknown: some may prosper from these changes, but others may suffer, and worries that institutional failures may exact a large toll on stability, growth and fairness.

**Questions for reading:** Is Google making us stupid, really? If not, which are its effects on society? Edwards catalogs a lot of institutional destruction. Choose one or two of his categories: do you observe what he is seeing? Describe how you see the discussions about the truth, especially in the context of the last election. Is knowledge being overly politicized? What are the implications of this for democracy and policymaking? What does the research community think needs to be done to get a better grip on the problem of maintaining a robust infrastructure for knowledge creation?


Session 8: The End of Work as We Know It?

*Group A post Start Off Comments, Group B Response Comments*

Automation has long been seen as a threat to jobs: the original Luddite weavers worried that power looms would put them out of work, which they did. Countless other occupations have disappeared due to mechanization, their workers eventually finding new jobs, learning new skills, or retiring quietly while their families upgraded their skills and moved on.
Now may be different: advances in computing, artificial intelligence and robotics presents what many say are real threats unlike any in the past. No only are low skilled jobs at risk, but squarely middle-class jobs are potentially now subject to automation, raising the specter for some of long-term under- or unemployment and lower levels of overall well-being.

So, what is the future of work? And what are the social and political implications of that future?

**Questions for reading:** What are the key elements of Brynjolfsson (extra points for being able to pronounce his name) and MacAfee’s argument? Why is the effect of technological change on work different this time? How does their argument differ from Gordon’s? Evaluate the arguments that Rotman makes on this topic, and be prepared to explain how they relate to the core readings this week. Think about the impact automation and AI not just on developed countries, but also on labor markets and societies in the developing world. How might the future of work look to government officials, managers and workers themselves in, say, China or India? Finally, what role, if any, do Miller and Porter say the evolution of work plays in the recent political developments in both developed and developing countries?

Brynjolfsson, Erik, and Andrew MacAfee, *The Second Machine Age: Work, Progress and Prosperity in a Time of Brilliant Technologies,* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2014), chs. 2, 6, 11, 13, 14,


**Session 9: Vulnerabilities, Security, Privacy and Transparency**
*Group B post Start Off Comments, Group A Response Comments*

This week we’ll dig into some (but not nearly close to all) specific cases of technology-related vulnerabilities arising from digital technologies; we’ll leave system failure vulnerabilities aside for now. We’ve skimmed Gillion and Monahan’s work earlier; it provides a broad survey of the surveillance landscape and illustrates how deeply these technologies are now embedded in the social fabric. The Wall Street Journal’s webpages on the issue are fascinating. Let’s add a fascinating effort by Angwin, also of the *Journal,* to minimize her electronic footprint on the Internet, to protect her personal information as much as possible. The Drone Aviary art piece is haunting in its speculative depiction that is actually no longer speculative: make a quick search on YouTube for drone videos, and you’ll see what I mean.
Finally, take a look at the WikiLeaks website for a first-hand look at the source of much recent political vulnerability, browse briefly the scope of what is there, and consider what it represents for our political future. If you are inclined, watch a few episodes of Black Mirror (if you have the stomach for it), or any of the films listed below. They are all classic, dark and compelling.

Questions for reading: On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate the extensiveness of the surveillance society, before and after our readings this week? What is driving ubiquitous surveillance: Unchecked state power? Concern for security? Cool technology? Users’ convenience? Desire to reduce uncertainty? How should society balance needs for security and for privacy? How could people avoid surveillance if they chose to? How do different cultures respond to increased surveillance capabilities of their governments?


Black Mirror, Channel 4, 2011- (any episode, but S1E1 may make you queasy)
The Conversation, Francis Ford Coppola, director, 1974
Gattaca, Columbia Pictures, 1997

Enemy of the State, Touchstone Pictures, 1998
Minority Report, Steven Spielberg, director, 2006
Closed Circuit, John Crowley, director, 2013
Citizenfour, Laura Poitras, director, 2014

Session 10: Organizations, Networks and Politics

Group A post Start Off Comments, Group B Response Comments

Digital technologies are reshaping how power is accumulated and used across the world. This session will assess how this is coming about, and what it’s effects are likely to be. Perrow provides a short account of how organizations have evolved during the last century, which sets the stage for more recent developments, such as described by Pool and Shirky. Gladwell notes that while it is relatively easy to organize protest movements using social media, but it is quite another to sustain them in the absence of traditional face-to-face organizations, as the failure of multiple Arab Spring uprisings attests. Manjoo worries that truth itself is being sacrificed through the erosion of the news media institutions, which find it difficult to compete with peer-to-peer, un-edited and/or intentionally untruthful information disseminators.

Questions for reading: Contrast the older literature on organizations, exemplified by Perrow and Pool, to more recent writing focusing on digital networks, e.g. Gladwell, Manjoo and Shirky. What are the main distinctions between them? How are organizations different from networks? Does the new
supplant the old, or does it add to it? Do new media improve or diminish the prospects for democracy? If good politics and policy depend on truthful and timely information, what are the challenges new media present to democracy in this age of “truthiness”? 


**Session 11: Technology and Globalization: Post-materialism, Populism, or ... ?**

*Group B post Start Off Comments, Group A Response Comments*

Technology and globalization are intertwined as accelerated informatic capitalism. Castells describes the essence of the new network society, where the digital transformation of work and the ability to coordinate it globally undermines communities in profound ways, leading people to seek meaning not in their social relations, but in intensified search for identity, including fundamentalism.

At the same time, Inglehart and colleagues in the World Values Survey (WVS), find a “post-materialist” outlook emerges in countries as they grow richer. The values associated with post-materialism are the basis of much cultural conflict, sometimes seen as modernization; try out the WVS database yourself. Griswold’s perspective on technology and culture takes a more synthetic view, whereby cultures evolve in the context of globalization and technological developments.

Finally, a populist nationalist wind is picking up around the world, notably in the United States, England, France, Austria, India, China, Russia and elsewhere. Zakaria and his fellow *Foreign Affairs* authors make an early attempt to explain why this phenomenon has appeared, and what it means for the established post-WWII liberal democratic free-market consensus.

**Questions for reading:** What causes the kind of capitalism is Castells concerned about, and what is his biggest concern about it? Looking at Inglehart’s work on the WVS, what strikes you most about the relationship of values and politics: in his view, can democracy exist in poor countries? Why or why not? How does Griswold’s perspective compare to that of Castells and Inglehart? Finally, what accounts for the surge in nationalism and populism around the world? Is it consistent with liberal democracy, as supporters claim, or is it likely to be harmful? Why or why not?


Session 12: Controlling Technologies: Ethics, Risk and Democracy

Group A post Start Off Comments, Group B Response Comments

Thinking clearly about policy responses to technology and globalization challenges is the task of this session. We pick up the thread from our earlier discussion about understanding technologies, to one about controlling them. We want to reduce the likelihood that technologies will result in harm to, and make them more consistent with norms of democratic societies. Technological controversies suggest that the interests of technology designers and promoters are out of alignment with the interests of some parts of the public, but controversies can also provide the means for technology designers to incorporate feedback.

Five main ideas comprise the conceptual foundations of this week’s reading: risk, ethics and responsibility, political controversy, foresight, and anticipatory democratic governance. As you compose your thoughts about the reading for your Blackboard posting, aim to combine these ideas with a discussion of the cases we’ve already read about.

Questions for reading: Explain why people might not want to have their children vaccinated: do you know anyone who doesn’t support vaccination for family members? What does Giddens mean by the phrase “the new riskiness of risk”? How does the concept of risk exemplify modern capitalism, and why does Giddens think it is facing trouble today?

Jonas’ piece, one of the most important in this course, argues essentially that with great power comes great responsibility (Spiderman may have gotten this idea from Jonas). What does that mean for our thinking and decision-making about powerful new technologies?

Nelkin outlines the main features of technological controversies, of which there are many (not just those in her book). What does she mean when she says that scientific controversies are less about science itself and more about power and about the declining capacity of citizens to decide for themselves? What does Westrum think we can do to shape technologies to public purposes?

Session 13: Culture, Class and Economic Development I

Group B post Start Off Comments, Group B Response Comments

Anthropologists have been studying cultures for decades and have developed deep understanding of how they work by seeing them from the inside and from close up. Such approaches emphasize such concepts as roles, authority structures, formal and informal rules, beliefs, rituals, and the like.

These ethnographic accounts strive to make no value judgments, but some have criticized practitioners for bending too far backward to defend a culture even when it violates certain basic human rights, such as ritual murder, genital mutilation, slavery, and the like. The issue has long been debated in anthropological circles and is today still not resolved.

A recent strand of thinking (or rather a reworking of an older tradition) holds that culture may account for economic failure in many countries in Africa, Latin America and parts of Asia, or distinct national subcultures, such Appalachia or poor inner-city communities. Authors in this school want to explain, and to change, such cultural elements to improve economic and social wellbeing.

At the same time, an equally venerable tradition in comparative political studies holds that the United States possesses a number of truly exceptional characteristics, which together make the country both a beacon for economic growth and personal freedom, but also the locus of extraordinary crime, social mayhem, and inequality. In particular, pay attention to the seminal work of William Julius Wilson, one of the leading scholars of race and class in American sociology. The following readings provide a starting point for our own discussion of what culture is, and how and why it matters in public policy.

Questions for reading: Landes and Chang disagree about the role of culture. What are their arguments? Rothman provides an overview of the culture debates by looking at recent writing, such as Vance, on white working class, while Wilson tries to square different perspectives on group vs. individual behavior. How do their arguments apply to other groups, including those outside the United States? How do they make their cases? Which do you find more persuasive? What are the implications for policy of these arguments?


Session 14: Culture, Race, Class and Economic Development II

Group A post Start Off Comments, Group B Response Comments

In this week we will continue our discussion about the roles of culture, social structure, class, race, ethnicity and individual behavior in shaping economic and political life. This week's readings address U.S. examples, but the phenomena we’re looking into are common to all societies.

We’ve already read Vance’s account of growing up poor in rural Kentucky and small-town Ohio, and Venkatesh’s about African-American life in the housing projects in Chicago; here we’ll compare those views to Alexander’s searching inquiry into incarceration as a tool for social and political control in African-American communities, and to Hochschild’s account of her work in coastal Louisiana. These detailed ethnographic narratives give insight into the particularities of subcultures in the United States and the common challenges they face in a rapidly changing world. Finally, we’ll wrap up the session with a look at Lilla’s perspective on identity liberalism and see what it can offer us in an age of increasing political polarization.

Questions for reading: Revisit the discussion from last week, in the context of the readings for this week, and the data indicated in the links below. What do these data tell us about the situation of poor and middle-class people in America? How do Vance, Alexander, Hochschild, and Williams each view the situation of poor and working-class people, and the impediments to getting ahead? Though not explicitly mentioned, how might their prospects be affected by acceleration of digital society and economy? Are nationalism and populism responses? How will this affect liberal democratic politics? What does Lilla mean by “the end of identity liberalism”? Is there hope for a successful accommodation and reconciliation? Or is a more assertive national and populist politics likely in the future? Why or why not?

https://peacelawandjustice.files.wordpress.com/2013/12/newjimcrow-ch-1.pdf
See also interview with Bill Moyers, http://billmoyers.com/episode/incarceration-nation/

http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2016/08/trump-white-blue-collar-supporters


Lilla, Mark, “The end of identity liberalism,” *New York Times*, November 18, 2016,

Data: Examine these maps and charts to get a sense of the geography of poverty and mobility in the United States, both in cities and in rural areas

Economic Innovation Group, Distressed Communities Index, http://eig.org/dci (examine Zip code and cities maps)

Dews, Fred, “These maps from Raj Chetty show that where children grow up has a major impact on their lifetime earnings,” Brookings Report, June 2, 2015, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brookings-now/2015/06/02/these-maps-from-raj-chetty-show-that-where-children-grow-up-has-a-major-impact-on-their-lifetime-earnings/

Take-home final exam