

Communication Technology and Culture
COMM 339
Thursdays, 3:30 to 6:20 p.m.
Spring 2008

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Office: ASC G6 (Garden Level of West Wing)
Office Hours: Tuesdays, 3 to 5 p.m., & by appt.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course explores the complex interplay between communication, technology, and culture in human society from western civilization to the present. It examines philosophical and popular understandings of technology, considers how technological developments have altered human communication and culture, and discusses how cultural narratives of technology work to reinforce, alter, or challenge the presence of technology in our lives.

COURSE TEXTS

- Jennifer Daryl Slack & J. Macgregor Wise. (2005). *Culture + Technology: A Primer*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Steven Johnson. (1997). *Interface Culture: How New Technology Transforms the Way We Create and Communicate*. New York: Basic Books.
- Science fiction text (of your choosing)
- Additional readings, distributed weekly via course blog

RECOMMENDED SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS

- Purdue's "APA Formatting and Style Guide" (<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/560/01/>)

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

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| • Autoethnographic Essay | 15% |
| • Final Project | 30% |
| • Midterm Exam | 15% |
| • Final Exam | 20% |
| • Online and In-Class Participation | 20% |

You must complete all course requirements to pass the class.

GRADING SCALE

A	93 - 100	B-	80 - 82	D+	67 - 69
A-	90 - 92	C+	77 - 79	D	63 - 66
B+	87 - 89	C	73 - 76	D-	60 - 62
B	83 - 86	C-	70 - 72	F	0 - 59

COURSE POLICIES

- **Participation.** Your participation grade is based on your demonstrated engagement with the course materials, your instructor, and your classmates. The “A” participant contributes regularly to online and offline discussions and demonstrates a willingness to question his or her instructor and fellow students in a respectful manner. The “B” participant contributes regularly, but tends to disrupt, dominate, or monopolize the discussion instead of making space for other students to speak. The “C” participant rarely contributes or misses many discussions.
- **Laptops.** Personal computers and wireless internet are key parts of today’s technological culture, but they can also distract you from the material and dampen participation. You are welcome to bring your laptop to class, but I ask that you refrain from using it during lecture and discussion. Browsing the web, checking email, and text or instant messaging (via laptop or PDA) will have an adverse effect on your participation grade. If you have a disability or injury that prevents you from taking handwritten notes, please see me at the beginning of the term.
- **Attendance.** You are allowed 2 absences, no questions asked. After that, each absence may reduce your final course grade by 1/2 of a letter grade. Accruing more than 4 absences risks failure in the class. Arriving late or leaving early counts as 1/3 of an absence. I don’t differentiate between excused and unexcused absences, so it’s a good idea to save your 2 absences for actual illnesses, out-of-town events, or family emergencies.
- **Deadlines/Exams.** All assignments must be turned in at the beginning of class on the due date. If you are absent the day an assignment is due, you will receive a 10% deduction in assignment grade for each day that the assignment is not turned in. In rare cases, and for legitimate personal or medical reasons, I will grant extensions. All extensions must be requested 24 hours PRIOR to the due date. Makeup exams will only be given in the event of a documented family or medical emergency on the day of the exam.
- **Grades.** Questions about grades should be addressed in a timely manner. There is a 24-hour wait / cool-down period after receiving a grade, but then you should address concerns within the next 10 days. After this time period, grades are considered final. All grade challenges must be submitted in writing. Challenging a grade is equivalent to requesting a re-grade. The revised grade may be higher or lower than the original grade.
- **Academic Integrity.** All assignments must be the original work of the student and not used for any other course. Violation of this policy is an Academic Integrity violation.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY STATEMENT

The Annenberg School for Communication is committed to upholding the University’s Academic Integrity Code as detailed in the *SCampus* guide. It is the policy of the School of Communication to report all violations of the code. Any serious violations or pattern of violations of the Academic Integrity Code will result in the student’s expulsion from the Communication major or minor. The University presumes that you are familiar with its standards and policies. Should you be found to have committed a violation, ignorance of these standards and policies will not be accepted as an excuse. For further clarification, please refer to “University Student Conduct Code” and “Appendix A: Academic Dishonesty Sanction Guidelines” in the *SCampus* guide.

ADA COMPLIANCE STATEMENT

Any student requesting academic accommodation based on a disability is required to register with Disability Services and Programs (DSP) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from DSP. Please be sure the letter is delivered to your instructor (or TA) as early in the semester as possible. Directions are available at http://sait.usc.edu/academicsupport/centerprograms/dsp/home_index.html.

PREVIEW OF THE COURSE

- **Autoethnographic Essay.** This assignment will hone your observation skills and ability to apply theories from the course to your own engagement with technological culture. For this assignment, you will be asked to log all the communication technologies you use for one week. Using this record as evidence, and concepts from the Slack & Wise textbook as a theoretical framework, you will write a 4 to 5-page essay discussing the current impact of technology on your life. This essay should consider both the positive and negative aspects of living in an increasingly technological culture. It should also consider how your personal experience with and feelings toward communication technologies have been shaped by broader cultural narratives regarding technology. Your log should be combined with the accompanying essay in one Word document, and turned in via e-mail.
- **Final Project.** This multi-media project uses science fiction as an entry point into important social debates and recurring cultural anxieties over the influence of technology on human society. Using a science fiction text of your choice, you will research the historical context, analyze the relationship between technology and culture established by the narrative, and apply the lessons learned from this analysis to a current debate or anxiety over technology. You can choose either a novel or short story for this project; the only requirement is that the text falls into the science fiction genre. I would recommend selecting a short novel or long short story, as a big novel will take you too long to read and a brief story may not contain enough material to produce a substantive criticism. Your selection is due at the beginning of our third class. Your submission should include bibliographic information on the text selected and a one-paragraph justification of your selection. Your final project will contain text, images, and audio or video clips. Each student will upload his or her project to the course blog.
- **Midterm Exam.** The midterm exam will cover all of the chapters assigned from *Culture + Technology: A Primer*, plus the additional readings assigned in the first eight weeks of the semester. The midterm exam will consist of short answer and essay questions. It is worth 15% of your final course grade.
- **Final Exam.** The final is cumulative and similar in format to the midterm. It is worth 20% of your final grade.
- **Online Participation.** We will be using the course blog (see instructor for URL) to discuss both the course readings and contemporary debates over technology and culture. You are responsible for answering at least one of the discussion questions posted each week. During your assigned week, you are responsible for posting a discussion question of your own. Good discussion questions reflect a thorough understanding of the reading selected and seek answers that provide both examples and textual evidence. Avoid overly simplistic questions that prompt regurgitation (i.e., "What did Author X say about Phenomenon Z?"). Cite key passages and write detailed questions instead. Discussion questions must be posted (via blog entry) by 12 p.m. on the Tuesday before class. Answers must be posted (via comment function) by 12 p.m. on the day of class. Your participation online is worth half of your total participation grade, or 10% of your final course grade.
- **In-Class Participation.** You are expected to complete the assigned readings before class and come prepared to discuss them. Be ready to answer questions, volunteer opinions, and find textual evidence to support your point (in other words, bring your textbooks and readings to each class). Your participation in the classroom is worth half of your total participation grade, or 10% of your final course grade.

COURSE SCHEDULE

Week 1 – January 17 – Technology in Everyday Life

Introduction to the Course

Investigating the Technological Culture of USC (Group Project)

Week 2 – January 24 – Key Terms and a Key Text

“Culture is Ordinary” – Williams (1989) [online]

“From Culture and Technology to Technological Culture” – Slack & Wise (2005)

“Defining Technology” – Slack & Wise (2005)

“The Idea of ‘Technology’ and Postmodern Pessimism” – Marx (1998) [online]

Week 3 – January 31 – Utopic and Dystopic Visions of Technological Culture

“Science Fictions” – Murphie & Potts (2003) [online]

Excerpt from *Frankenstein* – Shelley (1818) [online]

Excerpt from *Neuromancer* – Gibson (1984) [online]

“Why The Future Doesn’t Need Us” – Joy (2000) [online]

Due: SF Text Selection

Week 4 – February 7 – Accepting Technology

“Progress” – Slack & Wise (2005)

“Convenience” – Slack & Wise (2005)

“Determinism” – Slack & Wise (2005)

“Control” – Slack & Wise (2005)

Week 5 – February 14 – Rejecting Technology

“Luddism” – Slack & Wise (2005)

“Appropriate Technology” – Slack & Wise (2005)

“The Unabomber” – Slack & Wise (2005)

Excerpts from *Industrial Society and Its Future* – Kaczynski (1995) [online]

Due: Autoethnographic Criticism

Week 6 – February 21 – Theorizing Technology: Determinism vs. Agency

“The Medium is the Message” – McLuhan (1995) [online]

“Does Technology Control Us?” – Nye (2006) [online]

“Causality” – Slack & Wise (2005)

“Agency” – Slack & Wise (2005)

Week 7 – February 28 – Identity in a Technological Age

“Identity Matters” – Slack & Wise (2005)

“Identity in the Age of the Internet” – Turkle (1995) [online]

“Challenging Identity” (read to bottom of p. 168) – Slack & Wise (2005)

Week 8 – March 6 – Politicizing Technology

“Politics” – Slack & Wise (2005)

“Do Artifacts Have Politics?” – Winner (1985) [online]

“Do Politics Have Artifacts?” – Joerges (1999) [online]

Week 9 – March 13

Midterm Exam

Week 10 – March 20

Spring Break

Week 11 – March 27 – Interface Culture

Interface Culture: How New Technology Transforms the Way We Create & Communicate – Johnson (1997)

Week 12 – April 3 – Traditional Media Technologies and Culture

Excerpts from *Listening: Radio and the American Imagination* – Douglas (2004) [online]

Excerpts from *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* – Williams (2003) [online]

Week 13 – April 10 – New Media Technologies

“Lessons from the History of the Internet” – Castells (2002) [online]

“The Culture of the Internet” – Castells (2002) [online]

Week 14 – April 17 – New Media Culture

“The Significance of Social Software” – Boyd (2007) [online]

“Worldwide Wikimania” – Dodson (2005) [online]

“Heavy Metal Umlaut: The Movie” – Udell [found at: <http://weblog.infoworld.com/udell/gems/umlaut.html>]

Week 15 – April 24 – Humanizing Technology / Technologizing Humanity

“Challenging Identity” (read pages 168 to 172) – Slack & Wise (2005)

“Cyborgs, the Body, Information, and Technology” – Murphie & Potts (2003) [online]

“Computers as Universal Machines” & “How Artificial is Intelligence?” – Murphie & Potts (2003) [online]

“Geneticists in Society, Society in Genetics” – Beckwith (2002) [online]

Week 16 – May 1

Final Exam

Final Project due by 2 p.m. on Tuesday, May 13