

**Technology & Society: SOC 415**  
**Spring 2013**  
**Instructor: Holly Sevier**

Technology is all around us, from the chips in our dogs to the preservatives in our food; technology helps shape our social worlds, and we help shape our technologies. But while technology can be a force for good, the relationship between technology and society can pose some serious ethical dilemmas. This course will present a number of contemporary ethical issues related to technology's role in our society, representing an opportunity to critically examine the interplay between technology and society while developing skills for identifying and deliberating upon contemporary ethical issues, as well as making ethically determined judgments. The readings and multimedia material presented to the class will help us form questions about the many roles technology plays in our lives, provide a theoretical sociological background for our ideas, and give us a springboard for developing effective written and oral communication skills.

This course is offered with a Contemporary Ethical Issues (E) Focus designation and as such active participation in a number of ethical deliberations is required.

**Goals of Class:**

The goals of this class are two-fold:

- 1) To develop the critical perspectives and theoretical tools relevant to interpreting and analyzing the role of technology in society; and,
- 2) To develop essential skills for identifying, deliberating upon, and making ethically determined judgments on contemporary ethical issues related to technology.

In addition to the above goals, there are four program-level learning goals that we can strive to achieve. In brief, these are:

- 1) Ability to conceptualize sociological ideas and apply theory to the topic at hand.
- 2) Ability to collect and report relevant data, findings, or information.
- 3) Ability to analyze and interpret data, findings, or information.
- 4) Ability to write and present clearly and effectively.

**Homework:**

A regular reading routine is essential for this class. Each week we will have a number of small but engaging readings and you will need to make brief notes in order to be prepared for class discussions. Reading notes on the highlighted readings will need to be turned in on time as per the syllabus. Reading notes may be prepared and handed in on other readings/multimedia for extra credit. In addition, you will need to submit six ethical dilemma assignments (1-2 pages each) and the two term essays (5 pages each) in a timely fashion. While the amount of writing is small, the expectation is that work will be of a high standard, with points deducted for absent, late, or sub-par work.

**Textbook for Course:** Society and Technological Change, 6th Edition, by Rudi Volti.  
ISBN-10: 1429221216. Worth Publishers, published March, 2009.

### **Section 1 (January 8<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>)**

**1/08** Syllabus and Introductions. Concepts for discussion: Why study technology and society? An introduction to ethics and ethical decision making.

**1/10** Homework: How to recognize an ethical dilemma. How to take notes from readings. From the Wheel to the Smart Bomb: Promise and Fear in a New Technological Future.

**1/15** Introduction to Essay 1. Using SurveyMonkey to create online surveys. Reading Notes #1 Due.

**1/17** The Internet will Set us Free (Part I). The Technological Panopticon. Search engines and privacy issues. Digital surveillance society. Media: *How a Geek Changed the World*, 2008.

### **Section 2: *World Wide Wonderful* (January 22<sup>nd</sup>, 24<sup>th</sup>, 29<sup>th</sup>, 31<sup>st</sup>)**

**1/22** Homework: Discuss time management. The Internet will Set us Free (Part II). From Bombs to Boobs: Development and Growth of a New Technical Paradigm. Ethical dilemma #1 Due: civil liberties in a world of perpetual surveillance.

**1/24** Homework: Rules for ethical debate, how to overcome public speaking anxiety. Media: *PBS Frontline: Growing up Online*.

**1/29** The Internet will Set us Free (Part III). Stratification of society based on unequal access to technology on a local and global scale. Review of Census Bureau data. Reading Notes #2 Due.

**1/31** **Idea Honing for Essay 1.** Homework: Review in-text citation conventions and how to construct a bibliography. Ethical dilemma #2 Due: children's access to objectionable material on the Internet.

### **Section 3: *Work & Communications* (February 5<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>)**

**2/05** Group debate on Internet topics (II).

**2/07** Homework: Review time management. Rise of the Not-Work Society. The electronic sweatshop and cyberloafing.

**2/12** Technological Determinism or Human Agency? The smartphone that changes lives. Notions of agency in human appropriation of technology. Reading Notes #3 Due.

**2/14** The Medium is the Message: the technology of communications. Text messaging for conversation avoidance. Ethical dilemma #3 Due: Worker exploitation in a digital world.

### **Section 4: *War and Weaponry* (February 19<sup>th</sup>, 21<sup>st</sup>, 26<sup>th</sup>, 28<sup>th</sup>)**

**2/19** Homework: review of credible online sources. Trojan Horse: the Technology of War. Media: *PBS Ground War: Warrior Weapons*. **Essay 1 Due.**

**2/21** Command and Control: towards a Centralized Military. Ethical decision-making in war.

**2/26** Media: *The Fog of War - Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara* (2003). Reading Notes #4 Due.

**2/28** Group debate on technology of war. Ethical dilemma #4 Due: smart bombs and collateral damage.

### **Section 5: *Engineering Life & Food* (March 5<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>)**

**3/05** Creating Life: the Ethics of Biotechnology (I). Stem cells and human cloning. Media: *Technocalyps: Part I: Trans-Human* (2006).

**3/07** Creating Life: the Ethics of Biotechnology (II). Genetic testing and insurance companies. Cyborgs and bio-engineered humans. Ethical dilemma #5 Due: performance-enhancing drugs and cheating. Group debate on performance-enhancing drugs and cheating.

**3/12** I Can't Believe it's Not . . . Entirely Made of Chemicals: the Technology of Food. Reading Notes #5 Due.

**3/14** Food Technology continued. Media: *Food, Inc.* (2008).

**Section 6: The Environment . . . and Beyond. (March 19<sup>th</sup>, 21<sup>st</sup>, April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>)**

- 3/19 Lasting impacts from the Industrial Revolution. **New Words Due.** Media: *Cool It* (2010).  
3/21 **Idea Honing for Essay 2.** Housework: review of ASA rules for correct citation.  
4/02 Group debate on technology and the environment. Reading Notes #6 Due.  
4/04 Technology in Popular Culture.  
4/09 Media: *The Island* (2005).

**Section 7 (April 16<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, 23<sup>rd</sup>, 25<sup>th</sup>, 30<sup>th</sup>)**

- 4/16 Group debate on student-chosen technology topics.  
4/18 **Essay 2 Due.** Media: *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* (2011).  
4/23 Ethical dilemma #6 Due: dirty fuels and developing countries.  
4/25 Focus Group activity.  
4/30 Summary of class and pot-luck.

**Ethical Issue Exercises**

There are six ethical dilemmas that we will be studying related to technology and society. We will approach each issue by first independently reading material relevant to the topic (or watching relevant visual media) and making notes; by going over readings/media in class; and by having a discussion about each issue using a synthesis of approaches (utilitarian, justice, common good, for example). You will then be required to write a 1-2 page summary of each issue in which you apply your own framework for ethical deliberation, and come to an ethical judgment. Links to readings can be found on the class webspace.

**Ethical dilemma #1: civil liberties in a world of perpetual surveillance.** Reading: *The Electronic Sweatshop* by Barbara Garson. Chapter 8: “Electronic Surveillance.”

**Ethical dilemma #2: children's access to objectionable material on the Internet.** Documentary: *Frontline: Growing Up Online*. Reading: *Internet Blocking* by Joseph Westfall.

**Ethical dilemma #3: worker exploitation in a digital world** Reading 1: *An Exploration of The Effect of Digital Technology on Workers' Health and Relationships* by Charles F. Piazza. Reading 2: Volti, *Society and Technological Change*. Ch10: “Technological Change and Life on the Job.”

**Ethical dilemma #4: smart bombs and collateral damage.** Readings: *The Electronic Sweatshop* by Barbara Garson. Chapter 10: Command and Control; Volti, *Society and Technological Change*. Chapter 14: How New Weapons Emerge—And How They may be Contained.

**Ethical dilemma #5: performance-enhancing drugs and cheating.** Reading: *A Nation of Cheaters* By Kirk O. Hanson.

**Ethical dilemma #6: genetically modified food and Earth's ecosystem.** Reading: *Should we become a GM Nation?* Society, Religion and Technology Project Report to [U.K.] 2004 General Assembly.

## Grading

As this class gives you the opportunity to earn a Contemporary Ethical Issues focus, you will be expected to participate in in-class ethical deliberations. For each ethical issue that we will be studying you will also be required to submit a 1-2 page summary, including your own ethical deliberation and judgment

5% of your grade will be based on attendance. Showing up to class is key to success. A roster will be available at the beginning of class for you to sign. 1-2 absences are excusable. 3-5 absences you will lose 1%. >5 absences you will lose 2.5% and you will need to meet with me. >10 absences and you **will fail**.

5% of your grade will be based on your ability to learn, accurately spell, and fit into speech 10 new college-level terms or words. As this is based on your own personal learning curve, you need to find the words yourselves from within the weekly assigned readings or other appropriate sources. Words need to be posted on the website under the *New Words* tab so we can discuss them if necessary. There is no shame in not knowing a word or term. This is a place of learning.

15% of your grade will be for reading notes which are due at the beginning of class as per the dates on the syllabus. Notes on additional readings may be submitted for extra credit. Blank reading notes sheets can be downloaded from the class webspace or picked up in class.

5% of your grade will be for participation in class discussions and debates. The best way to participate in class is to read the assigned readings ahead of time and come prepared with questions and ideas to discuss. The class will be a welcome place to discuss ideas, make empirical observations, debate issues, and voice your dissent, all while maintaining a respectful and professional demeanor.

There will be two short essays due during the semester, each five pages long, each worth 20% of your grade. You will be docked half a grade for each day the paper is late. Early submissions are welcome and present an opportunity for you to correct your work for a higher grade.

30% of your grade will be based on the six ethical deliberation assignments in which you will be expected to summarize each issue, apply your own framework for ethical deliberation, and come to an ethical judgment. Again, you will be docked half a grade for each day the paper is late.

**Lame Excuses:** college is no place for insubstantial or poorly documented absences, tardy assignment submissions, sub-par work that fails to improve over the course of the semester, or a poor attendance record.

**Use of technology in the classroom:** Cellphones may be left in your bags on stealth mode or placed on the table FACE DOWN. Other than during designated periods of online research, random web surfing is not permitted while the class is in session. Notes must be taken at every lecture. For this to be possible you will need paper and a pen on the table in front of you.