

Wired Worlds: The Reading Component

I chose the topic for this seminar because I believe that—of all the issues that combine science and society—the question of how digital technology is affecting our future is one of the most important issues of our age. The changes that the Internet, the web, cell phones, social networks, and the other technologies of the Digital Age have been both rapid and profound. For the most part, the changes are clearly to the good. At the same time, every technological advance brings with it unintended consequences. As we proceed through this technological revolution, it is important to try to understand the full range of these consequences—both positive and negative—so that we are in a better position to guide the world through these rapidly changing times.

One of the important reasons to study Science, Technology, and Society is to learn methodologies and disciplinary strategies that will enable you to analyze technologically driven social change of this sort. What I intend to do with the reading component of the seminar is examine several specific aspects of the digital revolution that have led some writers and public intellectuals to question, at least in part, our collective rush to adopt these new technologies.

In the weeks devoted to the reading component of STS 200, I want to consider the following issues:

- Week 1. Enumeration of the issues.* In this class, our goal is to consider several possible downsides to the digital revolution and then brainstorm about others. The point of this session is to generate topics that may make it possible for you to write a senior paper that has synergy with the reading component of the course.
- Week 3. Reactions to Bauerlein.* This session comes immediately after you have completed your reaction papers (described in more detail in Handout #5) in which you refute some aspect of Mark Bauerlein's book in which he muses on (as taken from his subtitle) "how the Digital Age stupefies young Americans and jeopardizes our future." My guess is that your arguments will provide excellent fodder for a lively discussion.
- Week 4. Privacy, security, and freedom.* In this class, we'll try to examine critically the oft-repeated claim that the proliferation of digital technology inevitably enhances individual freedom. While it is certainly the case that the Internet and cell phones have made it possible, for example, to get more information out of repressive societies such as Iran and China, that same technology can provide new methods for social control.
- Week 6. Economic issues, intellectual property, the "tragedy of the commons."* In this session, I want to consider various aspects of the change in economic realities that the Digital Age has created. Of these, the most important is the change in the way creative work is compensated in an environment where people expect content to be free. In this Sunday's *New York Times*, for example, Bono identifies the intellectual-property problem as one of the top-ten issues for the next decade, noting that "a decade's worth of music file-sharing and swiping has made clear that the people that it hurts are the creators—in this case, the young, fledgling songwriters who can't live off ticket and T-shirt sales like the least sympathetic among us." The problems in this area are exacerbated because individual incentives do not always align with the collective good,

creating a form of Garrett Hardin’s “tragedy of the commons” problem. Most of us enjoy having a local bookstore/cafe but are unwilling to give up the convenience of ordering books online from Amazon. These desires may not be mutually compatible.

Week 7. The future of journalism. One of the industries that has been hurt most dramatically by the rise of digital technology has been the traditional media. Gathering news is expensive, and newspapers have heretofore been able to finance that operation through advertising. Today, however, the advertising revenue goes primarily to concentrators like Google who link to the various news sites. This structure is clearly unsustainable. For this class, we will be joined by several of this year’s Knight Fellows, who have a very strong personal interest in the issue.

Week 9. Book reports. This session comes immediately after you have completed your book reports and consists of mini-presentations (10 minutes each) of the key ideas in both the book and your analysis.

Week 10. Digital futures. During Dead Week, your primary focus must be completing your Senior Paper. To give you as much time for that as possible, the reading session that week will be an informal and free-ranging discussion of the future of the digital revolution and what conclusions we have come to over the course of the quarter.

Assignments

The reading component of the course has only two assignments, given that most of your time needs to be devoted to the completion of your senior paper. Those assignments are:

1. A reaction paper to Mark Bauerlein’s book in which you pick a particular aspect of his criticism and then muster as much evidence as you can to refute it. This assignment is described in more detail in Handout #5.
2. A book report on one of the other recent commentaries on the digital revolution. A set of possible books appears later in this handout.

Possible readings for your book review

You are free to choose any book that looks at the digital revolution for your book review, but the following books are ones that I considered when I was designing the reading list for the seminar:

1. Dinty Moore, *The Emperor’s Virtual Clothes* (1995)
2. Nicholas Negroponte, *Being Digital* (1995)
3. Esther Dyson, *Release 2.0: A Design for Living in the Digital Age* (1997)
4. Mark Stefik, *The Internet Edge* (1999)
5. Larry Lessig, *The Future of Ideas* (2001)
6. David Weinberger, *Small Pieces Loosely Joined* (2002)
7. Jack Goldsmith and Tim Wu, *Who Controls the Internet?* (2006)
8. Jarice Hanson, *24/7* (2007)
9. Andrew Keen, *The Cult of the Amateur* (2007)
10. Clay Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody* (2008)
11. Jonathan Zittrain, *The Future of the Internet—And How to Stop It* (2008)
12. Clara Shih, *The Facebook Era* (2009)