John Jay College of Criminal Justice · Spring 2025
Department of Interdisciplinary Studies

Thursdays 8:10 am - 10:40 am | NB 1.83
Thursdays 3:05 pm - 5:35 pm | NB 1.101

ISP 255: Technology and Culture

Professor Sarah Meister (she/they)	**Professor Silvana (Bibi) Calderaro (she/her)**
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****Please copy both professors when you email us.****

Land & Territory Acknowledgement

The meeting place of John Jay College campus on which the City University of New York operates has been a site of human activity for thousands of years. It is on the shared lands and waters of the Lenape, Haudenosaunee Nations and the Ramapo of the *Mahicantuck* River estuary and valley. This area is home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island and around the world. We are grateful to have the opportunity to work with this community-territory and care for this land.

COURSE DESCRIPTION: What is technology and can it be separated from being human? Many people claim humans have used technology for over 100,000 years to shape our world, and in turn we have been shaped by the technologies we have chosen, developed, and come to rely upon, from the flint and the ax, to the jet plane and the cell-phone, and beyond. Drawing on texts from the sciences, the humanities, and the social sciences, this interdisciplinary course will explore and examine the various ways technology and technological progress have molded our culture, our way of thinking, and our imagination--in other words, how we navigate our world and the many ways we experience ourselves.

We will reflect on readings and discussions to re-evaluate how our patterns of behavior may be shaped by the ease of an app, the comfort of data, and the feeling of connection to something

bigger. Do we install Instagram and tailor it to our needs, or does it install itself in our lives, and adapt to us? How quickly can an individual's habits be influenced by technology without the individual being aware? Does technology replace human connection, or enhance it? How does our use of technology implicate us in both just and unjust causes?

COURSE GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

In this course we will:

- Read, discuss, and compare/contrast differing perspectives on technology and culture in a variety of science, social science, and humanities texts
- Orally and in writing, debate, and evaluate the merits of arguments about the positive or negative effects of technological progress
- Through discussions, debates, class presentations, and written assignments, use evidence from their reading and research to devise and support their own arguments about the science that drives technological change
- In their reading, written work and in-class discussions, classify and appraise a range of topics
- Define, compare/contrast, and defend/criticize the ethical and moral issues surrounding the impact of technology on the world.
- Examine local, national, and global decision-making as it relates to the discovery of new scientific principles and compare/contrast with earlier events and examples.
- Be active readers, speakers, listeners and writers

COURSE MATERIALS AND HOW TO FIND THEM

The syllabus, schedule, and weekly folders are available on the course brightspace site. All course materials will be accessible through the weekly folders, either in attached pdfs or links to online sources.

We believe in following the students' interests, curiosity, and preferences as we move through the semester. We may make adjustments to the original course schedule. The readings and assignments in the weekly folders will be the most accurate information.

ASSIGNMENTS All assignments should reflect serious thought and critical engagement with the issues raised in the assigned materials. Most assignments will be submitted on brightspace.

In Class Writing Prompts | 20 Points Total | Each week in class, you will be asked to respond to a short writing prompt related to the week's materials and topics. These must be completed in class, and cannot be made up if you are absent.

"How We Got to Now" Group Presentations | 15 Points | With a group of fellow students, you will be asked to read and teach the rest of the class about one chapter from the book How We Got to Now. This will require you to read and take notes on your group's whole chapter,

meet with your group, and prepare a creative presentation to share with the class. Your assigned chapter, groupmates, and more details about the assignment will be provided in class.

"How We Got to Now" Individual Paper | 15 Points | This paper is a combination of:

- a reflection of the group collaboration from your presentation (see above)
- an individual critical interpretation of the whole chapter you are presenting on.

Guiding questions will be posted on brightspace.

Final Project and Presentation | 25 Points | For your final project, you will do an in-depth project on a particular technology. You'll have the choice to do a creative project or research paper. This project will have both a written component and an in-class presentation. You'll receive more details in class.

GRADING

Attendance and Participation (in-class and online)	25 pts
In-Class Writing Prompts (10 weeks)	20 pts
"How We Got to Now" Group Presentation	15 pts
"How We Got to Now" Individual Paper	15 pts
Final Project and Presentation	25 pts
Total:	**100 points**

CUNY Grading Criteria

A, A-	90-100 pts	Excellent
B+	86-89 pts	Very Good
B, B-	80-85 pts	Good
C+, C, C-	70-79 pts	Satisfactory
D+, D, D-	60-69 pts	Poor
F	< 60 pts	Fail

COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND POLICIES

College-Wide Policies:

Disability Accommodations: We operate under the assumption that we all learn in different ways. Ensuring equal access with these differences in mind is important to us in creating a classroom community that works for everyone. Even if you do not have a formally diagnosed disability, we welcome you to talk with us in class and outside of it about what makes you most engaged as a learner- and what sorts of approaches aren't working as well as they could. If you do have a diagnosed disability and are registered with the Office of Accessibility Services to receive accommodations, you are welcome to set up a meeting with us at the beginning of the

semester so that we can discuss what will work best for you in our class (the office will notify us of your accommodations, but not of your specific situation or needs), although this is optional. If you do not currently have ADA accommodations and think you might be eligible for them, please contact the Office of Accessibility Services.

Academic Integrity and Plagiarism: Plagiarism is the presentation of somebody else's ideas as your own; this includes material downloaded from the internet without citation. Plagiarism and cheating are extremely serious violations of academic behavior. In all written work, you must clearly indicate (using quotation marks and citations) when you are quoting or paraphrasing. Plagiarism and cheating will result in a final course grade of D- and/or disciplinary action. Unless specifically authorized by the instructor, the use of artificial intelligence technology to generate coursework is a violation of the CUNY/College Policy on Academic Integrity, and constitutes both cheating and plagiarism. Submitting work generated by someone or something other than yourself as if it were your own is cheating. Presenting ideas, concepts, words etc. without providing appropriate credit to your sources is plagiarism. If you are unsure of what constitutes a violation of academic integrity, please see John Jay's official policy on academic integrity here.

Writing Support: Students are strongly encouraged to consult a writing tutor for support with any (or all) written assignments. Tutors in the John Jay Writing Center are good; make an appointment to see someone at a convenient time for you. To make an appointment, visit the Writing Center (room 1.68NB) or call 212-237-8569.

Class Policies and Norms:

***Class Participation*:** Class sessions will be run as discussions, not lectures, and they will include interactive, on-your-feet activities. Be a responsible contributor to the course by coming to class on time and prepared, having done the readings, ready to ask questions, discuss, debate, and participate in interactive activities with your fellow students and professors. The quality of your class participation will affect your final grade. A successful active learning experience requires the full presence and active participation of every member of the class (including the faculty!).

***Attendance and Lateness*:** As you can imagine, it's quite hard to pass this class without solid attendance. Class participation and in-class assignments make up a substantial part of your grade, so please be present and on time for class. If you have an ongoing issue that affects your attendance or punctuality, please speak to us as soon as possible.

COVID and Illness Policies: While there are no longer official college guidelines on COVID testing and masking, the virus (and other contagious illnesses) are still here. If you are sick (COVID or otherwise), please stay home. If you have been exposed to COVID (or another contagious illness) or have any symptoms (runny nose, sneezing, coughing, sore throat, etc.),

please wear a mask to class. You are also welcome to wear a mask at any time for any reason. Masks will always be available in class. (Instructors will also abide by this policy).

Devices: You may use your tablet, laptop, or phone to access materials in class, but we ask that you turn off any notifications, email, text, or other potential distractions. A successful active learning experience requires the full presence and active participation of every member of the class (including the faculty!).

In today's world we are almost all, to some extent, addicted to social media. We know from personal experience that the urge to check twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, TikTok, etc. can be hard to resist. But being present in class (and in life more generally) is about a lot more than simply being physically present. Because we want to encourage all of us to be more intentional about where we are, if you are not 'present' in class because you are on your phone, we will not mark you present. (**If you have a disability that requires engagement with your phone that is different, just let us know at the beginning of the semester so we know to accommodate you.) If you need to urgently respond to a call or text someone back, feel free to leave the class for a minute and come back in when you're done. We are all adults and we trust you to decide when you need to leave and reenter the class, you don't need to ask.

If you do not have some form of reliable equipment (laptop, desktop, etc) on which you can read, watch, look at, or otherwise engage with the course materials and assignments, please contact the DoIT Helpdesk at helpdesk@jjay.cuny.edu.

Artificial Intelligence: The use of ChatGPT or any other AI platform like Grammarly or tools to generate either ideas or written content, or to produce any other material is **prohibited** in this course. This policy is for a number of reasons:

- This class is designed to improve your writing skills; if you're not writing, you're not improving.
- We want to engage with *your* ideas, not ones that have been generated by an AI tool. If the ideas aren't coming from you, we can't have a dialogue with you about what you really think. That's a key part of the learning experience.
- Using AI opens up academic honesty issues, both because it raises the question of whether the work is "your" work, and also because tools like ChatGPT rely on taking uncredited material from scholars and writers.
- Using AI does not produce reliably accurate results. Sometimes, it even produces fake sources from books, journals, and magazines that don't exist(!).
- ChatGPT has serious negative environmental impacts, particularly in relation to water usage. For more info, see here, here, and here.
- OpenAI has exploited workers from the global south, especially workers in prisons and refugee camps, and workers in Kenya, the Philippines, Colombia, and elsewhere. For more info, see here, here, here, and here.

To put it more bluntly: there are many people in the world who would love to be in your position-getting to be a student at a major university, especially in a relatively small class like this one. Education like this is not available to everyone. If you choose to spend this opportunity to learn by trying to avoid doing the work and learning through the use of AI tools, you are only cheating yourself *and* contributing to environmental harms and labor exploitation in the process. For these reasons, the use of ChatGPT or any other AI tools is not a part of this classroom community, no exceptions.

This class (and many of your classes at John Jay) is about fighting for *justice*. Schools and classrooms are reflections of the world, including the many injustices that permeate our everyday lives. This class aims to push back against those norms in the content we learn, but also in the way we learn and relate to each other. Let's aim to make this classroom and community more like the world we want to see out there, too.

If we find AI usage, you will receive an F on the assignment. You may have the opportunity to rewrite the paper for partial credit along with an additional written reflection (details will be provided by the instructors). Multiple uses of AI may be reported to the college and may result in failing the class or other disciplinary consequences.

Course Content: This course will engage with materials that cover and depict sensitive, challenging, and potentially uncomfortable, but real, concepts and experiences. Racism, sexual violence, gender violence, and more. We will work together as a classroom community to engage with these difficult topics sensitively and with respect to the diverse experiences of everyone in the room. Professors will aim to give specific content warnings about materials as necessary. Please come speak to us or email us if you have concerns about specific materials or issues we will cover.

If you feel overwhelmed at any point during class discussion you are welcome to step out of the class momentarily (just let us know what happened so we don't mark you absent), and if a particular day's materials are difficult for you to engage with feel free to get in touch with us and we can discuss the possibility of assigning you an alternative text. You are also welcome to bring up difficult emotions you had in response to the texts during class discussion, as these are an inevitable part of learning about injustice and therefore relevant to the topic.

If at any point the content of the course feels overwhelming to you, you are encouraged to talk to someone. You can reach out to us, and/or you can seek support through John Jay's free student counseling center, by calling 212-237-8111, visiting this website or walking in to L.68.00 NB.

What Else?? If you have any difficulties with the course—big or small—please consult with us. If you don't feel comfortable talking with us, visit our department coordinator, Prof. Adriana Perez (aperez@jjay.cuny.edu) or the chair, Prof. Susannah Crowder (scrowder@jjay.cuny.edu). Please remember, we in ISP are here to support your success.

TENTATIVE COURSE CALENDAR

The calendar is subject to change over the course of the semester as we learn what we find most compelling and engaging and as topics relevant to technology in the news become available. The latest and most accurate readings and assignments will be in the weekly folders on brightspace. Items that do not appear as links will be available in the folders as pdfs.

Week 1 | Thursday January 30 | Introduction: What is Technology?

Week 2 | Thursday February 6 | Technology Foundations (Part 1)

Read:

- Johnson, Introduction from *How We Got to Now* [on brightspace]
- Hall, Excerpts from *Encoding/Decoding* [on brightspace]

Week 3 | Thursday February 13 | Technology Foundations (Part 2)

- Read: Hornborg, Excerpts from *The Political Ecology of the Technocene* (p. 59-65) *[on brightspace]*

Week 4 | Thursday February 20 | Artificial Intelligence Part 1: Hidden Labor and Planetary Footprint

Read:

- Foster, The Machine Stops [on brightspace]
- Artificial Intelligence Technology Behind ChatGPT was Built in Iowa — With a Lot of Water
- A Bottle of Water Per Email: the Hidden Environmental Costs of Using AI Chatbots
- Exclusive: OpenAI Used Kenyan Workers on Less Than $2 Per Hour to Make ChatGPT Less Toxic
- Long hours and low wages: the human labour powering AI's development
- The Exploited Labor Behind Artificial Intelligence

Week 5 | Thursday February 27 | Artificial Intelligence Part 2: The Product

- Due: AI Research and Writing/Research Assignment

****Our class will not meet on Thursday March 6. All of John Jay will follow a Wednesday schedule that day.**

Week 6 | Thursday March 13 | Technology and Race

- Read: Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression*, Chapter: Searching for Black girls (p. 64-109) *[on brightspace]*

- Listen: Code Switch Podcast, "How Does a Computer Discriminate?" (33 mins)

Week 7 | Thursday March 20 | Technology and Gender

Read:

- Criado Perez, The Deadly Truth About a World Built for Men
- Guo, Congress Prods Biden Administration on Female Crash Dummies
- D'Ignazio & Klein, Chapter 7 "Show Your Work" from *Data Feminism* (p. 173-202) *[on brightspace]*

Week 8 | Thursday March 27 | How We Got to Now Group Presentations

- Due In Class: How We Got to Now Group Presentations

Week 9 | Thursday April 3 | Technology and Love

Listen:

- It's Been a Minute Podcast, The Surprising Case for AI Boyfriends (30 mins)
- Love and War Podcast, How Tinder Changed Everything (37 mins)

Week 10 | Thursday April 10 | Technology and Food

Watch:

- Sean Sherman, Sean Sherman at World of Flavors (26 mins)
- Video on Regenerative Culture
- Something about China (Bibi)

APRIL 17 | NO CLASS: Spring Break

Week 11 | Thursday April 24 | Technology as Resistance & as a Tool to Imagine New Worlds

In Class: Field Trip

Read:

- Bushwick, *How scientists are using AI to talk to animals*
- Dhanesha, *How Tech is helping us talk to animals*
- Bromley, *How to use AI to Talk to Whales – and Save Life on Earth*
- *D'Ignazio & Klein, Data Feminism Conclusion (p. 203-208) [on brightspace]*
- *Benjamin, Racism After Technology, Chapter 5: Retooling Solidarity, Reimagining Justice [on brightspace]*

Week 12 | Thursday May 1 | Technology and Morality

- TBD Based on Current Events

Week 13 | Thursday May 8 | Final Project Workshop

Week 14 | Thursday May 16 | Final Project Presentations

- Due Wednesday May 15 at 11:59 pm: Final Assignment
- Due In Class: Final Presentations