



Spring 2023

PSCI 4991

Democracy and Technology: A Critical and Historical Evaluation

Course Instructor:

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Office Hours: PSCI, office 340, By Appointment

Course Scope:

The relationship between democracy and technology, contentious since the advent of television, has become a matter of urgent political debate. The goal of this seminar is to place the relationship between the two into its historical and theoretical context. We will examine how a regime based on communication (democracy) has only become more reliant on technology as the size and number of citizens has grown; we will also see that even as technology evolves, its central tensions with democracy have remained fairly constant over time. And in the final quarter of the class, we will ask ourselves how the relationship could and should be organized.

Aims:

The primary aim of the class is to give you the theoretical and historical tools to think critically about the relationship between technology and democracy. This requires an understanding of both democracy and technology, and we will be engaging in the scholarly literature of both fields—with a particular focus in democratic theory. Technology must be understood within the context of the needs, shortcomings, and ideals of democracy.

Evaluation:

This is a discussion-based seminar, with significant reading every week. Students will therefore primarily be judged on their participation, both informal and ongoing, and in two small presentations (one on a class reading, another on a technology of choice). There will also be a final paper, on a topic of your choice, of roughly 3,000 words.

Ongoing participation: 40%

Two in-class presentations: 20% (10% each)
Final Paper: 40%

Academic Resources:

I am available throughout the semester to discuss paper topics, and I will also go over the expectations for the final paper periodically throughout the semester. Students can also take advantage of the Penn Writing Center, which offers free one-on-one consultations.

Schedule:

1 — Introduction

January 12

Scope, aims, and animating questions of the class: Why does the relationship between democracy and technology matter, and how can history and theory help us understand it?

2 — Introduction II

January 19

What do we mean by 'technology'?

Readings:

CASTORIADIS, Cornelius. "Technique," in *Crossroads in the Labyrinth*, Volume I, p. 290-330.

SCHATZBERG, Eric, "Introduction," in *Technology: Critical History of a Concept*, p. 1-15.

WINNER, Langdon. "Do Artifacts Have Politics?" *Daedalus* 109 (1980): 121-36.

I. From Athens to Elections

In the first section of the course, we will focus on the theory and history of democracy, paying particular attention to the transition from the face-to-face democracy of 4th century Athens to the modern electoral-representative democracies of the 18th and 19th centuries. We will see that whereas technology played a minor role in Athenian democracy, it became crucial to the maintenance of modern democracy, where large distances and populations made the distribution of power difficult.

3 — Face-to-face: Athenian Democracy

January 26

Understanding daily life in Athenian democracy

Readings:

CARTLEDGE, Paul. *Democracy: A Life*, Ch. 7 "Athenian Democracy in Practice," Ch. 8 "Athenian Democracy: Culture and Society," p. 107-143.

THUCYDIDES. "Pericles' Funeral Oration," in *The Peloponnesian War*.

Georgia Institute of Technology. "Ancient Greek Amphitheater: Why You Can Hear From the Back Row," *ScienceDaily*.

4 — Distance and Representative Democracy

February 2

Why are modern democracy and technology intertwined?

Readings:

URBINATI, Nadia. *Representative Democracy*, Introduction, p. 1-16.

PITKIN, Hanna. "Representation and Democracy: An Uneasy Alliance," *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 27(3), 2004.

SCHIVELBUSCH, Wolfgang. *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century*. Ch. 3, "Railroad Space and Railroad Time," p. 33-51.

5 — Distance and Modern Democracy II

February 9

Exploiting the political and technological gaps of representative democracy

Readings:

URBINATI, Nadia. *Democracy Disfigured*, Ch. 1, "Democracy's Diarchy," p. 16-80.

MANIN, Bernard. *Principles of Representative Government*, "Metamorphoses of Representative Government," p. 251-302.

II. Modern Democracy, Modern Problems

In the second quarter of the course, we will see that technology and modern representative democracy are beset by many of the same problems, which can be grouped around the theme of the masses versus the individual. We will see that technology often exacerbates problems that are inherent in electoral-representative democracies.

6 — Discipline vs. Freedom, Conformity vs. Independence February 16

Is technological life compatible with democratic freedom?

Readings:

MARCUSE, Herbert, "The New Forms of Control," in *One-Dimensional Man*, p. 1-55.

MUMFORD, Lewis. "Cultural Preparation," in *Technics and Civilization*, p. 9-59.

7 — Mediocrity vs. Individuality

February 23

Is it democracy or technology that dulls the brain?

Readings:

MANDER, Jerry, *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*, p. 192-262.

TOCQUEVILLE, Alexis de. *Democracy in America*, “Literary Characteristics of Democratic Centuries,” “Why there are so many men of Ambition in the United States but so few Lofty Ambitions,” “What sort of Despotism Democratic Nations have to Fear,” p. 470-475, 627-632, 690-695.

WILLIAMS, James. *Stand Out of Our Light: Freedom and Persuasion in the Attention Economy*, Selections.

8 — Conformity vs. Independence

March 2

Does technology threaten individuality?

Readings:

ADORNO, Theodor W.; Horkheimer, Max. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” p. 94-136.

MARCUSE, Herbert, Ch. 6 “From Negative to Positive Thinking: Technological Rationality and the Logic of Domination,” in *One-Dimensional Man*, p. 144-169.

ELLUL, Jacques, *The Technological Bluff*, Selections.

Spring Break

III. Contemporary Technology, Contemporary Problems?

In the penultimate quarter of the class, we’ll confront digital technology head-on. As we’ll see, many of the problems associated with the Internet are in fact new iterations of long-standing tensions between democracy and technology.

9 — A New Public Sphere

March 16

How is it different and who owns it?

Readings:

ARENDT, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. Ch. 2, “The Public and the Private Realm.”

ISIN, Engin; RUPPERT, Evelyn. *Being Digital Citizens*, p. 1-54.

MCCHESENEY, Robert, *Digital Disconnect: How Capitalism Is Turning the Internet against Democracy*, Selections.

SCHNEIER, Bruce. *Data and Goliath: The Hidden Battles to Collect Your Data and Control Your World*, Selections.

10 — Digital Democracy

March 23

Speaking out in the new public sphere

Readings:

DEWEY, John. *The Public and Its Problems*, Selections.

FOUCAULT, Michel. *The Courage of Truth*, Selections.

ROUVROY, Antoinette. *Algorithmic Governmentality – The Taming of Multitudes* (Interview).

SUNSTEIN, Cass. *On Rumors: How Falsehoods Spread, Why We Believe Them, and What Can Be Done*, Selections.

IV. Forms of Power

By the end of March, we will have analyzed the symbiotic relationship between democracy and technology both historically and theoretically. In the final section of the course, paying particular attention to the growing power of technology, we will try to imagine how the relationship between the two could be improved and reorganized. We will end on the question of whether technology, which is vital to democracy, can also be controlled by it.

11 — Is Technology Out of Control?

March 30

The unpredictable, ambiguous nature of technological change

Readings:

ELLUL, Jacques, *The Technological Bluff*, Selections.

ROSA, Hartmut, *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*, Selections.

WINNER, Langdon, *Autonomous Technology: Technics-out-of-Control as a Theme in Political Thought*, Selections.

12 — Politically Controlling Technology

April 6

The government's historic role in scientific and technological development

Readings:

DUPREE, A. Hunter. *Science in the Federal Government: A History of Policies and Activities*, Selections.

LEVINE, Yasha, *Surveillance Valley: The Secret Military History of the Internet*, Selections.

Mazzucato, Mariana. *The Entrepreneurial State*, Selections.

13 — Democratically Controlling Technology

April 13

How technological progress can be democratically influenced

Readings:

CALLON, Michel ; LASCOUMES, Pierre; BARTHE, Yannick. *Acting in an Uncertain World: An Essay on Technical Democracy*, Selections.

WINNER, Langdon, “Frankenstein’s Problem,” in *Autonomous Technology: Technics-out-of-Control as a Theme in Political Thought*, p. 306-335.

14 — Conclusion

April 20

Readings:

CASTORIADIS, Cornelius. “Democracy as procedure and as regime,” in *Crossroads in the Labyrinth*, Volume IV.