

SOCI 355: The Technological Society:



Spring 2026 MW 1:30 to 2:50 Holmes Hall 101

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“No social, human, or spiritual fact is so important as the fact of technique in the modern world.”

Jacques Ellul

What is this course about?

This course examines the ways in which technology, or technique, shapes human life in virtually every imaginable way, e.g., in the way in which our societies are organized, in the work we do, in our understanding of ourselves and the meaning of our lives. We will explore discussions of the nature of technology and look into the history of technology in the human world. Much of our focus will be on the contemporary period of the information technology revolution of the past half-century. In particular, we will closely and critically examine technologies of communicative/social media and artificial intelligence in order to ponder their promises and risks.

The intellectual tools required to analytically and morally understand the role and nature of technology in our lives are multidisciplinary. Some topics can be usefully studied from the perspective of one academic discipline, but complex topics in human social life such as ours in this course are immune to careful understanding in that manner. We will look at various topics in the course using a range of perspectives that will enable us to ask and answer several different kinds of questions: *What is the effect of technology on human life? Have different periods and kinds of technology affected our lives differently? What are the moral parameters we should apply in*

understanding human development and use of specific technologies? Are some technologies perhaps too dangerous to develop or maintain, whatever their benefits? How would we know that about those technologies?

We will therefore read texts written by philosophers, social scientists, and people who have worked closely in technological fields or spent long periods of time reporting on research in those fields. We will also see a few films about technology and perhaps read some fiction on the topic. This eclectic approach to disciplinary perspective will require a willingness on your part to shift back and forth from these various perspectives throughout the course and sometimes to look at once from more than one such perspective.

What will I learn in this course?

You will learn a great deal of factual information about theories of technology and the history of technology.

You will learn how to use social scientific and philosophical reasoning to think about the effects of technology on human life.

You will learn a great deal about the information technology revolution of the present time, especially communicative/social media and artificial intelligence.

You will be provided with opportunities to integrate personal experiences and insights into a broader understanding of technology.

How will I be evaluated in this course?

This is a *seminar*. All class meetings are in the form of discussions. I will perhaps do some lecturing as orientation to topics, and I will post some notes to our course blog from time to time to orient your reading and our discussion of some texts. But in a seminar, the focus is on discussion, so you must be prepared and willing to talk about what we have read when we meet.

Attendance is far more important in a class like this than it is in a larger, more lecture-based course. Your absences from our class will make it harder for everyone, and not just you, to get the full benefit of learning. I will therefore take attendance and a sizable portion of your grade (20%) in the course is based solely on being here and participating in discussion.

You are expected to do the reading every day we meet. I will occasionally give short quizzes on readings for the day. These quizzes will collectively make up 10% of the course grade.

Each student will be assigned to give two short introductions to readings. These should be neatly focused and concise (not more than ten to fifteen minutes) summaries of interesting points in the reading and a line of questioning to start our discussion. It is a difficult thing to properly and expertly present on a reading in such a brief period of time and you will need to be prepared. Generate notes to orient your presentation and practice to be aware of time. Fifteen minutes go by distressingly quickly and the texts we are reading are dense and difficult, so you need to be sharp. You must also post a text version of your introduction to the course blog. These should be at least 500 words each in length. These two reading introductions are each worth 15% of the course grade.

Finally, we will collectively determine in the first two weeks of class what form of final evaluation we would like for the course. There are two options: 1) A final essay in which you make a substantive argument as to the effects of some form of technology on contemporary human life; or 2) a final exam during finals week in which you

write short essay responses to questions I pose. In either case, this assignment will be worth 40% of your final grade for the course.

The formal grading breakdown is as follows:

1. **Attendance and participation in class discussions: 20%**
2. **Short introductions of readings: 30%**
3. **Quizzes: 10%**
4. **Final assignment: 40%**

Class rule on technology

There will be no use of tablets, laptop computers, cell phones, or other electronic devices during our class meetings. Those things are a distraction from our collective business. If you bring your phone to class, please be sure it is in silent mode and keep it in your pocket, backpack, or wherever you store it. Please do not have your laptop on your desk, even if it is unopened.

The use of generative AI tools for writing, editing, and reading (that is, for reducing readings to short summaries) is prohibited in this course. Using an editor simply to find typos in your writing is fine, but you may not use any tools that actually generate text or substantively alter your own text. Using technologies to generate or substantively alter text that you will put your name on as author directly undermines the educational goal of the teaching of writing. Your reading comprehension and your writing is your work—indeed, in my view, it is **you**. I want to see your work and your progress, not what is generated by some machine. Do not cheat yourself of the satisfaction of learning to better express your thoughts in writing by using generative AI.

In staying in this course after reading this policy, you are effectively pledging to avoid using such technologies. Offenders risk failing grades for assignments and/or for the course.

What University policies are in force in this course?

Bucknell students are responsible for the preparation and presentation of work representing their own efforts. Acceptance of this responsibility is essential to the educational process and must be considered as an expression of mutual trust, the foundation upon which creative scholarship rests. Students are directed to use great care when preparing all written work (including journal entries) and to acknowledge fully the source of all ideas and language other than their own.

I fully support the above principles and the institutional process that deals with violations of academic responsibility at Bucknell. I will not hesitate to initiate this process if the above mentioned “mutual trust” is violated in my course. In addition, it is important that you recognize that there may be instances when collaboration is appropriate in my class and other instances when it is not. Absent specific instructions to the contrary, you are to assume that all assignments are to be completed without collaboration. Finally, in acknowledging the source of all ideas and language other than your own, you must cite the creator of Internet posted information just as you would an author of a textbook, a journal article, a reference book, emails, or personal conversations from which you have used information or ideas.

Courses at Bucknell that receive one unit of academic credit have a minimum expectation of 12 hours per week of student academic engagement. Student academic engagement includes both the hours of direct faculty instruction and the hours spent on out of class student work. It is likely that you will need to spend more than this

minimum expected amount of time per week to do work above C-level (though you should also note that simply spending the minimum 12 hours per week is itself no guarantee that you will receive at least a C in the course).

Any student who may need an accommodation based on the impact of a disability should contact Heather Fowler, Director of the Office of Accessibility Resources at 570-577-1188.

Bucknell University Honor Code

As a student and citizen of the Bucknell University community:

- *I will not lie, cheat or steal in my academic endeavors.*
- *I will forthrightly oppose each and every instance of academic dishonesty.*
- *I will let my conscience guide my decision to communicate directly with any person or persons I believe to have been dishonest in academic work.*
- *I will let my conscience guide my decision on reporting breaches of academic integrity to the appropriate faculty or deans.*

Class Policy on Debate and Expression

It is not the proper role of the University to attempt to shield individuals from ideas and opinions they find unwelcome, disagreeable, or even deeply offensive. Although all members of the University community share in the responsibility for maintaining a climate of mutual respect, concerns about civility and mutual respect can never be used as a justification for closing off reasonable discussion of ideas, however offensive or disagreeable those ideas may be to some members of our community. The University may restrict expression that violates the law, that falsely defames a specific individual, that constitutes a genuine threat or harassment, that unjustifiably invades substantial privacy or confidentiality interests, or that is otherwise directly incompatible with the functioning of the University. But it is vitally important that these exceptions never be used in a manner that is inconsistent with the University’s commitment to a free and open discussion of ideas. Although members of the University community are free to criticize and contest the views expressed on campus, and to criticize and contest speakers who are invited to express their views on campus, they may not obstruct or otherwise interfere with the freedom of others to express their views.

There are long-established, reliable rules of comportment for critical engagement and contestation in academic settings, and this classroom is such a setting. Allowing interlocutors to speak and express their arguments is but the first part of that set of interactional rules. Beyond this, we are all required to show outward signs of our acceptance of open dialogue and basic mutual respect and magnanimity. *Ad hominem* claims should be avoided, and critical remarks should always be directed to arguments rather than to persons. Even (*especially*) when you disagree vehemently with something that is being said, it is obligatory to refrain from using gestures and expressions that betray a lack of respect and generosity, i.e., rolling your eyes, demonstratively sighing or interrupting, etc. Breaking the rules of academic comportment destroys the possibility of critical discussion, and we cannot allow it to jeopardize our central task in the course. An important part of the pedagogy of the course involves learning skills in dispassionate, logical, and calm discussion and debate, even (*especially*) when you are highly emotionally exercised by some question or topic. All of us have such emotional investments, but there simply is no reasonable way in which all our personal emotional investments can be fully accommodated in collective inquiry into difficult material. Allowing our emotions to dictate how we react and how we contest claims is a sure recipe for accomplishing nothing that is intellectually useful.

What books do I need to acquire for this course?

1. Nicholas Carr, *Superbloom: How Technologies of Connection Tears Us Apart*
2. Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*
3. Eliezer Yudnowksy and Nate Soares, *If Anyone Builds It, Everyone Dies*

There are also a number of readings available on Moodle or the course blog.

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	date	topic	reading	assignments
Mon	19-Jan	NO CLASS - MLK DAY		
Wed	21-Jan	Introductions	n/a	
Mon	26-Jan	Humankind and Technology	Lewis Mumford, "The Monastery and the Clock" (BLOG)	
Wed	28-Jan	Humankind and Technology	Arnold Gehlen, "Man and Technique" (BLOG)	
Mon	2-Feb	Humankind and Technology: An Historical Sociological Template	Gerhard Lenski, Ecological-Evolutionary Theory , pp. 63-68, 83-106)	
Wed	4-Feb	Humankind and Technology: Early History	<i>The Technological Society</i> , chapter 1, pp. 1-42	
Mon	9-Feb	The Industrial Revolution	<i>The Technological Society</i> , chapter 1, pp. 42-60	
Wed	11-Feb	The Industrial Revolution	Karl Marx, "Machinery and Modern Industry" (BLOG)	
Mon	16-Feb	The Characterology of Technology	<i>The Technological Society</i> , chapter 2, pp. 61-94	
Wed	18-Feb	The Characterology of Technology	<i>The Technological Society</i> , chapter 2, pp. 94-147	
Mon	23-Feb	Human Techniques	<i>The Technological Society</i> , chapter 5, pp. 319-358	
Wed	25-Feb	Human Techniques	<i>The Technological Society</i> , chapter 5, pp. 358-387	
Mon	2-Mar	Human Techniques	<i>The Technological Society</i> , chapter 5, pp. 387-427	
Wed	4-Mar	Human Techniques	See <i>Koyaanisqatsi</i> (MOODLE)	
Mon	9-Mar	NO CLASS - SPRING BREAK		
Wed	11-Mar	NO CLASS - SPRING BREAK		
Mon	16-Mar	Information Technology and the Human World	Manuel Castells, "The Information Technology Revolution" (BLOG)	

Wed	18-Mar	Information Technology and the Human World	Marion Fourcade and Kieran Kealy, "Classification Situations" (BLOG)	
Mon	23-Mar	Communicative/Social Media	<i>Superbloom</i> , prologue, chapters 1-2	Josie
Wed	25-Mar	Communicative/Social Media	<i>Superbloom</i> , chapters 3-4	Catherine
Mon	30-Mar	Communicative/Social Media	<i>Superbloom</i> , chapters 5-6	Luke
Wed	1-Apr	Communicative/Social Media	<i>Superbloom</i> , chapters 7-8	Margot
Mon	6-Apr	Artificial Intelligence	<i>Superbloom</i> , chapters 9-10	
Wed	8-Apr	Artificial Intelligence	Gary Marcus, "The Twelve Biggest Immediate Threats of Generative AI" (BLOG)	
Mon	13-Apr	Artificial Intelligence	Nick Bostrom, "Is the Default Outcome Doom?" and "The Control Problem" (BLOG); See <i>2001: A Space Odyssey</i> (MOODLE)	
Wed	15-Apr	Artificial Intelligence	<i>If Anyone Builds It, Everyone Dies</i> , introduction, chapters 1-2	
Mon	20-Apr	Artificial Intelligence	<i>If Anyone Builds It, Everyone Dies</i> , chapters 3-4; See <i>AI: Artificial Intelligence</i> (MOODLE)	Josie
Wed	22-Apr	Artificial Intelligence	<i>If Anyone Builds It, Everyone Dies</i> , chapters 5-6	Catherine
Mon	27-Apr	Artificial Intelligence	<i>If Anyone Builds It, Everyone Dies</i> , chapters 7-9; See <i>Ex-Machina</i> (MOODLE)	
Wed	29-Apr	Artificial Intelligence	<i>If Anyone Builds It, Everyone Dies</i> , chapters 10-11	Luke
Mon	4-May	Artificial Intelligence	<i>If Anyone Builds It, Everyone Dies</i> , chapters 12-14	Margot