



Building the Society We Want

This syllabus is the result of a workshop organized by Kevin Munger and co-hosted by the Princeton Center for Information Technology Policy and the Princeton University Center for Human Values. Participants. For more background, see [this post on CITP's Freedom to Tinker blog](#).

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This syllabus is designed around *actions* that students can take. There is only so much variation from the standard format of a college course that is permissible within the structure of a college course, but this syllabus intends to use all of that leeway. Much of the learning that takes place in this class will be experiential, embodied – the actions they take, they will be able to take again.

To contextualize these Actions, the syllabus also presents Values and Tools. It begins with an overview of possible frameworks of Values that serve as the ends those actions seek to achieve. Throughout, the syllabus introduces Tools in the sense of analytical or epistemic Tools for evaluating whether a given Action or technology is in accordance with a given Value.

Week 1: Decide Technology Policy in the classroom

In-class exercise: discuss the experiences of students using “technology” as part of their education, both in the classroom (eg laptops, smartphones) and outside of it (eg ChatGPT, GroupMe).

Begin by introducing *Values*: the normative principles that students think are relevant for their semester in this class.

Then discuss *Tools*: the analytical methods by which they (or anyone) might come to know which policies produce the best outcomes with respect to these different Values.

Conclude with *Actions*: in this case, what procedure should be used to select the policies?
Consider:

- Democracy: majority vote by students
- Technocracy: expert (the teacher) decides
- Conservatism: look up other classes (in the department/university) and adopt the most common policy
- Liberalism: everyone does what they want, but individuals who feel their experience infringed upon can try to persuade others
- Materialism: everyone does what they want – subject to everyone in the class having equal technological access
- Experimentalism: the policy is randomized – either for the whole semester, class-by-class, or student-by-student
- Constitutionalism: for any of the above, should there be a procedure to revisit or amend this policy during the course

As the instructor, be sure to highlight what has been taken for granted / is necessarily given while doing the above:

- This is happening as part of a class, which is governed by laws and policies, and which has to deliver grades
- The “discussions” are by default taking place by people taking turns speaking in person. We could be using other technologies to communicate

Weeks 2-4: Background Reading on Values

The beginning of the course takes a more traditional format: each week there are readings introducing the philosophical frameworks that give rise to the Values discussed in the course. Assignments for this week take the standard form of reading, in-class discussions, and before-class reading responses – or whatever the instructor desires. However, these should all be justified with the Values - Tools - Actions framework:

- Here the instructor as expert is taken as the premise for why we’re in the same room together
- Explain the Values that you think are important, the *Tools* you’ve used to select the readings, and the *Actions* the class will take. For the latter, this means explaining expectations for how students should read, how they should prepare some pre-class assignment (individual reading response, group wiki, short presentations, etc), and how they’ll be spending time in class (lecture, small-group discussion, full-group discussion, collaborative digital writing, individual hand-written reflections, reading quizzes, etc)

The number of weeks/sessions is flexible, as are the Values and the associated readings. The crucial element is to broaden student's vision beyond the hegemonic Values of utility, efficiency, progress.

- Conviviality
 - Illich Ivan. 1973. *Tools for Conviviality*. New York: Harper & Row.
 - [Commentary](#)
 - Jacques Ellul, 1954. *The Technological Society*.
 - [Commentary](#)
- Human Capabilities
 - Martha Nussbaum
 - Amartya Sen
- Transhumanism
 - Laboria Cuboniks, 2018. *The Xenofeminist Manifesto: A Politics for Alienation*
- Accelerationism
 - Andreesen, M. (2023) "The Techno-Optimist Manifesto"
<https://a16z.com/the-techno-optimist-manifesto/>
 - Nick Srnicek, Helen Hester. *After Work: A History of the Home and the Fight for Free Time*
 - What we owe the future, MacAskill
- Posthumanism
 - Vilém Flusser, "The Present Situation" in *Communicology* (2023), 201-208.
 - Vilém Flusser, *Vampyrotheuthis infernalis* (1987)
 - Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt (2021). *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton University Press.
- Vernacular Values
 - [Vernacular Values and Education](#)
 - Mavhunga, C. C. (2014). *Transient workspaces: technologies of everyday innovation in Zimbabwe*. mit Press.
 - Parreñas, Juno Salazar. "6. From decolonial indigenous knowledges to vernacular ideas in Southeast Asia." *History and Theory* 59, no. 3 (2020): 413-420.
- Epistemic Justice
 - Nguyen, C. T. (2021). The seductions of clarity. *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements*, 89, 227-255.
 - Nguyen, C. T. (2023). Hostile epistemology.
 - Fricker, M. (2007). *Epistemic injustice: Power and the ethics of knowing*. Oxford University Press.
 - McKinnon, R. (2016). Epistemic injustice. *Philosophy Compass*, 11(8), 437-446.
- Virtue Ethics
 - Julia Annas, *Intelligent Virtue*
- Cybernetics
 - Stafford Beer, *Designing Freedom*

Week 5: Measure Personal Tech Use

Action: Make a detailed time diary of what technology the student is using. [Example assignment](#)

Think about: The intuitive language that goes into a positivist interpretation of this assignment: “Scrolled TikTok with my AirPods in, 30 min” etc. Discuss what is meant by “technology” and by “using.” What kind of data/output resulted from this usage?

Bundle of ideas: Naturalization of technology

- Winner, L. (1980). Do artifacts have politics? *Daedalus*, 109(1), 19–39.
- Winner, L. (1983). Technologies as forms of life. In *Epistemology, methodology, and the social sciences* (pp. 249-263). Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands.
- MacKenzie, D., & Wajcman, J. (1985). *The social shaping of technology*. Open University Press.

Week 6: Explain Personal Tech Use

Assignment: Write a first-person phenomenological account of interacting with a technology, what it feels like and what it does to you.

Think about: Do you notice the technology mediating your behavior? Not simply “algorithms”, but also the ease of interacting with text, images? What gestures, shortcuts, and shorthands do you use? To what extent does the technology feel like it is “thinking”, or even conscious?

Bundle of ideas: phenomenology, HCI, attention/intention/consciousness

- Vilém Flusser, *Gestures* (2014)
- [Ackerman \(2000\)](#)
- Vannevar Bush, 1945, [As We May Think](#)
- Justin EH Smith, *The Internet is Not What You Think It Is*, chapter 1 “A Sudden Acceleration”, chapter 3 “The Reckoning Engine and the Thinking Machine”
- Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”

Week 7: Quantify Personal Tech use

Action: Build technology to quantify — (a) Collect data about yourself or an activity or organization you care about, and (b) design a way to quantify something useful/valuable. This paper describes how users using a system to engage in data analytic tools can facilitate the construction of critical technological literacies

(<https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/3025453.3025823>).

Think about: Once this is done and data has been collected, have learners engage with others to critique and problematize their own measures. What does your technological approach to measurement leave out?

Bundle of ideas: limits of quantification,

- Guyer, J. I., Khan, N., Obarrio, J., Bledsoe, C., Chu, J., Bachir Diagne, S., ... & Verran, H. (2010). Introduction: Number as inventive frontier. *Anthropological Theory*, 10(1-2), 36-61.
- Merry, S. E. (2016). *The seductions of quantification: Measuring human rights, gender violence, and sex trafficking*. University of Chicago Press.
<https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/S/bo23044232.html>.
- Bowker & Star, *Sorting Things Out*
- [Thi Nguyen, Value Capture](#)
- [Lucy Osler, Narrative Devices](#)
- Something about the increasing use of biometric data in social sciences from wearable devices E.g. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0167268121001505>

Property/ownership/labour

- Eric A. Posner, E. Glen Weyl. *Radical Markets: Uprooting Capitalism and Democracy for a Just Society*. Chapter 5 “Data as Labor” <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvc77c4f.10>
Jennifer Zhu Scott, “Why you should get paid for your data”
https://www.ted.com/talks/jennifer_zhu_scott_why_you_should_get_paid_for_your_data/transcript

Week 8: Audit an Algorithm

Action: Audit the YouTube (or other platform) algorithm. [Example assignment](#).

Think about: What does the algorithm know about you, and how? How does that relate to what device you're using, how that device is connected to the internet, and the laws where you live? Also, think about what “the algorithm” is actually capable of – what are some limits to how much “discretion” it has? What is “the algorithm” trying to accomplish, and why?

Bundle of ideas: experimental design, individual agency in presence of algorithmic recommendation, measurement of realized behavioral change

- How to design for critical algorithmic literacies in general
(<https://wip.mitpress.mit.edu/pub/designing-for-critical-algorithmic-literacies/release/1>).
- Kevin Munger, [“The Algorithm” does not exist](#)
- Nick Seaver, [Captivating Algorithms: Recommendation Systems as Traps](#)

Week 9: Label and Report

Action: Read the user agreement for a social media platform. Come up with a coding scheme to translate the principles into decisions about individual posts. Evaluate real posts and use on-platform features to report posts that violate the policy.

Think about: How much agreement or disagreement about whether certain posts violate the policy or not? How would you change the policy to make this more clear?

More broadly, does this work? What is the process by which these actions affect the overall content network? It might be helpful to create a diagram of the process and what we know (and don't know).

Bundle of ideas: liberalism/free speech, constitutional control of government, corporate control of platforms

- Platform paper
- Amy Zhang
- FB supreme court
- Douek, E. (2022) *Content Moderation as Systems Thinking*, *Harvard Law Review*. Available at: <https://harvardlawreview.org/print/vol-136/content-moderation-as-systems-thinking/>.
- Gillespie, T. (2020). Content moderation, AI, and the question of scale. *Big Data & Society*, 7(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053951720943234>.

Week 10: Edit Wikipedia

Action: Select a topic students are knowledgeable about. Go to the Wikipedia page and see if there are improvements to be made. Make those edits, and look into the edit page (edit history and discussion page?)

Think about: Look into the/a relevant [WikiProject](#) – what kinds of discussions occur within the WikiProject? How is labor organized? What are the roles of intra-Wikipedia institutions such as the “press” ([Signpost](#)), “court” ([Arbitration Committee](#)), and “[police](#)” (Administrators)? What kinds of community norms can you infer?

In what ways does Wikipedia resemble and not resemble *real-life* cities, states, corporations, or other institutions? In what ways does Wikipedia resemble other *online* committees, such as Reddit? Is Wikipedia “governed” formally and/or informally?

Bundle of ideas: peer production, collective governance

- Aaron Shaw, Benjamin M Hill, *Laboratories of oligarchy? How the iron law extends to peer production*
- “Crypto’s Three Body Problem” <https://otherinter.net/research/three-body-problem/> and Lawrence Lessig, The New Chicago School <https://arena-attachments.s3.amazonaws.com/25639907/bd36fdf4ae2724cf843be2dd3128fb58.pdf>
- “Who Governs?”, Robert Dahl

Week 11: [Over a Break] Interview an Older Person

Action: Conduct an extended interview with an older person that the student encounters while on spring or fall break. Ask them about the way that technology has changed in their lifetime, how they feel about this, and how well-equipped they feel to navigate the modern technological environment.

Think about: Do you have the language to communicate how you use technology? Did your conversation partner grow up in the same country/class environment as you, and how does that affect your respective relationship with age?

How do you want the world of technology to change as you age? Are you excited to keep up with new developments or worried about lagging behind?

Bundle of ideas: digital literacy, human dignity, US Culture

- Margaret Mead, *And Keep Your Powder Dry*
- [Kevin Munger, *Generation Gap*](#)
- Eszter Hargittai, [“Second-Level Digital Divide”](#)

Week 12: Do a privacy checkup on every single one of your apps

Action: Go through every app on your phone. Examine the different types of privacy options they allow. Note of the default settings for each app. Decide what settings you’re comfortable with, and adjust them accordingly. Keep track of how your experience with the apps changes if you change any of the settings.

Think about: To what extent did you “consent” to these privacy settings? What are the ethical responsibilities of individuals compared to corporations when it comes to issues like digital privacy? Do you actually care about your digital privacy? How much, in principle, would you trade off privacy for less efficient service? Or the opposite: how much would you have to be paid for the default level of privacy to be worth it to you?

Bundle of ideas: attention, privacy, ethics

- Helen Nissenbaum; A Contextual Approach to Privacy Online. *Daedalus* 2011; 140 (4): 32–48. doi: https://doi.org/10.1162/DAED_a_00113.
- Khan, D.E.P., Lina M. (2019) *A Skeptical View of Information Fiduciaries*, *Harvard Law Review*. Available at: <https://harvardlawreview.org/print/vol-133/a-skeptical-view-of-information-fiduciaries/>.
- Balkin, Jack, *The Fiduciary Model of Privacy* (2019) *Harvard Law Review*. Available at: <https://harvardlawreview.org/forum/vol-133/the-fiduciary-model-of-privacy/>.

Week 13: Do Online Gig Work

Action: Sign up for and complete online gig work on a platform like Mechanical Turk. Make note of the legal reporting requirements that go into being paid for this work. Calculate your hourly wage. [Example assignment](#)

Think about: What are the most serious barriers to getting started? Technological? Legal? Social? How does this kind of work differ from other jobs you’ve had?

Bundle of ideas: formal legislation, informal online labor

- [Dube, Jacobs, Naidu and Suri, Monopsony in Online Labor Markets](#)
- [Gray and Suri, Ghost Work](#)

Week 14: Norm Transgression

Action: Taking inspiration from Christian Sandvig’s [“The Oversharer”](#), engage in a norm transgression on social media.

Think about: How did you feel when transgressing this norm? How do you think others felt? Did you feel the need to explain your behavior after the fact? What is the difference between “ethical” behavior and “normative” behavior – that is, are norm violations intrinsically less ethical than upholding norms?

How much did anonymity play a role in your choice of norm transgression and/or in your experience? Would it have been easier to do this if you could be fully anonymous?

Bundle of ideas: norms, ethics of online action

- Kevin Munger, ["Tweetment Effects on the Tweeted: An Experiment to Decrease Online Harassment"](#)
- Nathan Matias, ["Preventing harassment and increasing group participation through social norms in 2,190 online science discussions"](#)
- Prentice and Paluck, ["Engineering social change using social norms: lessons from the study of collective action"](#)

Week 15: Investigate the Medium

Action: Select a current event in the news. Consume media about that event in as many different mediums/platforms/contexts as you can: print newspaper, YouTube, X, Reddit, radio, television, podcasts, magazines, TikTok, etc

Think about: How does the *content* differ in these different mediums? What about the *experience* – how your different senses were used more or less, in what physical/social contexts you could consume information in this medium. How do you usually choose a medium in which to consume media? Is this choice more about the *content* or the *medium itself*?

Bundle of ideas: technological determinism, media effects

- Gibson, K. R., Gibson, K. R., & Ingold, T. (Eds.). (1993). Tools, language and cognition in human evolution. Cambridge University Press.
- Ong, Walter (1982). *Orality and Literacy*
- McLuhan, Marshall. The Medium is the Message
- Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno. (1944). "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception." In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Amsterdam: Querido.
- Hadley Cantril with Herta Hertzog. (1940). Excerpt from *The Invasion from Mars: A Study in the Psychology of Panic*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

- Katz, Elihu, and Paul F. Lazarsfeld. *Personal Influence: The Part Played by People in the Flow of Communication*, Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1955.
- Todd Gitlin. (1978) "Media Sociology: The Dominant Paradigm." *Theory and Society* 6: 205-253.
- Edward Herman & Noam Chomsky. (1988). "A Propaganda Model." from *Manufacturing Consent: The political economy of the mass media*. Pantheon Books
- Jefferson D. Pooley and Michael J. Socolow, (2013). "Checking up on *The Invasion From Mars*: Hadley Cantril, Paul F. Lazarsfeld, and the Making of a Misremembered Classic." *International Journal of Communication* 7:1920-1948.

Week 16: Digital Surveys

Action: Using the expert knowledge accumulated in the class, design a survey about the themes of the course and ask students to circulate it among their friends. Include both open-ended and categorical survey questions. Analyze and discuss the results.

Think about: How does the sample of respondents affect the kind of knowledge you can produce? What would the ideal sample be? How are you sure you're asking "the right questions"? Did all of your respondents have the same understanding of the survey that you did? How does this affect how you interpret other surveys, either about technology use or politics, or public opinion more broadly?

Bundle of ideas: expertise, representativeness

- Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* ch1
- Pew Research, [Online Survey Methodology](#)
- Pew Research, [Internet Fact Sheet](#)