



Module Title: Social Networks and Digital Lives

Module Code: SOU44022

Module Name: Social Networks and Digital Lives

- **ECTS Weighting:** 10
- **Semester/Term Taught:** Hilary Term
- **Contact Hours:** 22
- **Module Personnel:** Prof Anne Holohan

Module Learning Aims and Outcomes:

- Understand the concepts of 'techno-optimism', 'surveillance capitalism' and 'radical indifference'
- Understand the idea of 'logics' in the context of technology
- Understand the concepts of unconscious bias, systemic bias, and intersectionality.
- Understand the role of big data in contemporary society and the different ways digital technologies perpetuate and entrench existing racial, gender and class inequalities.
- Understand institutional bias with specific reference to the institutional culture of Silicon Valley and the role of government, universities, companies, and entrepreneurs.
- Understand the core debates around the impact of digital technologies on the self, relationships, and community
- Understand the core debates around the impact of digital technologies on politics and the economy.

Module Content:

Digital technologies shape every aspect of our lives but are dominated by a narrative of techno optimism and a rejection of any contextual critique that questions the 'objectivity' of technology.

This module tackles that techno optimism and shows that it is not the technology but the logic of the system in which it is embedded that determines what technologies are developed, who benefits and who is disadvantaged, and determines what we see as inevitable or as something that needs to be subject to scrutiny and regulation. The dominant logic has come to be that of Surveillance Capitalism (Zuboff). But there were and are other logics, based not on profit but on sustainability and democratic decision making.

To understand the real-world embeddedness of technology, the logic that dominates and other possible logics, we explore the institutional culture of Silicon Valley [shorthand for the technology industry in the US and beyond as it sets the norms for other tech hubs around the



world to follow], and its evolution over the last 60 years.

We see that there are competing narratives to the dominant neoliberal meritocratic myth shaping the technology industry. This latter storyline describes some actors in the economy as the true ‘innovators’, wealth creators and risk takers, and sees the State as a wealth extractor or distributor. In fact, the State has played a crucial entrepreneurial role, and all workers, in the labour force and unpaid reproductive workers, create value, but a disproportionate amount of the gains, and credit, has gone to the ‘innovators.’ We link the structural forces and the actors in the industry – the government, the universities, the companies, the entrepreneurs – and show how their interaction continues to shape the production and use of technologies. We take a critical look at innovation and what is defined as problems which public and private money is put behind – we see a very narrow range which does not solve the giant problems we face, and which is highly specific in terms of motivation (profit), and who is funded (overwhelmingly white men). We see the results in how class, gender, racial and age biases are built into technology, unconsciously and when the result of indifference, consciously.

The opacity, lack of accountability and scale of algorithmic decision making in education, the labour market, housing, raises the possibility of harms that are reinforcing and cannot be challenged. We take a critical look at AI, which Crawford argues is neither Artificial nor Intelligent.

The ‘radical indifference’ of companies to what keeps us glued to our phones (the only goal is to keep us on there and generating data) has implications for the cognitive reshaping of our realities in terms of politics, connections and friendships, our sense of self, and community.

We ask how can we rethink the logic of our technologies so that they are a force for economic, political and social progression? Looking at case studies around the world we consider the conversations we need to have and how to progress a more inclusive future.

Recommended Reading List:

- Shoshana Zuboff (2019) *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*. Profile Books: London.
- Cathy O’ Neill (2017) *Weapons of Math Destruction*. Penguin.
- Crawford, Kate (2021) *Atlas of AI: Power, Politics, and the Planetary Costs of Artificial Intelligence*. Yale University Press.
- Ruha Benjamin (2019) *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*. Polity Press: UK.
- Jaron Lanier (2014) *Who Owns The Future?* Simon & Schuster, New York.
- Johnson, S., & Acemoglu, D. (2023). *Power and Progress: Our Thousand-Year Struggle Over Technology and Prosperity*. Hachette UK.
- Broussard, M. (2018). *Artificial unintelligence: How computers misunderstand the*



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world. MIT Press.

- Haidt, J. (2024). *The anxious generation: How the great rewiring of childhood is causing an epidemic of mental illness*. Penguin.

Module Pre-Requisite: None

Module Co-Requisite: None

Assessment Details: End of term written assignment (60%); Group presentation in tutorial (20%); MCQ test (20%).

Module Website: