Contemporary Issues in Science & Technology Studies

STS 5106, Fall 2011
CRN 97633
3 Credit Hours
Wednesday 7:00-9:45 p.m.
NVC, Falls Church, room TBA

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Office Hours: by appointment

Introduction
This seminar provides an introduction to social studies of technology. Who creates new technologies, who uses them, and what do designers, regulators, and other users know about each other? How can we make technologies safe, fair, and user-friendly, and who defines such goals? Over the last few decades, scholars in Science and Technology Studies (STS) have developed new theoretical and methodological approaches to analyzing not only the transformative impacts of technologies on society, but also how social arrangements fundamentally influence the development of technologies in the first place.

In this course, you will learn about interdisciplinary studies of technology. We will read on and discuss topics ranging from the social construction of technology to testing, national styles, technology and development, users of technologies, and the globalization of technologies, to name but a few. We will read and discuss foundational texts in Technology Studies, as well as case studies that focus on individual technologies or technological systems. You will come to understand our world as a large socio-technical system; analyzing a specific aspect of it by applying STS-tools will lead you to novel interpretations of how societies and technologies interact.

Due to the diversity in this field, we will only be able to cover a fraction of possible topics. I am willing to modify the syllabus to some extent to accommodate students’ distinct preferences. This is a writing-intensive seminar: you will write weekly reading responses, as well as a final research paper on a topic of your choice.

There are no prerequisites for this course, although familiarity with basic STS concepts is an asset.
Assignments and Expectations

Participation
This course is a seminar, which means that you will substantially contribute to class discussion. You are expected to come to class having completed the assignments for that day’s meeting, i.e. having done the readings and having spent time thinking about the material before you come to class. Your preparation is vital for meaningful participation in our discussions. You are expected to attend class regularly. If you cannot make it, you should contact me in advance.

A couple of times over this semester, you will lead the class discussion (either alone or together with another colleague, always supported by me, of course). That does not mean that you should summarize the readings at length; rather, you should assume that everyone has done the readings and come prepared with questions to get the discussion started.

Readings
I recommend four books for purchase (available through online retailers):


All remaining readings will be made available as URLs or PDF documents on the course website.

Reading Notes
You will write short reading notes each week (2-3 paragraphs) and post them to the course website by Tuesday 5 p.m. before our next meeting (“Forums”). Reading notes are not summaries. Rather, they should begin to identify, analyze, and evaluate arguments presented in any given text. Make sure you also read your classmates’ notes before class starts, as we will be using them in our discussions.

Ask yourself questions such as these:
- What are the most exciting or interesting points raised by the readings?
- How does one piece of the assigned readings relate to another one – is it an addition, a counter-argument, or an illustration?
- Am I persuaded by this argument? If so, why? If not, why not, and what could make it more convincing?
- What questions do these readings raise for me?
What, if anything, do I not understand in the reading? (Identifying points of confusion is a valid and important contribution to class discussion!)
In addition to your own comment, feel free to comment on a posting by one of your colleagues!

**Paper**
You will write a research paper on a topic of your choice, in which you apply, criticize, and/or evaluate at least one theoretical approach introduced in this course. What I will be looking for in your paper is (a) a demonstrated command of the literature, and (b) some integration of the course materials into your work.

In order to facilitate completion of your paper by the end of the semester, this course entails several steps ranging from an early outline of your project, to the peer review of a draft, to the presentation of your final project. You will submit a short outline (1-2 pages) by early October. It should contain the following elements:

1. what your research question is;
2. if you choose a case, a brief (!) outline of it;
3. where you think your topic fits in the syllabus (roughly).

By November 9, you will submit a draft of your paper, and you will have a week to read and prepare comments on your peers’ drafts. Our meeting on November 16 is reserved for an in-depth discussion of these drafts in class. You are expected to integrate this feedback into your final paper. Remember to reference all your sources and give credit where you benefited from your peers’ feedback!

Our final meeting is reserved for short presentations, followed by Q&A. For all of these assignments, I will provide more detailed instructions in class.

**Short Overview**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Topic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8/24</td>
<td>Organizational Meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8/31</td>
<td>Concept and Issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/7</td>
<td>Social Construction of Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/14</td>
<td>Technology and Gender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/21</td>
<td>Large Technological Systems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/28</td>
<td>Networks and Technological Change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/5</td>
<td>Accidents and Disasters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/12</td>
<td>Testing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/19</td>
<td>Infrastructure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/26</td>
<td>National Technological Styles and National Identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/2</td>
<td>Users</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/9</td>
<td>Techno-Politics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/16</td>
<td>Feedback on Drafts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/23</td>
<td>Thanksgiving recess – no class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/30</td>
<td>Global Perspectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12/7</td>
<td>Presentations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Grade
Your grade will be based on your participation in class (20%), on your reading notes (content, timeliness, and relevance for class discussion; 20%), on the feedback you provide for your peers (content, timeliness, relevance; 15%), and your final paper (outline, draft, and final version; 45%).

Miscellaneous
The VT Honor Code will be enforced in this course. http://www.honorsystem.vt.edu/ http://ghs.grads.vt.edu/ Through the extensive use of peer evaluations and collaborative development in this course, you will be exposed to concepts and ideas that you may want to use in your own work. Getting permission to use those ideas and concepts from the originator (except when it is already in the public domain such as on the Web, or in print) and giving appropriate acknowledgement in your own work circumvents a charge of plagiarism.

If you are unsure about what constitutes plagiarism, please consult the “Plagiarism” handout on the course website, or take the “Plagiarism Module” (30 minutes) for hands-on guidelines on how to avoid theft of words and ideas, at: http://www.english.vt.edu/plagiarism/plagiarism1.html

If you are a student with special needs or circumstances, if you have emergency medical information to share with me, or if you need special arrangements in case the building must be evacuated, please make an appointment with me as soon as possible.

Finally, this course affirms the Virginia Tech Principles of Community. For more information, see http://www.vt.edu/diversity/principles-of-community.html.
Detailed Schedule

Please note that this syllabus is subject to change. Check the most current version online.

8/24: Organizational Meeting

8/31: Concepts and Issues

Readings will include:

9/7: Social Construction of Technology

Readings will include:

9/14: Technology and Gender

Readings will include:

9/21: Large Technological Systems

Readings will include:

9/28: Networks and Technological Change
Readings will include:

10/5: Accidents and Disasters
Readings will include:

10/12: Testing
Readings will include:
10/19: Infrastructure
Readings will include:

10/26: National Technological Styles and National Identity
Readings will include:

11/2: Users
Readings will include:

11/9: Techno-Politics and Development
Readings will include:

11/16: Feedback on Drafts

11/23: Thanksgiving Recess – no class
11/30: Global Perspectives
Readings will include:
New STS work on climate change and geo-engineering, globalization and labor, as well as on crafting international technology policy frameworks.

12/7: Presentations

Version 8/5/11. I reserve the right to make changes to this syllabus.