Technology vs. Democracy: Can the American Experiment Survive American Innovation?

Prof: Alexander Landfair    |    New York University

Science, as it were, proposes that we should enter a new world that has not been made for us. We should like to venture into it; but it does not take us long to realize that it requires a constitution we lack and organs we do not have.

—Gustave Claudin, *Paris* (1858)

We are in danger of losing one of the most important concepts of mankind—that the future is what we make it.

—Edmund N. Bacon, *Design of Cities* (1967)

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Course Description
From the Founders to the Facebook generation, Americans have regarded technological progress as an existential threat to American democracy. In this seminar, you will explore a range of texts—written by scientists, novelists, and religious and civic leaders—questioning whether the American experiment can survive American innovation, and whether its institutions can, or even should, evolve with its technologies.

As citizens and apprenticing scholars, you will devise your own possible answers to these questions (and other questions of your own devising) and share your ideas using a range of modes and genres: class discussions, blog posts, research proposals, and formal research projects.

Learning Objectives
Our goals here are twofold. This class aims not only to foster a deep understanding of texts and ideas central to this issue, but also the habits and practices of experienced writers and researchers. Specifically, you will learn and practice new strategies for:

- Gaining a deeper understanding of texts
- Demonstrating your understanding in writing
- Crafting and articulating good questions
- Conducting discourse-based research
- Using databases and research tools
- Anticipating your readers’ needs and expectations
- Revising holistically, and
- Providing effective feedback.

Readings
Each reading will illustrate or reflect upon new technologies’ possible or actual negative impacts on democracy, including the potential to decrease civic engagement, public faith in government, national solidarity, government efficiency, and legislators access to reliable information as well as the potential to worsen social inequality and political partisanship.

Readings are available on our shared Google Drive folder and posted on the course calendar below. Please bring a copy of each day’s assigned reading, marked up with your reading notes, to class.

Assignments and Grades
Blog posts (15%)
Each week, you will contribute a blog post (400-500 words) offering your interpretations of—and your ideas about—the class readings. These posts are an opportunity to grapple with course readings and shape the direction of class discussion. You can read more about blog posts here.
Discussion Leaders (10%)
Students will work in pairs to lead the class in discussion—introducing the reading for the week, providing key context, asking questions to the group, and prompting a group writing exercise. A sign-up schedule will be distributed during our second class. You can read more about discussion leaders here.

Quizzes (15%)
Weekly multiple-choice and short-answer quizzes will help me to gauge the class’s understanding of class readings, for the purposes of guiding class discussions. You can read more about quizzes here.

Research Proposal & Presentation (20%)
Mid-semester, you will write a research proposal and present your proposal to the class. You can read more about proposals and presentations here.

Research Project (30%)
By the last day of class, you will craft an essay, podcast, or video (2500 words or 12 minutes long) that develops a surprising, clear, and well-supported argument about technology and democracy. You can read more about the research project here.

Participation (10%)
A seminar is a space in which we create understanding collectively. That means that you must attend class ready to listen, think, read, write, re-read, revise, question, and speak thoughtfully. To do all of that, you must complete the reading assignments and writing exercises, and you must complete them with your mind awake. Expect to do some in-class writing every class.

Conferences
You must make arrangements to conference with me (30 minutes each) outside of class at least twice over the course of the semester. These conferences give you the opportunity to discuss your ideas, to work through your drafts, to prepare for presentations, or discuss any aspect of the course. If your schedule precludes you from meeting with me during my regular office hours, you can send me an email to arrange a time to meet. Keep in mind; it may be twenty-four hours (or longer on weekends) before I am able to respond. Please note: Missing a scheduled conference will count the same as an unexcused absence.

Essay Grades and Expectations
Your work will receive letter grades that typically exhibit the following characteristics:

C grades
C-level work fulfills most of the goals of the assignment and responds to peer feedback and to the instructor's comments. If it uses outside sources, it typically summarizes them accurately and
employs them fairly. Grammatical and syntactical mistakes do not impede readers' understanding of the argument.

**B grades**
Strong, thoughtful work. B-level work further develops the skills needed to earn a “C.” “B” writing comes in two basic varieties: the “solid B” and the “striving B.” The solid B is a good, competent piece; it sets out a modest, simple project and executes it well. The striving B may set out an ambitious, exigent project, but not fully execute it. In each case, grammatical and syntactical choices complement the project. B work reflects a strong grasp of the assignment’s goals.

**A grades**
A-level work reflects excellence and artistry. An “A” text, builds on the foundations discussed above and then pushes beyond the goals of the assignment in surprising ways. The argument is provocative and illuminating, possibly addressing an issue from a perspective that most readers have not considered, perhaps even changing the way they look at it altogether. “A” work demonstrates a command of style, voice, mechanics, and usage.

**D grades**
D-level work may appear to have been hastily written, incomplete, or thrown together.

**F grades**
F-level work fails to meet the minimum level of expectations for the assignment.

**Late and Missing Assignments**
All work must be posted to the course website by the deadline in order to be considered on-time. We will do work in class with weekly homework assignments such as weekly response postings, and, thus, they cannot be made up when late or missed. Major assignments (proposals and final projects) will be lowered by one-third of a grade every day that they are late.

**Participation**
Because this course demands high levels of collaboration and discussion to meet its goals, regular participation in class is a baseline expectation. Please come to class having read and marked-up the readings for the day, and focus on the quality of your comments about them. As a group, we will strive to practice Wayne Booth’s idea of “listening rhetoric.” Your goal is not merely to share your ideas but to listen to your classmates’ arguments and warrants and respond in a way that advances the discussion. In rare cases, a student’s participation is so exceptionally attentive to others’ ideas and so productive that we will raise that student’s final grade by one or two percentage points.
Absences
Because this class is structured as a seminar, absences cannot be made up. Absences may be excused for reasons of religious observance, illness, or family emergency. Students with more than two unexcused absences will find their final course grade lowered by 5% for each additional missed class beyond the second. I will reach out to you and to your advisor if you are absent two classes in a row or from any three classes within a three-week period.

Lateness
Lateness is disruptive to the entire class. If you arrive once class is underway or depart before the class session has ended, you will be marked as late. If you arrive more than fifteen minutes late, or leave more fifteen minutes early, you will be marked as absent.

Statement on Academic Integrity
Plagiarism is a serious academic offense. Here is a brief list from NYU's Statement of Academic Integrity of some of the forms plagiarism can take:

- Writing a paragraph which, despite being in different words, expresses someone else's idea without a reference to the source of the idea
- Failing to acknowledge, through proper in-text citation and other bibliographic information, the sources of ideas essentially not one's own, including materials on the Web.
- Submitting work written for one course to a second course without having received prior permission from both instructors.

Final drafts that contain plagiarism will receive a zero, may result in failure of the course, and the case will be reported to Dean of their School, who will initiate the discipline process and determine whether to apply sanctions, which range from a warning to expulsion from the university. For more information on avoiding plagiarism and proper use of internet citation, we recommend visiting these websites:

- "Academic Integrity." New York University, College of Arts & Science.
- Virtual Salt. "Citing Web Sources MLA Style." By Robert Harris. Guidelines to what to cite and how to cite in Modern Language Association style.
- "How to Avoid Plagiarism." Northwestern University. A comprehensive site about academic integrity and citing sources.

The Writing Center
The Writing Center provides additional support for student writers at NYU. Writing Center consultants are EWP faculty; they can provide an outside perspective on a draft, be a sounding board as you develop ideas, or help you better understand where you want to take an essay. You can book appointments in advance through the online scheduler, or walk in.
Other Support Services

**The Center for Students with Disabilities (CSD)**
New York University provides reasonable accommodations to students who document their disability with the Center for Students with Disabilities. If you know or believe you have a disability of some kind, please consult with CSD and your advisor as soon as possible; Expository Writing Program faculty need official documentation from CSD in order to provide accommodations, and we cannot make retroactive accommodations.

**Counseling and Psychological Services**
Counseling and Wellness Services (CPS) at NYU provides many kinds of support for student wellness and academic success. Students may receive psychiatric medication management services through the Student Health Center.

**NYU Wellness Exchange**
College life can be stressful and overwhelming. I encourage you to reach out if you need help. The NYU Wellness Exchange offers free, confidential counseling services. You can reach them 24/7 at the hotline (212) 443-9999 or during walk in hours at 726 Broadway, 344.

Contacting me
Email is always the best way to reach me, although it may be 24 hours (or longer on weekends) before I am able to respond. If I don’t respond, it likely means that the answer to your question is already available to you on the syllabus or elsewhere. You can also reach me in person during my regularly scheduled office hours, by appointment.

Overview of Graded Assignments

**Blog posts**
(prompt available [here](#))
**Goal:** Offer your interpretations of, and ideas about, class readings.
**Due:** Weekly: Sunday nights before 10:00 p.m.

**Research proposal**
(prompt available [here](#))
**Goals:** Develop and articulate a clear, compelling research question.
**Due:** TK

**Research proposal**
(prompt available [here](#))
**Goals:** Craft an original argument.
**Due:** TK
Quizzes
Goal: Demonstrate reading comprehension.
Due: Weekly, in class.

Course Calendar
Subject to change

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Topics</th>
<th>Reading due</th>
<th>Writing Due</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Class #1</td>
<td>Overview, Introductions</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Booths’ rules</td>
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<tr>
<td>Class #2</td>
<td>The Founders and the First Industrial Revolution</td>
<td>At least two texts from <a href="#">this folder</a>.</td>
<td>Blog post</td>
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<tr>
<td>M 2/1</td>
<td><em>Time period</em>: 1750-1850 <em>Themes</em>: class division, enslavement, citizenship.</td>
<td><strong>Summary</strong>: The enlightenment produces new ideas of equality and new technologies that create inequality. America seeks a “middle way” between agrarianism and urbanization. When the middle way fails, Malthusianism gives way to cornucopianism.</td>
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<td>Ethos and audience</td>
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<td>Class #3</td>
<td>The Founders and the First Industrial Revolution continued</td>
<td>At least two texts from <a href="#">this folder</a> that you have not yet read.</td>
<td>Blog post</td>
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<tr>
<td>M 2/8</td>
<td><em>Time period</em>: 1850-1900</td>
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<td>NO CLASS</td>
<td>Presidents Day</td>
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<td>n/a</td>
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<td>M 2/15</td>
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<td>The Second Industrial Revolution</td>
<td>At least two texts from <a href="#">this folder</a>.</td>
<td>Blog post</td>
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<td>M 2/22</td>
<td><em>Time period</em>: 1850-1900</td>
<td><strong>Summary</strong>: Despite growing class inequality, renewed faith in the idea of progress.</td>
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<td>Class #</td>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Topic</td>
<td>Time Period</td>
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<tr>
<td>#5</td>
<td>M 3/1</td>
<td>The Second Industrial Revolution</td>
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<td>#6</td>
<td>M 3/8</td>
<td>The Discovery of the Future</td>
<td>1900-40</td>
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<td><strong>Summary:</strong> The middle way fails: Manufacturers are the majority of American workforce. A radical new approach to the problem of progress.</td>
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<td>M 3/15</td>
<td>Spring Break</td>
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<td>#7</td>
<td>M 3/22</td>
<td>Post-war boom</td>
<td>1940-59</td>
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<td><strong>Summary:</strong> TK</td>
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<td>M 3/29</td>
<td>The Space Age</td>
<td>1960-90</td>
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<td><strong>Summary:</strong> In space age, legislators decry inability to understand policy matters. A novel approach to the problem of progress.</td>
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<td>M 4/12</td>
<td>The Internet Age</td>
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<td><strong>Summary:</strong> TK</td>
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<td>The Internet Age continued</td>
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<td>#12</td>
<td>M 4/26</td>
<td>Web 2.0</td>
<td>2000-present</td>
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<td><strong>Summary:</strong> TK</td>
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<td>#13</td>
<td>M 5/3</td>
<td>Web 2.0</td>
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| Class #14 | **Web 2.0**  
*Continued* | At least two texts from [this folder](#) that you have not yet read. | Final project |

*These readings are strictly optional. We typically won’t discuss them in class, though they provide some of the theoretical and practical foundations of the work we do together. I hope you’ll give them a quick glance now and then.*