Discovery Seminar Proposal 2018: Connection & Consciousness in the Digital Age

Description

This course will explore the ways technology is shaping how we know ourselves, how we perceive others, and how we communicate and interact. For example: Is social media making us more connected or more isolated? What makes us human? Could a machine think and feel? In relying on technology, are we becoming less human? And what role will technology play in our future? Through readings, films, discussions, and social experiments, we will explore questions about consciousness, humanity, love, lust, and loneliness as they relate to our relationship with technology.

Course Curriculum

Readings will include popular science selections from psychology, communication, sociology, and cognitive science. For example, *Alone Together* (Sherry Turkle) illustrates some of the interpersonal dangers in turning toward our phones and away from each other, *Irresistible* (Adam Alter) proposes that modern technology is designed to be addictive, and *Smarter Than You Think* (Clive Thompson) suggests that technology has a positive effect on our individual intelligence and collective consciousness.

Students will also discuss films, series episodes, and podcasts that illustrate our complex relationship with technology. For example, *Her* (film) and *Westworld* (series) both suggest that machines could learn to have humanlike characteristics, or even be perceived in ways that are indistinguishable from humans, while *Black Mirror* is a satirical dystopian series suggesting that many of our current technological practices could have unanticipated consequences.

Assignments will include conducting observational research, interviews and surveys, photojournalism, reflective journaling, and experimenting with students' personal use of technology. For example:

- Observing the frequency of phone usage in public places
- Designing surveys about people's use of technology, distributing them to students' social networks, and analyzing the results
- Interviewing friends and family members about their relationship with technology
- Documenting and analyzing the types of things people post about on Instagram and Snapchat
- Engaging in a "media blackout" in which students avoid any use of technology and report on the experience
- Working in small groups to create a podcast that summarizes their research and readings related to one theme from the class

Learning Goals

1. Understanding and evaluation of one's personal relationship with technology, including some of the costs and benefits
2. Ability to describe factors that influence perceptions of "humanness" in both people and machines
3. College-level research and writing skills
4. Ability to evaluate data and think critically
5. Interpersonal skills, including articulating one's arguments and demonstrating respect and appreciation for diverse perspectives

Contact

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