Tech Labor, Entrepreneurial Life & Precarious Creativity

SI 710 – Prof. Silvia Lindtner, University of Michigan

Winter 2018

Thursdays, 1-4pm

“if capital interweaves technology and power, then this weaving can be undone, and the threads used to make a different pattern.” –Dyer-Whiteford, Cyber-Marx, 1999

“the ability – to manufacture ‘local or global’ at will – is a huge advantage. That simple menu option compresses three centuries of industrial revolution into a single mouse click. If Karl Marx were here today, his jaw would be on the floor. Talk about ‘controlling the tools of production’: you (you!) can now set factories into motion with a mouse click.” –Chris Anderson, Makers: The New Industrial Revolution, 2012

Course Description

This graduate readings seminar provides a comprehensive introduction to some of the major themes that cut across studies of tech labor, power, civic engagement, neoliberal technology, and governance. Drawing from core readings in science and technology studies, feminist and autonomous Marxist studies, labor process theory, anthropology, critical computing, and digital studies, students will gain a critical vocabulary to unpack historically contingent and changing formations of work, labor, resistance, power, governance, and control. From low-wage and micro work on Amazon Mechanical Turk to social media platforms like Facebook that mine data from users for ad revenue and the normalization of risk taking in the creative and tech industries, precarious work has become a condition shared by many. Across professions and domains, individuals are called upon to turn themselves into self-entrepreneurializing actors capable to harness individual life as productive machinery of technological and economic futures. As automation and artificial intelligence once again fuel fears over loss of control, peer production, platform cooperatives, and localism are presented as possible solutions to this rise in precarious work conditions brought about by the post-industrial economy and platform capitalism. Often these alternatives, however, share the same neoliberal underpinnings of the systems they are claiming to challenge.

In the course we will explore questions such as: What are the analytical and theoretical toolkits to make sense of this seeming capitalist surround? How do the promises of tech activism, feminism, and peer production butt against the rise of unemployment and socio-economic disparity? How do we have to rethink what counts as resistance and alternative to the status-quo?

This course does not require any particular prior expertise.

Students from other programs (not SI or STS) are welcome. The course grants credit for the graduate certificate in Science, Technology, & Society. This course is intended for doctoral students. Other graduate students may enroll by instructor permission if there is a good reason to do so.
Required Readings

All required readings except the books listed below will be available for download through the course Canvas site, or through the library’s subscription to ebrary.


Class Requirements

a) **Weekly reading responses:** are due every week and should be a ~500 words long response to the readings. These will be electronically submitted at 8am the day of the seminar. Weekly responses will not be graded.

b) **Seminar paper:** Your seminar paper will be 2500-3500 words in length. The choice of topic and format is up to you, but has to incorporate readings of the seminar. You must receive approval of the topic and format you choose from the instructor. You will submit a proposal due midway through the term and submit the final seminar paper at the end of the term.

c) **Discussion lead:** twice during the term, you will help lead class discussion. This involves the preparation of a 15 minutes introduction and high-level summary of the weeks readings. You can (optional) include additional readings and references that might facilitate class discussion. You are responsible for facilitating the following 30 minutes of class discussion. You will bring a one-page handout (and/or other supporting material of your choice) to facilitate the discussion. A successful discussion ranges broadly over the readings and topic; relates the week’s readings to earlier readings and the larger issues of the course as a whole; involves all the students in the class; and gives all students time and encouragement to express their views and raise the issues they find important. The instructors may occasionally intervene during this period, but the goal is for the students to engage with each other to discuss some of the important issues raised by the readings.

Grading Breakdown

Participation: 35%
Discussion lead: 30%
Final Paper: 35%

All assignments but be turned in on time. No exceptions (without cause).
Seminar Schedule & Weekly Readings

**Week 1 Introduction**


Paul N. Edwards, “How to Read a Book”

“Reading a Scholarly Monograph”

no reading response this week.

**Week 2 Tech Labor, Capital & Feminization of Work**

Christian Fuchs. Digital Labor and Karl Marx.


**Week 3: Labor, Capital & Development**


**Recommended (Optional):**


**Week 4: Feminist Critiques of Labor, Tech & Capital**


Watch: [She is beautiful when she is angry (2014)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5z9v9QmZ440)

*Recommended (Optional):*

*Hannah Arendt. The Human Condition.*

**Week 5 Neoliberal Technology & Post-Soviet Capitalism**


*Recommended (Optional):*

*Chumley. Creativity Class.*


*Joseph Schumpeter. 1942. Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy. 3rd Edition*

**Week 6: Social Media, Digital Labor, & Neoliberalism**


**Week 7: Precarious Creativity and techno-optimism**


*Recommended (Optional):*


Lauren Berlant. Cruel Optimism.


**Week 8: Digital Labor & Autonomous Marxists**


*Recommended (Optional):*


**Week 9: Economization of Life**


*Recommended (optional):*


Judy Wajcman. Pressed for Time.

**Week 10: Life, bodies & biocapital**


*Recommended (optional):*


**Week 11: Design, technology & power**


*Recommended (optional):*


*Silvia Lindtner and Seyram Avle. 2017. Tinkering with Governance: Technopolitics and the Economization of Citizenship. CSCW.*

*Lilly Irani. 2015. The cultural work of microwork. In New Media and Society 17, 5, 720-739.*


**Week 12: Postcolonial Capitalism**


*Recommended (optional):*


**Week 13: Post-capitalism, Crisis and Life otherwise**


Recommended (Optional):


Stengers and Despret. Women Who make a Fuss. The Unfaithful Daughters of Virginia Woolf.


Week 14: Wrap-up Discussion