COMS 361 - Selected Topics Communication Studies 1
Techlash: Critical studies of technological solutionism
Arts 150

General information

Winter 2024
Course pre-requisite: COMS 200, COMS 210, or COMS 230 or permission of the instructor. Not open for students who took COMS 362 in W2023.
Mondays and Wednesdays - 11:35 pm-12:55 pm
Number of credits: 3

Instructor information

Gustavo Ferreira, PhD. (he/him)
gustavo.ferreira@mcgill.ca
Office location / office hours: Arts W-233 / Wednesdays 1:30-3:30 pm – in-person, just show up or zoom by appointment (Calendly link on myCourses).
Communication plan: All course updates and official information will be posted on MyCourses, you should check it for updates regularly – at least once a week. To book appointments, we will use a Calendly link available on myCourses. You can direct other private inquiries by email, and I will try to respond within 2 business days.

Teaching Assistant: Gustavo Haiden de Lacerda
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Office hours: By appointment via Zoom – send me an email and I'll follow up with a Zoom link based on the mutual availability we discuss via email.

Communication Studies: Study of a special field of critical inquiry into media and/or technological practices.

In this course, our aim is to study and employ critical concepts in media and technological analysis. The 2010s were the decade of the Startup and disruption rhetoric. Rooted in hopes of technological development as the solution for all humanities' problems, we have seen the rise and fall of the "Uber of X" solutions from deliveries, through health, to financial services. Despite critiques of such promises being raised almost simultaneously with this enthusiasm, these hopes have longer historical roots and are still central to current technological developments. To understand these contexts, past and present, we will overview studies of digital technology that critically explore their economic and political conditions, ideologies, assumptions, consequences, and the contradictions of their ability to address societal challenges. Questioning the neutrality or objectivity of technological tools, we will use these concepts to map new trends in the tech development world and analyze their discourse and practice, presenting our findings in experimental media modalities. We hope to identify beneficial engagements with media technologies and their proposed innovations.

Learning outcomes

This is a course on critical analysis. Our goal is to identify and interpret stated, embedded, or foundational worldviews, politics, economic structures, interests, and visions of the future in digital technology solutions. By the end of this course, you will be able to:

- **Describe** historical, social, and political contexts and implications of technological development.
- **Explain** and **comprehend** critical concepts about technology, its politics and imaginaries, human agency, and ideology.
- **Identify** trends in computation technology discourse and practice.
- **Apply** knowledge of technological development and concepts to **critically evaluate**, and **analyse** current technological pitches and deployments, and their assessment of societal challenges.
- **Elaborate** questions about technology development to further discuss current critical approaches.
- **Develop** strategies to **collectively plan and produce** critical analysis of technological artifacts, solutions, and business models on different media formats (writing, video, audio and multimedia).

Instructional methods

- Lectures (synchronous and in person)
- Group discussions (synchronous in person and asynchronous online)
- Group projects (time and place at student's choice)
- Research and Analysis assignments (time and place at student's choice)

Course materials, instructions, discussions and updates will be available on myCourses. I encourage you to download the myCourses Pulse mobile app to stay connected and on track. Online office hour meetings will take place on zoom. If you need information on how to plan, access or better use these platforms and do assignments, check out McGill's Learning Resources.

I expect you to show up to class and on time. This is the basics of participation, for more details on participation as an evaluative criterion, see below. Based on health considerations, I understand circumstances may change and make it difficult, or impossible, to attend safely in-person. If this is the case, please contact me. This is also true for our planned evaluation and instructional methods. In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University's control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.

Class Conduct
When interacting with others, you should always be attentive to their well-being, use polite and non-aggressive language, justify your positions, and give sources of information.

When expressing opinions, always reflect on how your thoughts align with different realities and perspectives. In this course we value solidarity as a learning practice: Try to think and take your positions from a solidary position. Acknowledge how your context is affected and affects others. We are allowed to disagree, and we should understand that more than one thing can be true.

Class recordings

Whenever possible, lectures will be recorded and posted to myCourses, while group assignments, presentations and discussions will not. Even in these circumstances, your voice or image may appear in the recordings. If you are concerned about privacy or other uses of the recording, please discuss with me.

Required course materials

All required readings will be available online through McGill services: myCourses, Course Readings and Library or open access links.
Other materials such as videos and podcasts will be linked or referenced on myCourses.
Full information on materials can be found on the schedule below.

Optional course materials

Recommended Readings and other materials are listed alongside required materials on the schedule below.

Evaluation

Name of assignment or exam	Due date (check times)	% of final grade
#1: Participation	Weekly	15%
#2: Mapping technological solutionism	17 Jan, 7, 21 Feb	20%
#3 Group Discussion	Weeks 8 and 11	20%
#4 Critique of Solutionism (in 2 parts)	CSP Plan/Brief – 28 Feb First Version – 3 Apr Final Version – 12 Apr	45% (10%-35%)

Description of assignments

#1 Participation (15%)
Participation means you read the assigned texts, listened, or watched other assigned materials and attend every class prepared with at least one question, thought and example about the week's topic. These assignments refer to comprehension and critical thinking about the readings.

The most important evaluation of this criterium is based on participation responses. Post weekly questions or comments (max. 250 words) drawn from the week's reading on myCourses and be ready to elaborate or discuss them in our Wednesday discussion sections. We recommend you choose what you find the most interesting or pressing question from your notes from the reading and lectures. Be encouraged to add any question you think it is relevant for us to talk about because there will be no "quality" assessment of these, by posting a complete question you already completed the task. However, be sure to exercise your writing to be clear and well-referenced. **Do not copy/paste from others**.

In class, we will cover as many questions as possible, and you are welcome to discuss on myCourses with classmates or with us, if you feel yours was not sufficiently discussed.

Beyond just posting them, the 15% grade will refer also to other modes of participation like:
- Being present and on time
- Contributing your thoughts in class
- Coming to office hours to discuss ideas and assignments.

This is a wholistic grade based on the cumulative posts and the elements above, there isn't just one combination for task achievement.
Here's an example of an A in participation: you posted every participation response, you talked in class at least two times, or you came to two office hour meetings. You were present to most sessions.
And here's an example of an B in participation: you missed more than a couple of participation responses; you talked once in class, never commented in any posting, and never came to an office hour. You were present to most sessions.

#2 Mapping technological solutionism (3 entries) – (20%)
Posted on myCourses: After finishing discussions on 3 major topics: Technological Solutionism, Ideology and/or Ethics, and Sociotechnical Imaginaries and/or Utopianism, students will have to research online and post a short report of around 250 words with an example of initiatives that engage in technological solutionism considering each topic.
The post should give information on (1) what these initiatives are, (2) who's behind it, (3) where they are located/originated, (4) describe what is the problem they supposedly solve and (5) why is it solutionist, articulating the elements from the readings. **Grades will be Pass/Fail based on fulfilling all these 5 tasks.**

#3 Group Discussion (20%)
We will divide the class in 8 large groups which will be assigned a reading to discuss among the group on Wednesday. The discussion should focus on understanding the analysis provided by the text and abstracting it

to a general point to be made about the week's topic: what is the central idea/thesis the text puts forward? One or more student of each group will present a very short (5 min) summary of the text on Wednesday and state this general point. While the student presents, we will draw mind maps in the blackboard seeking shared theoretical elements between the texts.

These are large groups; you should prioritize interaction with your classmates and talking about your impressions of the text more than giving a perfect presentation.

Pass/Fail grading will be based on being present at the discussion and presentation and achieving this generalizing task. The whole group gets the grade for the generalizing task, and each student gets their own grade for being present.

#4 Critique of Solutionism Project – CSP (45%)

The main project will be a critical analysis of the solutionism present in one current technological initiative. It can be taken from our mapping or a new example. Your analysis should draw from the concepts and methods we approached in the course and (1) identify the problem your example states/implies to solve, (2) question its premises, "hidden" motives and/or imaginaries, (3) present a description of the "real" problem(s) that the initiative ignores and (4) an evaluation of its proposed solution (Does it achieve its stated goal or its "hidden" goals? Does it create other problems? Does it have potential to deal with the "real" problem? How?)

This final product can take the form of a short, 7-8 page, doubled spaced (2000 to 2250 words), 12pt font, essay or another type of media content like: a podcast episode or short episode series, a video essay, a social media thread, story or short video sequence, an infographic or illustration, a news reporting, etc.

4.1: a plan or brief (10%)

This where you decide what to do and how. You should present an outline of your project detailing who is involved, the initiative you will critique and possible sources of information. If it is an essay, 2 page maximum (400 to 550 words), double-spaced, contextualization, question, and theoretical framework. If it is another type of project, a script outline with the product's predicted structure, main points to cover, stylistic references, runtime, etc., with no maximum length limit, but at least 300 words. The plan will be evaluated in (a) coherence with the topic of the class, (b) clear vision of the end-product, (c) feasibility of the proposal.

4.2: the end-product (35%)

You deliver on your plan. The resulting product of your research and critical analysis as the written essay or, if it's different type of production, accompanied by a maximum 3 page, double-spaced (600 words), summary and defense (arguing for the relevance of your creative, information and production choices), with student names and credits (what each student did). Appendices, like script, photos, or other materials allowed. Added to the 4 tasks listed for the whole project, we will evaluate the end product based on (d) overall quality (technical, writing, etc.) and (e) coherence with the initial proposal (a,b,c).

Course content

The course is structured in three connected parts. Critical concepts, explores theories and studies of technology and society; Critiques of solutionism, presents sample cases of the critique of technological solutionism using critical analysis; The last and shorter part, "alternative thinking", reflects on how to escape solutionism, and frame new questions on technology and problem solving.

Part 1 - Critical concepts:
- Technological Determinism
- Technological Solutionism
- Ideology and Ethics
- Sociotechnical Imaginaries and Utopianism

Part 2 - Critiques of solutionism:
- Luddism: Opposing Tech Power
- Solving: human bodies, displacement, and hunger
- Solving: the environment, cities, democracy and finance

Part 3 - Alternative thinking
- A brief look at indigenous, anti-colonial and anti-oppressive perspectives on the future, technology, and design.

Class Schedule and readings:

Dates and Readings are always subject to change and will be announced in class and on myCourses.

Week 1	Intro and Determinisms
8 Jan	Course Outline (*this thing here*) Abumrad, J and Krulwich, R (2017) *Revising the Fault Line*. Radiolab. **[podcast]**. 27 Jun 2017. Available at: https://radiolab.org/episodes/revising-fault-line (Accessed 13 Dec 2022). (49min) ***** ***Sensitive content: Please be aware that this episode contains language that may be difficult for some students. It is included in this course because it directly relates to biological determinism.**
11 Jan	Wyatt, S (2008) Technological Determinism is Dead; Long Live Technological Determinism. In: Hackett, EJ et al. (eds) *The handbook of science and technology studies.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 165-180. Wisecrack (2022) *Who Will Survive The AI Revolution?* **[video]**. 29 Aug 2022. Available at: https://youtu.be/gv0aI9p0t4k (20min)

Week 2	Part 1: Internet and Technological Solutionism
15 Jan	Morozov, Evgeny. 2013. "Solutionism and Its Discontents" and "The nonsense of 'the Internet' – and How to Stop It". In To Save Everything, Click Here: The Folly of Technological Solutionism. PublicAffairs. (p. 1-62) Johnston, Sean F. 2020. "Implications of Technological Confidence" and "The Future for Fixing". In Techno-Fixers: Origins and Implications of Technological Faith. Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press-MQUP. (p. 184-238)

	Participation responses (#1) due next morning.
17 Jan	Discussion Session: Internet and Technological Solutionism

Solutionism Mapping (#2) due tonight. |

Week 3	Part 1: Critical Concepts – (Californian) Ideology
22 Jan	Williams, Raymond. 2014. "Ideology". In Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society. New Edition. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press. (p. 107-111).

Barbrook, Richard, and Andy Cameron. 1996. "The Californian Ideology." Science as Culture 6 (1): 44–72. https://doi.org/10.1080/09505439609526455. |
| | **Participation responses (#1) due next morning.** |
| 24 Jan | Discussion Session: The Californian Ideology

Optional Movie:
Ross, Matt, dir. 2016. Captain Fantastic. Comedy, Drama. Electric City Entertainment, ShivHans Pictures. 58min. |

Week 4	Part 1 – Histories and Shifting Ideologies
29 Jan	Turner, Fred. 2008. "The shifting politics of the Computational Metaphor." In From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism. University of Chicago Press. (p. 11-39)

Marx, Paris, and Richard Barbrook. 2021. The Sunset of the Californian Ideology? Podcast. Vol. Tech Won't Save Us. **[podcast]**. 03 Jun 2021. Available at: https://techwontsave.us/episode/63_the_sunset_of_the_californian_ideology_w_richard_barbrook. (Accessed 13 Dec 2022). (60min). |
| | **Participation responses (#1) due next morning.** |
| 31 Jan | Discussion Session: The changing Californian Ideology |

Week 5	Part 1 – Critical Concepts – Solutionist Ethics
5 Feb	Nachtwey, Oliver, and Timo Seidl. 2023. "The Solutionist Ethic and the Spirit of Digital Capitalism." Theory, Culture & Society, October, 02632764231196829. https://doi.org/10.1177/02632764231196829.
	Participation responses (#1) due next morning.
7 Feb	Discussion Session: Solutionism as the spirit of Digital Capitalism **Solutionism Mapping (#2) due tonight.**

Week 6	Part 1: Critical Concepts – Sociotechnical Imaginaries and the Future
12 Feb	Jasanoff, Sheila, and Sang-Hyun Kim. 2009. "Sociotechnical Imaginaries" In Containing the Atom: Sociotechnical Imaginaries and Nuclear Power in the United States and South Korea. *Minerva* 47 (2): 119–46. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11024-009-9124-4. **Pages 122-124.** Tutton, Richard (2021) Sociotechnical Imaginaries and Techno-Optimism: Examining Outer Space Utopias of Silicon Valley. *Science as Culture* 30(3): 416-439.
	Participation responses (#1) due next morning.
14 Feb	**Discussion Session: Sociotechnical imaginaries and optimism**

Week 7	Part 1: Critical Concepts – Technological Utopianism and the Future
19 Feb	O'Shea, Lizzie. 2021. "Technological Utopianism is Dangerous: The Tech Billionaires Have Nothing on the Paris Commune." In Future Histories: What Ada Lovelace, Tom Paine, and the Paris Commune Can Teach Us about Digital Technology. Verso Books. Dickel, Sascha, and Jan-Felix Schrape. 2017. "The Logic of Digital Utopianism." NanoEthics 11 (1): 47–58. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11569-017-0285-6. Marx, P and Eveleth, R (2023) Why Tech Billionaires want to shape our future. Tech Won't Save Us. **[podcast]**. 5 Jan 2023. Available at: https://techwontsave.us/episode/149_why_tech_billionaires_want_to_shape_our_future_w_rose_eveleth (Accessed 5 Jan 2023).
	Participation responses (#1) due next morning

21 Feb	**Discussion Session: Tech Utopia, imaginaries and ideologies** **Solutionism Mapping (#2) due tonight.**

Week 8	**PART 2: Critiques of Solutionism**
	Assignment #3: Group discussion – Discussion in group in class
26 Feb	**Group 1:** Taylor, Linnet. 2021. "There Is an App for That: Technological Solutionism as COVID-19 Policy in the Global North." In The New Common, 209–15. Cham: Springer International Publishing.
	Group 2: Madianou, Mirca. 2019. "Technocolonialism: Digital Innovation and Data Practices in the Humanitarian Response to Refugee Crises." Social Media+ Society 5 (3): 2056305119863146.
	Group 3: Black, Sara. 2021. "Lifelong Learning as Cruel Optimism: Considering the Discourses of Lifelong Learning and Techno-Solutionism in South African Education." Int Rev Educ, October, 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-021-09924-8.
	Group 4: Xu, Zhe, and Mengrong Zhang. 2022. "The 'Ultimate Empathy Machine' as Technocratic Solutionism? Audience Reception of the Distant Refugee Crisis through Virtual Reality." The Communication Review 25 (3–4): 181–203. https://doi.org/10.1080/10714421.2022.2129118.
	Group 7: Sexton, Alexandra E. 2020. "Food as Software: Place, Protein, and Feeding the World Silicon Valley–Style." Economic Geography 96 (5): 449–69. https://doi.org/10.1080/00130095.2020.1834382.
	Group 6: Hajric, Elma. 2020. "A Commentary on Covid-19 Contact-Tracing Apps and Broader Societal Implications of Technosolutionism." In 2020 IEEE International Symposium on Technology and Society (ISTAS):330–38. IEEE. https://doi.org/10.1109/istas50296.2020.9462243.
	Group 7: Gilmore, James N. 2021. "Predicting Covid-19: Wearable Technology and the Politics of Solutionism." Cultural Studies 35 (2–3): 382–91. https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2021.1898021.
	Group 8: Shew, Ashley. 2020. "Ableism, Technoableism, and Future AI." IEEE Technology and Society Magazine 39 (1): 40–85. https://doi.org/10.1109/mts.2020.2967492.
28 Feb	Groups summarize their discussion, and we articulate it with critical concepts. **CSP Plan or Brief (#4.1) is due today.**

Week 9	Winter Reading Break
4 Mar **6** Mar	**NO CLASS**

Week 10	Part 2: Critiques of Solutionism – Luddism: Opposing Tech Power
11 Mar	**Invited Speaker: Erza Teboul** *** Readings will likely change *** Mueller, Gavin (2021) "Introduction" and "The Nights of King Ludd". In Breaking things at work: the Luddites are right about why you hate your job. London; New York: Verso, an imprint of New Left Books. Ganesh, Maya Indira and Moss, Emanuel (2022) Resistance and refusal to algorithmic harms: Varieties of 'knowledge projects'. *Media International Australia* 183(1): 90-106.
	Participation responses (#1) due next morning
13 Mar	**Discussion Session: The luddites and identifying power in solutionism**

Week 11	PART 2: Critiques of Solutionism
18 Mar	**Assignment #3: Group discussion – Discussion in group in class**
	Group 1: Schulte, Stephanie Ricker. 2020. "Fixing Fake News: Self-Regulation and Technological Solutionism." In Fake News: Understanding Media and Misinformation in the Digital Age, edited by Melissa Zimdars and Kembrew Mcleod, 133. MIT Press.
	Group 2: Greene, Daniel. 2021. "Introduction: 'The Internet: Your Future Depends on It.'" In The Promise of Access: Technology, Inequality, and the Political Economy of Hope. MIT Press.
	Group 3: Campbell-Verduyn, Malcolm. 2021. "Conjuring a Cooler World: Blockchains, Imaginaries and the Legitimacy of Climate Governance." Imaginaries of Climate Governance Evolving in Blockchain Space 28. https://doi.org/10.14282/2198-0411-GCRP-28.
	Group 4: Jutel, O. 2022. "Blockchain Humanitarianism and Crypto-Colonialism." Patterns (N Y) 3 (1): 100422. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.patter.2021.100422.

	Group 5: Taffel, Sy. 2021. "Communicative Capitalism, Technological Solutionism, and The Ocean Cleanup." In Plastic Legacies, edited by Trisia Farrelly, Sy Taffel, and Ian Shaw, 181. Edmonton: Athabasca University Press.
	Group 6: Marx, Paris. 2022. Road to Nowhere: What Silicon Valley Gets Wrong about the Future of Transportation. Verso Books.
	Group 2: Arjaliès, Diane-Laure. 2021. "The Role of Utopia in the Workings of Local and Cryptocurrencies." In The Palgrave Handbook of Technological Finance, 95–137. Springer.
	Group 8: Pink, Sarah, Kari Dahlgren, Yolande Strengers, and Larissa Nicholls. 2022. "Anticipatory Infrastructures, Emerging Technologies and Visions of Energy Futures." In Infrastructural Being, 33–60. Cham: Springer International Publishing.
20 Mar	**Groups summarize their discussion, and we look for patterns of research and critique writing.**

Week 12	PART 3: Alternative Thinking
25 **Mar**	Krenak, Ailton. 2020. Ideas to Postpone the End of the World. Anansi International. Barendregt, Wolmet, Christoph Becker, EunJeong Cheon, Andrew Clement, Pedro Reynolds-Cuéllar, Douglas Schuler, and Lucy Suchman. 2021. "Defund Big Tech, Refund Community." Tech Otherwise. https://doi.org/10.21428/93b2c832.e0100a3f.
27 **Mar**	Lewis, Jason Edward. 2016. "A Brief (Media) History of the Indigenous Future." Public 27 (54): 36–50. https://doi.org/10.1386/public.27.54.36_1. Mitchell, A and Chaudhury, A (2020) Worlding beyond 'the' 'end' of 'the world': white apocalyptic visions and BIPOC futurisms. *International Relations*, 34(3), 309-332. **Participation responses (#1) due next morning**

Week 13	PART 3: Alternative Thinking
1 Apr	**GOOD FRIDAY HOLIDAY – NO CLASS**
3 **Apr**	**Discussion: resisting solutionism** A discussion on alternative technologies, futures, and power relations **First versions of CSP (#4.2) are due tonight.**

Week 14	Final meeting
8 Apr	**Groups will provide feedback on classmates' projects.**
10 Apr	I will be available to discuss topics of the course and further questions on revising your project. **Final versions of CSP (#4.2) are due on morning 12 Apr.**

McGill policy statements

- Language of submission
  "In accord with McGill University's Charter of Students' Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French written work that is to be graded. This does not apply to courses in which acquiring proficiency in a language is one of the objectives." (Approved by Senate on 21 January 2009)

  « Conformément à la *Charte des droits de l'étudiant* de l'Université McGill, chaque étudiant a le droit de soumettre en français ou en anglais tout travail écrit devant être noté, sauf dans le cas des cours dont l'un des objets est la maîtrise d'une langue. » (Énoncé approuvé par le Sénat le 21 janvier 2009)

- Academic integrity
  "McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures" (Approved by Senate on 29 January 2003) (See McGill's guide to academic honesty for more information).

  « L'université McGill attache une haute importance à l'honnêteté académique. Il incombe par conséquent à tous les étudiants de comprendre ce que l'on entend par tricherie, plagiat et autres infractions académiques, ainsi que les conséquences que peuvent avoir de telles actions, selon le Code de conduite de l'étudiant et procédures disciplinaires. » (Énoncé approuvé par le Sénat le 29 janvier 2003) (pour de plus amples renseignements, veuillez consulter le guide pour l'honnêteté académique de McGill.)

- Artificial Intelligence (AI) Tools: I expect you to do your own work and I do not advise you to use these tools. However, you are not forbidden to use them in this course. If you use Generative AI (such as ChatGPT), I expect you use it as a revising, suggestion tool, not as your writer. You should be transparent as when and how you used it in your assignments adding an appendix for each assignment detailing what tools you used, how they were used, and how the results from the tool were incorporated in your work.