Apple, Google, Facebook
Fall 2018, M/W/F 12:30-1:40pm

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Description: Our current relation to technology and information feels new, but it fits in with long term cultural and religious transformations in American life. This exploration of the three corporations in the title of the course will be framed by critical texts such as Robert Bellah's classic sociological study *Habits of the Heart.* The course is not only interested in the story of these three corporations, but also the elements of technology that they exemplify: personal devices, information, and social websites. The argument of this course will be that our relationship to technology are connected to American notions of the self, society, and religiosity.

Objectives:

- technology and the Internet play a central role in our lives, yet we don't commonly learn how to approach these technologies with a critical framework. This class attempts to form a critical language for talking about technology.
- This class will approach religion from a sociological perspective, as exemplified by Robert Bellah. Students will come to see religion as a social phenomenon, and not as exemplified by particular religious traditions.
- This class provides an introduction to the ongoing flow of discussion about technology. It's no surprise that this course changes every time I teach it as a result of constant change in the technology itself.
- To foster an environment of learning and inquiry in our class. Interestingly, this is the approach to corporate and personal life encouraged by the corporations that have succeeded in the technology sector.

Note: this course is not meant to encourage praise for everything about Silicon Valley, though some of the material we examine will take an overwhelmingly positive view. Remember there is much to criticize about Silicon Valley!

Textbooks:
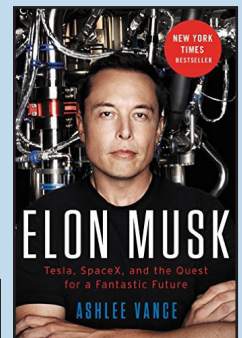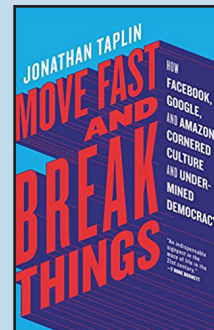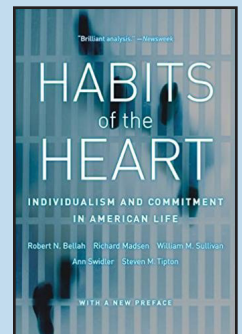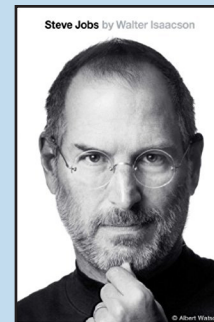
Steve Jobs, Walter Isaacson

Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life, Robert Bellah

Move Fast and Break Things: How Facebook, Google, and Amazon Cornered Culture and Undermined Democracy, Jonathan Taplin

Elon Musk: Tesla, SpaceX, and the Quest for a Fantastic Future, Ashlee Vance

Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now, Jaron Lanier

Other readings will be posted on the Moodle page for our course. Check there for readings that are not from our four textbooks. We will have a number of required film screenings. These films and television shows are an integral part of this course, and you will need to make arrangements to view these films.

Assignments:
(note that the gradebook will be available on Moodle so that you can follow your progress)

1. Designing Community on the Internet (3 pages, 18%). Students will choose a social media platform and analyze a feature of the program that encourages the development of community. It might also be the case that the features of the platform do not lead to community but rather to the building of a social enclave. The sites you might choose include Flickr, Reddit, Instagram, SnapChat, Tumblr, Twitter, etc. These terms for community will be encountered in our reading and discussion of Robert Bellah in weeks 3 and 4. Your paper should include images in the form of screenshots (from desktop or mobile device) that will illustrate the points you are making. One component of your grade will be the design of the paper, and whether you effectively use images to make your points about the platform. Your project should demonstrate that you have thought deeply about the platform and the ways it pushes you into interacting with other people. I am looking for a critical approach to the topic, and not a simple "tour" of the site and your use of it. **The designing community project will be due on Monday, October 9.**

2. Critical Responses (30%, 3 per student, 3 pages + 7% for group interactions). Working in teams on projects is typical of work in Silicon Valley. Much research has been done by Google into understanding what makes a good team (see article on Moodle). It turns out that what makes a good team is not being best friends or hanging out after work, but fostering an environment of listening and openness to the input of others. I will pair up students into teams of three that will remain throughout the term (I will do this as soon as the enrollment stabilizes). Each week (beginning in week 2) one of the three members of the team will write a response. Each writer will take up the question for the week. The actual writing is to be done by an individual member of the team, but by Friday afternoon each member of the team should read the response and offer commentary and proof reading. The final response should be revised to reflect the insight of the other people on the team. This interaction will take place on Moodle. To be clear: only the writer will be graded for the response, but the other two people on the team should sign off on the response that is turned in. These responses will be graded on the basis of their **clarity** in taking up a **specific question** and their ability to offer **analysis** and **argumentation** for the position taken. Some of the questions may invite you to find material from outside our reading and thus require research on your part. These weekly responses will be due by Saturday at 5pm.

3. Final Social Media Essay (4 pages, 15%). Using the arguments of Jaron Lanier as the basis of your reflections, craft a personal statement about the use of social media. This should not describe your current usage, but rather explain how you would ideally make use of social media platforms. Would you use social media platforms at all? Which platforms would you use? How would you use them? You are free to take this in whatever direction seems most relevant to you, but you must interact with the arguments of Jaron Lanier. This assignment is due Monday, November 19 at noon.

3. Weekly Reflections (15%). At the end of each week you will write a reflection on Moodle about how your thinking has changed. This reflection should interact in a direct way with discussions in class. You could expand on a point made in class or raise a question that came to mind during class discussion. These personal reflections should be ~150 words in length. These reflections must be completed by the end of the week (Saturday 5pm). There is no making up these reflections.

4. Pop Quizzes (15%, at least 6). I have heard that it is possible to get through classes at Lawrence without doing assigned reading. I would feel this class was a failure if I felt students were not doing the reading. At the beginning of some classes I will pass out a pop quiz that will be aimed solely at evaluating whether you have done the reading. (In other words, the quiz won't be about deep analysis, which I realize sometimes requires discussion.)

Class Policies:

Honor Code. The class assignments assume adherence to the Lawrence University honor code. Your adherence to the Lawrence University honor code should be noted on each assignment you turn in.

Attendance. Your attendance in class is very important for your learning the material of this course. Students get two unexcused absences in the course of the term. This is meant to cover unexpected illnesses and travel. Any absences after the second can be excused only by a note from student health services or from the athletics department. Any unexcused absences after this will affect the student's final grade. In addition, your notebooks will be incomplete since you don't have the handouts.

Students are expected to show up to class on time, and excessive tardiness will be treated the same as missing a class.

Leaving Classroom. I understand that there may be an occasion when you need to get up and go to the bathroom or whatever, but this should be a rare occurrence. If a pattern of leaving the classroom develops, I will need to be told a reason or I will treat these as an attendance issue.

Late Assignments. Late assignments will be marked down a letter grade. If you have a conflict or some other pressing reason as to why the paper cannot be turned in on time, then talk to me well ahead of time so that arrangements can be made.

Technology. This is a class on the subject of technology, but during our class time the use of laptops and other devices is discouraged (if you have a particular need, then talk to me). This policy on technology is in line with the way work is done at tech companies.

Healthy Balance. Lawrence is a vibrant community, a place of tremendous vitality and richness that offers abundant opportunities for meaningful work and play. This abundance brings with it the challenge of maintaining a healthy, balanced life – a life characterized by productive tension among such competing needs as work and play, sleep and wakefulness, solitude and sociability. All members of the Lawrence community – students, staff, and faculty – have the responsibility to promote balance in their lives by making thoughtful choices.

Balanced choices flow from an understanding that human flourishing requires the fulfillment of very real physical, emotional, spiritual, and social needs.

Technology is for many of us a point of anxiety, both socially and professionally. It is my hope that our reflection on technology and the values of Silicon Valley will enable you to be more critical and knowing in your use of technology, as well as better prepared to enter a work world where innovation and quick change is the norm.