Virtual Economies and Virtual Selves

Academic Year 2013-14
Hilary Term
Location:

Course Provider:
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Background

Do Internet technologies give rise to radical social change, or are they simply extensions of existing social, economic and geographic processes and inequities? Early thinkers of the emerging Internet saw it as a new digital cyberspace that transcends the material world and its societies, creating new “virtual” spaces and identities to replace them. Later accounts showed that this view was misguided, and sought to reduce the net’s effects to its material, social and political underpinnings. In some areas, the debate has recently been reignited. Immersive virtual environments create experiences of “being there” in a virtual space. Advances in cryptography allow new virtual currencies to emerge and challenge national currencies. Innovations in crowdsourcing and prosumer work reconfigure productive processes and undermine conventional employment arrangements. Are we witnessing a re-emergence of the virtual?

Course Objectives

This course offers a tour of selected cutting-edge phenomena where Internet technologies seem to be at the root of radical social discontinuities. In particular, the course focuses on discontinuities related to economic institutions and experiences of the self, with less emphasis on politics. For each phenomenon, relevant theory and background is introduced from science and technology studies, sociology, economics and economic geography. The students are then given the opportunity to analyse and debate for themselves whether cyberspace does transcend the material.

Learning Outcomes

Upon course completion students will:
• Understand the debates concerning Internet-led social change and how they relate to virtual spaces, identities and economies.

• Possess the conceptual tools to analyse whether a social change is *caused* by technology or whether technology is implicated in it in other ways.

• Be familiar with a range of “virtual” phenomena where Internet technologies seem to create opportunities for social change, particularly in the areas of economic institutions and experiences of the self.

• Be able to situate these novel phenomena in larger theoretical and historical contexts.

• Be able to assess critically the future potential of virtual economies and experiences to bring about social change.

**Teaching Arrangements**

There will be eight weekly two hour classes which consist of lectures and discussion. Eight topics will be covered: (1) Technology and Social Change; (2) Virtual Geography; (3) Virtual Reality; (4) Virtual Identities; (5) Virtual Consumption; (6) Virtual Work; (7) Virtual Economies; and (8) Virtual Money. Sessions 2, 3 and 4 will be led by guest speakers (see Key Readings, below).

Before every meeting, students are required to submit a brief (one page) critical reflection on the readings. The reflections can (but need not) be structured around one of the following two questions: Does cyberspace transcend the material? Do Internet technologies give rise to radical social change, or are they simply extensions of existing processes and inequities?

**Assessment**

Students will be assessed through a final essay that is no longer than 5000 words which must be submitted to the Examinations School by 12 noon of Monday of Week 1 of Trinity term. The essay will cover one or several of the course topics and students will choose a topic in consultation with the course tutor in advance. The essay should be clearly related to the topics of the course. Students will also be required to write one short (advised length: 1500-3000 words) essay on any of the 8 topics covered. This essay will provide a means for students to obtain feedback on the progress they have achieved in preparation for the final essay.

**Key Readings**

A reading list is given below for each class. Items listed under essential readings MUST be read by all students in preparation for the class. Items listed under additional readings are optional, but it may be useful to read at least their abstracts/summaries before the class.
**Week 1: Technology and Social Change**

Do Internet technologies give rise to social change, or are they simply extensions of existing social processes? During the first week, we learn about the philosophical underpinnings of this debate from science and technology studies (STS) and take a quick tour of its historical battlegrounds. In STS terms, the debate can be framed as the contrast between *technological determinism* (the notion that technological progress causes social change) and various responses to it, collectively known as *social shaping of technology* (which seek to show how technological progress is socially determined). We examine what determinists and constructionists of the past have posited about the Internet’s effects on economic institutions, identity and social relations, and what actual outcomes have been observed.

**Essential readings:**


**Week 2: Virtual Geography (Mark Graham)**

Spatial metaphors such as “cyberspace” and “digital world” are often used to convey the notion that the Internet has brought the world closer together and at the same time created new virtual spaces of action, opening up radically new social and economic opportunities for those who were previously isolated. But to what extent are these social and economic processes in fact still conditional on physical geographies? Are virtual space metaphors appropriate, or do they simply mask the complex actual geographies of Internet-mediated processes?

**Essential readings:**


* Graham, Mark “Geography/Internet: Ethereal Alternate Dimensions of Cyberspace or
Week 3: Virtual Reality (Ralph Schroeder)

In contrast to earlier communication technologies, certain technologies are able to produce a rich range of sensory cues that create the experience of *presence*, or “being there” in a virtual place. In multi-user virtual environments, the experience grows into *co-presence*, or being there together. In this session, we learn about the conditions for the experience of presence and co-presence, and examine its social implications in various contexts.

* Schroeder, Ralph  
  * Chapters 1, 2

Axelsson, Ann-Sofie  
Schroeder, Ralph  

Blascovich, Jim  
Bailenson, Jeremy  

Boellstorff, Tom  

Steinkuehler, Constance  
Williams, Dmitri  

Turner, Jonathan H.  

Williams, Dmitri  
Week 4: Virtual Identities (Bernie Hogan)

This lecture focuses one of the key arguments in Internet studies – to what extent are we different people online than offline? That is – should we consider a form of ‘digital dualism’ wherein we think of the online world as a separate space, or should we consider it merely an extension of offline life? By focusing narrowly in this lecture on gender and sexuality, we will be able to see both the fluidity of identity through text based constructions as well as the ways that biology tends to constrain our ability to be someone else.

* Jurgenson, Nathan

* Hogan, Bernie

Kendall, Lori
• Chapter 6: Computer mediated relationships, pp. 139-179

Kendall, Lori

Marwick, Alice E.
Boyd, Danah

Reed, Adam

Turkle, Sherry
• Chapter 8: Tiny Sex and Gender Trouble, pp. 210-232

Week 5: Virtual Consumption

One way in which identities are constructed and performed in a consumer society is through consumption behaviour. The Internet is implicated in many small transformations in consumption behavior and popular culture. One of the most striking of these is the rise of virtual goods, or artificially scarce digital objects that are bought and sold for real money. In this session, we critically assess the question of whether the Internet transforms or simply perpetuates consumer cultures.

* Lehdonvirta, Vili
A history of the digitalization of consumer culture: From Amazon through Pirate Bay to FarmVille. In: J. Denegri-Knott and M. Molesworth (eds), Digital
The above reading is essential, as is any one of the following additional readings.

- **Lehdonvirta, Vili**
  - **Castronova, Edward**
  - • Chapter 3

- **Lehdonvirta, Vili**
  - **Virtanen, Perttu**

- **Lehdonvirta, Vili**
  - **Wilska, Terhi-Anna**
  - **Johnson, Mikael**

- **Lehdonvirta Vili**

- **Denegri-Knot, Janice**
  - **Molesworth, Mike**

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**Week 6: Virtual Work**

Firms are using Internet technologies to push workers out of the door and into homes, cafés and offshoring facilities, while at the same time pulling consumers closer to the productive processes through models such as open innovation, crowdsourcing, prosumer work and service co-creation. In this session, we examine whether these reconfigurations of work and organization spring from the new possibilities opened up by technological progress, or whether they can be seen as reflections of broader economic and managerial trends that predate the Internet.

- **Lehdonvirta, Vili**
  - **Ernkvist, Mirko**

- **Kleemann, Frank**
  - **Voß, Gerd G.**
  - **Rieder, Kerstin**

- **Ritzer, George**
  - **Jurgenson, Nathan**

- **Brabham, Daren C.**
  - “Moving the crowd at iStockphoto: The composition of the crowd and motivations for participation in a crowdsourcing application.” 2008. *First
**Week 7: Virtual Economies**

Many online games and virtual communities feature entire economies revolving around the production and exchange artificially scarce virtual goods. In some aspects these virtual economies mimic the institutions of national economies, while in other aspects they can be quite original. In this session, we learn about virtual economies through case examples, and ask whether the potential for some kind of radical economic or social discontinuity can be found within them, or whether they simply represent virtual extensions of the global market society.

Essential readings:

* Lehdonvirta, Vili
  Castronova, Edward
  **Virtual Economies: Design and Analysis.** 2014. MIT Press.
  - Chapter 1

* Castronova, Edward

Lehdonvirta, Vili
Castronova, Edward
**Virtual Economies: Design and Analysis.** 2014. MIT Press.

Castronova, Edward

Fairfield, J.

Lastowka, Greg

Dibbell, J.
Week 8: Virtual Money

In the final session, we focus on money, a complex topic that can bring together earlier themes from economic institutions and political power to geography. We learn about the fundamentals of money from economics and economic history, examine the technological and ideological underpinnings of emerging cryptocurrencies like Bitcoin, and think about their potential to bring about social change, to “transcend” material politics and economies, and what kind of a future that would imply.

* Lehdonvirta, Vili
  Castronova, Edward
  Virtual Economies: Design and Analysis. 2014. MIT Press.
  - Chapter 10

* Nakamoto, Satoshi
  http://bitcoin.org/bitcoin.pdf

Galbraith, John K.

North, Peter