Background

The internet has been associated with social changes in government, business, research, and many other areas of everyday life. Moreover, in the short time in which it has been in widespread use, the technology itself has changed rapidly. The Internet was initially mainly used for communication via email, but with the Web it has, among things, also become a vast repository of online information. This transformation is still incomplete: the embedding of the Internet in other technologies such as digital television and mobile phones is still ongoing. Nevertheless, throughout the developed world, the Internet and related information and communication technologies have already become a well-established and integral part of social life.

Research on the social implications of the Internet is still at an early stage, but there are already some key insights. This course will provide an overview of the major findings to date within several social science disciplines, including communication studies, sociology, and political science. One aim of the course is to identify the overlaps and divergences among different research approaches. Another is to give students who come from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds a common grounding in research on the Internet, its social shaping and impact.

The debates about the social implications of the Internet have focused on the digital divide, potential for e-government and social mobilization, distributed work, impact on economic growth and commerce, and governance and regulation of the Internet. Within these topics, debate has often tended towards extremes, claiming revolutionizing effects of the Internet or arguing that little if anything is changed by the technology. There has also been a tendency to highlight the utopian and dystopian effects in a one-sided way. This course will attempt go beyond these extremes and identify which research agendas have yielded the most promising results and are based on the strongest evidence.

Key Themes

Three key themes will run through all the topics discussed in this course, and students are expected to bear these in mind when undertaking course readings or attending classes:

1. Do online relations depart from, reflect, or complement offline social structures?
2. Which disciplines contribute most to our understanding and knowledge of the social implications of the internet? What are the assumptions made, and how powerful – or uncertain – are the findings? Are the findings from different disciplines complementary, or at odds with another?
3. Does the internet have one effect, or many? What is different about this technology, and sets its implications apart from those of other technologies?

Course Objectives

The course will identify the strengths and weaknesses of different social science approaches. It will cover major theoretical debates and the empirical evidence that is needed to assess them. The course will range
across a variety of topics in relation to these debates – including distributed collaboration, the use of online tools by social movements, and regulation and governance of the Internet – in order to illustrate the breadth and variety of substantive areas of study of the Internet.

The study of the social implications Internet and related information and communication technologies cuts across different social science disciplines. These include media and communications, certain areas within computer science (Human-Computer Interaction, Computer-supported Cooperative Work), politics, sociology, psychology, economics, and anthropology. By the end of the course, students will have a thorough understanding of the main perspectives and key findings about the social implications of the Internet and other new media technologies.

Learning Outcomes

At the end of the course students will:

- Have a thorough grasp of major concepts and debates about new information and communication technologies and social change
- Be able to identify where insights from across the social sciences overlap or diverge
- Be familiar with a number of substantive topics that will be relevant for research on many aspects of Internet studies
- Be able to relate social science research on the Internet to policy - and to the design and development of the Internet

Teaching Arrangements

The course will be taught during Michaelmas term in eight weekly classes, each consisting of a lecture followed by student presentations and seminar discussion.

All classes will take place on Tuesdays 10-12 in the seminar room at OII.

Each student will be required to give one ten minute presentation on a specific aspect of the session topic or to review the argument of one of the books under the additional readings for each session topic. Details of these presentations will be agreed in Week 1.

Assessment

For the purposes of formal assessment all students will be required to produce two 3,000 word essays. There will be no examination.

One the essays will be related to the topics covered, and students may pick from any of the questions listed under each week’s topic. For essay 2, students will choose a question on a topic related to their research interests. This should be agreed with the Course Tutor (Ralph Schroeder) in advance. The essay should be clearly related to the key themes of the course outlined above.

Either of these essays can be done first, but one essay must be submitted by 5pm on Friday of Week 5 and the second by 5pm on Friday of Week 8.

Submission of essays

Essays must be submitted to the OII's Student and Academic Affairs Officer (Laura Taylor Laura.Taylor@oii.ox.ac.uk) via email in pdf format.

A penalty for late essays will be enforced, with 5% of the essay’s marks awarded being deducted every day after the deadline until the essay is handed in. Extensions may be granted in exceptional circumstances only, and must be obtained in writing from the Director of Graduate Studies (Vicki Nash Victoria.Nash@oii.ox.ac.uk) IN ADVANCE of the essay deadline.
Topics

1. The Internet in Everyday Life: Domestication and Globalization
2. An Anthropological Perspective on the Internet
3. User Experience Research: An Industry Perspective
5. Young People and New Media
6. Distributed collaboration and e-Research
7. Internet and Democracy
8. The Internet and Society: Visions and Realities

General Readings


Selected Internet Resources

Pew Internet and American Life Project http://www.pewinternet.org/index.asp
World Internet Project http://www.worldinternetproject.net/

Key to Readings

A reading list is given below for each class. Those items marked with an asterisk (*) are essential reading and MUST be read by all students in preparation for the class. Items which are not marked with an asterisk are additional readings which need only be consulted in the preparation of student presentations or term assessments.

Week 1. October 14

The Internet in Everyday Life: Domestication and Globalization (Ralph Schroeder)

We all use a number of media on to maintain our relationships on a day-to-day basis. The ‘domestication’ perspective on ICTs proposes that users shape new technologies by embedding them in their everyday lives. This perspective focuses on the social relations around ICTs in the home and changing patterns of—for example—time use and mobility. Within this perspective, how do the uses of the Internet compare with the uses of telephones, mobile phones, television, and other new media? There are now also extensive cross-national surveys of the uses of the Internet and other ICTs. Clearly there are ever denser global networks of communication, but some have argued that the divide between the information (and communication) rich and poor has been growing. To what extent is it possible to answer a basic question
such as whether the Internet and other ICTs homogenize social relations or make them more diverse across the globe?

Question: ‘What are the primary uses of the Internet in everyday life? Are the uses of the Internet and ICTs converging or diverging in the developed world?’

* Haddon, Leslie Information and Communication Technologies in Everyday Life, chapters 6-7.
* Rantanen, Tehri The Media and Globalization, chapters 4-5.

Silverstone, Roger and Eric Hirsch (eds) Consuming Technologies
Flichy, Patrice Dynamics of Modern Communication
Wellman, Barry and C. Haythornthwaite (eds). The Internet in Everyday Life, parts 1-3, 5
Schroeder, Ralph Rethinking Science, Technology and Social Change, chapters 5-6.
Meyrowitz, Joshua No Sense of Place
Flichy, Patrice Dynamics of Modern Communication
Fischer, Claude America Calling: A Social History of the Telephone to1940
Katz, James and Rice, R. Social Consequences of Internet Use: Access, Involvement and Interaction

Week 2. Oct. 21

An Anthropological Perspective on the Internet (Xiang Biao)

We all agree that the Internet has changed our life significantly, but the exact changes are hard to pinpoint. This is partly because the Internet pervades everyday life and yet does not provide any clear features that can be isolated from everyday contexts. The effects of the Internet are thus at once powerful and elusive - and an anthropological approach may be helpful. In this lecture we will discuss the strengths and limitations of anthropological approaches, and probe how ethnographic fieldwork can yield insights and contribute to interdisciplinary studies of the Internet.

Question: ‘Discuss the strengths and limits of an ethnographic approach to the internet with reference to a particular fieldwork study (your own, or a well-documented book-length study).’

* Slater, Don Miller, Daniel "Conclusion.", in The Internet - An Ethnographic Approach.

Eriksen, T. H. Tyranny of the Moment: Fast and Slow Time in the Information Age.
Wheeler, D. The Internet In The Middle East: Global Expectations And Local Imaginations In Kuwait.
Schlecker, M. Kelty, Chris. Two Bits: The Cultural Significance of Free Software.
Yongming, Z. Historicizing Online Politics: Telegraphy, the Internet and Political Participation in China.
Week 3. Oct. 28

User Experience Research: An Industry Perspective (Jens Riegelsberger)

How to translate good research ideas into products? - this is a key issue for social science. Innovation is often based on observing and understanding people: their needs, their desires, and the obstacles they face in everyday actions. These questions are frequently summed up in the term 'user experience' – which has become ubiquitous in the Internet industry over the last decade. The concepts and methods that make up user experience have foundations in many well-established disciplines: anthropology, cognitive science, and psychology – to name a few. This lecture will draw on the experience at Google to give insights into how user experience research forms part of product development. We will discuss the elements of user experience, core methods and approaches, and how a focus on users is part of Google's culture of innovation. Taking a field research project for Google Maps as a case study, we will also discuss the practical aspects of conducting user experience research in industry.

Question: ‘Using a concrete case study, discuss how research can inform the user-centred design of a particular internet technology’?


Haddon, L. Everyday Innovators: Researching the role of users in shaping ICTs.

Von Hippel, E. The Sources of Innovation.
Kelley, T. The Art of Innovation.
Berkun, S. The Myths of Innovation.
Norman, D. The Design of Everyday Things.
Beyer, H., Contextual Design: Defining Customer-Centered Systems
Holtzblatt, K.
Cooper, A. et al. About Face 3: The Essentials of Interaction Design
Kuniavsky, M. Observing the User Experience: A Practitioner's Guide to User Research
Moggridge, M. Designing Interactions

Week 4. Nov. 4

The Social Psychology of Computer-Mediated Communication (Ellen Helsper)

Social psychologists have assessed the effect of computer-mediated communication both experimentally and by means of surveys. Experimental studies have focused on self-presentation, social cues, media richness, and the effects of time. Survey studies have examined social capital, the strengths of ties, and personal well-being. The problem with the former is that it is difficult to assess how well the findings of research travel outside of the laboratory context. The problem with the latter is that it is difficult to assess how robust the findings in the broader context of social changes. What can we learn from studies of the social psychology of online relations? What lessons can be learned from linking them to longitudinal survey studies of Internet and related ICT uses?

Question: ‘What effect do different modes of Internet-based communication have on interpersonal communication? Critically assess recent reviews of research in this area.’

*Walther,J.et al. ‘The Role of Friends' Appearance and Behavior on Evaluations of Individuals on Facebook: Are We Known by the Company We Keep?’ Human Communication Research, 2008, 34 (1), 28 – 49.


Joison, A.N. Understanding the psychology of internet behaviour: Virtual worlds, real lives, p.115-142.

Valkenburg, P. et al. ‘Precursors of adolescents' use of visual and audio devices during online communication.’ Computers in Human Behavior 23(5): 2473-2487.


Reeves, Byron The Media Equation: How People Treat Computers, Television and New Media

Nass, Clifford Like Real People and Places

Week 5. Nov.11

**Young People and New Media (Rebecca Eynon)**

How do younger people use the Internet and other new media in their everyday lives? Are new media changing patterns of leisure and sociability? What findings do we have about young people's use of the Internet? And how does it compete with, and complement, face-to-face relationships, and uses of other new media? Is it possible and desirable to regulate the content available on the Internet to avoid harming children? What is the evidence about harmful uses such as video games? One important use of the Internet is for research and education: what are the most successful educational uses of new media? This session will examine how policy can respond to social science research.

Question: ‘How can concerns about harm be balanced against the need to maintain the openness of the Internet?’

* Livingstone, Sonia Young People and New Media, chapters 1, 4, 6.

Livingstone, Sonia and Moira Bovill (eds) Children and their Changing Media Environment: A European Comparative Study

Millwood Hargrave, Andrea and Livingtone, Sonia Hurt and Offence in Media Content: A Review of the Evidence

Glotz, Peter et al. (eds) Thumb Culture: The Meaning of Mobile Phones for Society

Vorder, Peter and Jennings Bryant Playing Video Games: Motives, Responses, and Consequences

Ito, Mizuko et al. (eds) Personal, Portable, Pedestrian: Mobile Phones in Japanese Life

Buckingham, David ‘Children and New Media’ in Leah Lievrouw and Sonia Livingstone (eds), The Handbook of New Media, (student edition, pp.75-91).

Haddon, Leslie Information and Communication Technologies in Everyday Life, chapters 3


Mesch, Gustavo and Ilan Talmud The Quality of Online and Offline Relationships, the role of multiplexity and duration, The Information Society, 22(3).

Buckingham, David (ed). Youth, Identity, and Digital Media.

Baron, Naomi Always On: Language in an Online and Mobile World
Week 6. Nov. 18

Distributed collaboration and e-Research (Ralph Schroeder)

Researchers increasingly work at-a-distance and across institutional, disciplinary and geographical boundaries. What are the challenges of online collaboration? How is working in distributed mode different from face-to-face meetings and collaboration? When people work in a distributed group, what are the implications for trust and leadership? There are also ethical and legal issues in e-Research, such as the privacy and anonymity of data, intellectual property and access to shared digital resources. And finally, different disciplines organize online research in different ways. What are the lessons from these ways of working together? The lecture will examine both general issues in distributed research and individual e-Research projects.

Question: ‘Using specific examples, assess the advantages and drawbacks of distributed collaboration or e-Research.’

* Cummings, Jonathon and Sarah Kiesler ‘Collaborative Research Across Disciplinary and Institutional Boundaries’. Social Studies of Science, 35(5), 2005


Hinds, Pamela and Kiesler, Sarah (eds) Distributed Work

Salaff, Janet et al. ‘Escape from the Fishbowl? Office Workers Go Virtual’ available at http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/~wellman/


Koku, Emmanuel et al. ‘Netting Scholars: Online and Offline’ in American Behavioral Scientist, 43, 1999


Yates, JoAnne Control through Communication

Week 7. Nov.25

Democracy and the Internet (Vicki Nash)

It has been argued that the Internet has the potential to enhance democratic practice by enabling new forms of communication between politicians and citizens. A broader argument has been that the Internet can revitalize civil society or the public sphere by easing connection and communication between citizens themselves or by providing new sources of information available to all. What evidence is there to suggest that either of these hypotheses are true? How well do these views fit with existing theories of democracy, participation and representation? The main focus of this session is to assess the implications of the Internet for political change (outside of e-government).

Question: ‘Political use of the Internet and other new media simply serves to reinforce existing patterns of democratic participation and inequality’. Discuss.
The Internet and Society: Visions and Realities (Ralph Schroeder)

To what extent do we live in an information society? It has been argued that we live today in a 'network society', with information and communication flows transforming relations of production and power. Does this mean that there is greater equality between people, that barriers of space and time are eliminated, and cultural boundaries become irrelevant? Should the Internet be regarded as a tool for strengthening 'community', creating new networks and mobilizing social movements and other groups? Or the opposite - do new media diminish the role of 'community'? Does the Internet enhance the scope for individualism and creativity, or does it homogenize society and mainly provide more consumption and entertainment? These questions have often been raised in the context of American society, and it is important to ask how they apply in other parts of the world. This final lecture shall examine the normative questions about ICTs and society from the perspective of different visions of the ‘good’ society.

Question: ‘Provide a critical assessment of Benkler’s The Wealth of Networks’.

*Benkler, Yochai The Wealth of Networks, chapters 5,9.

Webster, Frank Theories of the Information Society
Xiang, Biao Global Body Shopping: An Indian Labor System in the Information Technology Industry (In-Formation)
Pool, Ithiel de Sola Technologies of Freedom
Putnam, Robert Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community
Beniger, James The Control Revolution, esp. chapters 1, 10
Thompson, John The Media and Modernity: A Social Theory of the Media.
Starr, Paul The Creation of the Media: Political Origins of Modern Communications.
Bimber, Bruce Information and American Democracy: Technology in the Evolution of Political Power
Czitrom, Daniel Media and the American Mind
Turner, Fred From Counterculture to Cyberculture