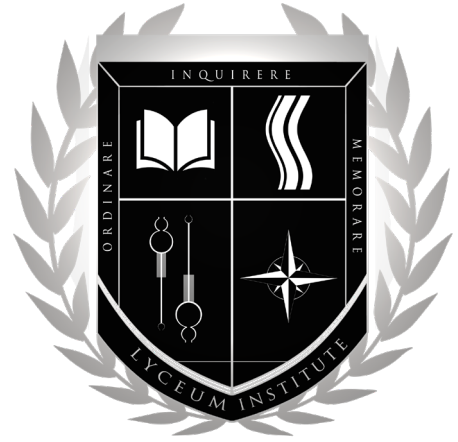# THE DIFFICULTIES OF TECHNOLOGY

SEMINAR SYLLABUS

[2024 Q4]

AN INITIATIVE OF THE HUMANITAS TECHNICA PROJECT

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DESCRIPTION

We are a technological people. Our lives are surrounded by, structured by, permeated by technologies and their products. This permeation extends not only to the corporeal environments, but to the psychological habituation through which we view the world. Thus, even when it is not directly present, technology remains virtually powerful in our experience.

To many, this immersion seems normal and fitting to what we are as human beings—or at least, not worth questioning. While certainly we all see the negative consequences of social media use, or parents might worry over the neurological effects of excessive screen time in young, developing brains, other technologies seem to produce massive benefits at little evident cost. Technological development has led to, for instance, improved medicine, with better life expectancies, the prevention of disease, the treatment of it, and greater success rates in surgical interventions; to more efficient food producing, harvesting, storing, and transporting techniques and instruments, reducing hunger and stabilizing populations around the globe; and to bettered communication networks, which have allowed us to stay in contact with loved ones despite moving around the globe, to share ideas with the like-minded, and to learn things in a more flexible and adaptable structure. Why question the causes of so much good?

But do we *really understand* technology? And in the absence of such an understanding, do we truly understand its effects? No, and no. This is not to say we are entirely ignorant of what technology is, but the new unanticipated ways in which our world keeps changing because of it shows we have not yet firmly grasped its essence—and that what understanding we *do* have is not widely-enough shared.

By critically examining a myriad of difficulties attendant upon a technology-permeated life, viewed through a diversity of readings and conversations, we will strive to improve not only our collective understanding of technology but also our abilities to communicate that understanding.
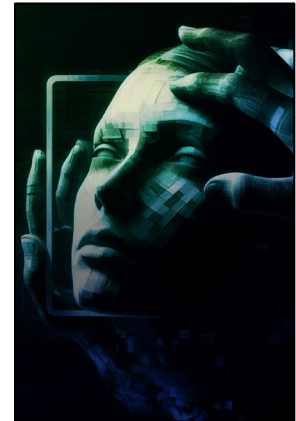
METHOD

The seminar is 8 weeks long, with one recorded lecture and one discussion session each week. Most discussion sessions are structured around selected topics, motivated through primary and secondary readings, and key questions raised through the lectures. Participants are expected to have read the required reading and listened to the lecture prior to the session, so that they may engage in a semi-structured discussion directed and moderated by the instructor. *Continual discussion* via textual chat throughout each week will foster that participation and engagement. Participants will be expected to partake in these discussions on a regular basis and will be challenged to do so directly.

It is expected that participation in this advanced seminar will require a minimum of **5-10+ hours per week** of reading, listening, discussing, and reviewing material. Because the amount of secondary material is quite extensive, however, one can easily spend much more time deeply engaging, not only in examining that material but in conversing about it—and participants are encouraged to dive deeply into this multifaceted discussion!

READING AND MEDIA

The required and recommended texts for this seminar will be made available in PDF, taking from the very wide range of sources which provide the stimulus for the lectures and discussion sessions. A tertiary group of texts—named below as background readings—will be suggested as relevant for each week as well. In addition, other forms of media such as videos, lectures, podcasts, etc., will be suggested in the post for each week. All offerings aside from required texts are intended to stimulate consideration from diverse perspectives on each of the topics. A comprehensive bibliography of all texts, including assigned readings as well as background materials that are generally related to the course as a whole and grouped according to topic (but not suggested with any corresponding week), will be provided. Note that this bibliography will comprise tens of thousands of pages of material—no one is, of course, expected to read this all. **Readings are subject to change**.

LECTURE

Each week there will also be an audio lecture (approximately 30-60 minutes in length), posted to Teams at the beginning of the week. This lecture will be based upon the assigned reading, but will also stray into related topics—such as may be drawn from recommended or background readings—and may use the reading as a launching point for addressing related issues. The purpose of these lectures is to help orient participants to questioning how we struggle with and resolve the difficulties of technology which structure thinking through this seminar, as well as to raise specific questions that should help structure and guide our discussion sessions. As highly-technical in content and discussion, it is recommended that one listens to these lectures carefully, pausing and re-winding as necessary, while taking notes.

DISCUSSION

The heart of the seminar is the discussion session (**Saturdays 1:45pm-2:45pm ET**, officially—though many sessions run longer): where all the thoughts emergent and encountered throughout the week—via the reading, lecture, and on-going textual conversations in the Teams channel—are brought into explicit conversation. This allows us to attempt a concerted effort at bringing resolution to our difficulties, and—failing such a resolution—to direct our inquiry further.

Each discussion session will begin with a brief synopsis of the week's material and focal questions on whichever aspects of technology center the conversation. Beyond the direction provided by the instructor, participants are encouraged to bring their own concerns explicitly into view and to engage with the instructor and one another in civil debate and collective inquiry.

CONTRIBUTIONS

Though no one is required to produce any contribution from out of this seminar, it is hoped that—as part of the Humanitas Technica project—participants will discover their thoughts coalescing into a verbal form, primarily those of essays or articles. These compositions may be evaluated for publication in *Reality* (perhaps as a collective issue, if sufficient contributions are offered). These may be either essays (roughly 2000-5000 words) or articles (typically from 8000+).

SCHEDULE

Week I 09/22–09/28	The Conception of Technology Lecture 1: Thinking and the Technological Required Readings: • Heidegger 1953: *The Question Concerning Technology*. • Ellul 1954: "Situating the Technical Phenomenon" in *The Technological Society*. Recommended Reading: • Floridi et al. 2015: *The Onlife Manifesto: Being Human in a Hyperconnected Era*.
Week II 09/29–10/05	Technology and the Psyche Lecture 2: Faculties, Habits, and Extensions Required Readings: • McLuhan 1964: *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, Part I. • Kemple 2024: "A Primer on Thomistic Psychology – Faculties and Functions".
Week III 10/06–10/12	Natural and Artificial Environment Lecture 3: Semiosis of Environment Required Readings: • Mumford 1961: *The City in History*, c.17, "The Myth of Megalopolis". • Engelmann 2007: "The Mechanistic and the Aristotelian Orientations toward Nature and their Metaphysical Backgrounds". Background Reading: • Eddington 1927: *The Nature of the Physical World*, c.1, "The Downfall of Classical Physics". • Heidegger 1942: Lecture on Aristotle's *Physics B.1*. • Wallace 1996: *The Modeling of Nature: Philosophy of Science and Philosophy of Nature in Synthesis*. • Engelmann 2017: *Nature and the Artificial: Aristotelian Reflections on the Operative Imperative*.

Week IV 10/13–10/19	**Technology of Biology and Biological Environments** Lecture 4: Enhancement and Moral Justifications Required Readings: • Kass 1985: *Toward a More Natural Science: Biology and Human Affairs*, "Introduction" (1-9) and c.1, "The New Biology: What Price, Relieving Man's Estate?" • Sandel 2007: *The Case Against Perfection*, c.1, "Ethics of Enhancement". Recommended Reading: • Wiener 1950: *the Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society*. • Wachs 2015: *The New Science of Communication*, c.6, "Cyberspace, Cyborgs, Cybernetics, Systems Theory, & the Tetrad".
Week V 10/27–11/02	**Culture as a System** Lecture 5: Systems as Procrustean Thinking Required Readings: • Schumacher 1973: *Small is Beautiful*, II.3, "Resources for Industry" and II.5, "Technology with a Human Face". Recommended Readings: • McLuhan and Powers 1989: *The Global Village*, II. "The Global Effects of Video-Related Technologies" (83–144). Background Readings: • Lyotard 1979: *The Postmodern Condition*, c.1, "The Field: Knowledge in Computerized Sciences". • Winner 1982: "Semiotics of Culture" in *Frontiers in Semiotics*. • Postman 1992: *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*. • Deely 1994: *The Human Use of Signs, or: Elements of Anthroposemiosis*.
Week VI 11/03–11/09	**Governments and Technology** Lecture 6: Ability, Regulation, and Force Required Readings: • McLuhan 1964: *Understanding Media*, c.21, "Press: Government by News Leak". • Barba-Kay 2023: *A Web of Our Own Making*, c.3, "The Sound of Our Own Voices". Background Readings: • Simon 1949: *Philosophy of Democratic Government*, c.9, "Democracy and Technology". • Marx 1994: "The Idea of 'Technology' and Postmodern Pessimism" in *Does Technology Drive History*?
Week VII 11/10–11/16	**Communication: Media, Institutions, Environments** Lecture 7: World War Three Required Readings:

	• McLuhan and McLuhan 2011: *Media and Formal Cause*, selections.
	Recommended Readings:
	• ACPA Conference – Digital Identity and Disintegration of the Human Soul.
	• Weaver 1948: *Ideas Have Consequences*, c.5, "The Great Stereopticon".
	• Deely 1994: *New Beginnings*, c.6, "How do Signs Work?"
	• Kemple 2021: *Introduction to Philosophical Principles*, c.2.5 (74–107).
Week VIII 11/17–11/23	## Technology and the Whole Person Lecture 8: Resolution and Integration This week is reserved to reflect upon the seminar and to think about how we might resolve the difficulties of technology.