Technology and Digital Culture

Christina L. Ivey, Ph. D.
christina.ivey@siu.edu

Classroom:
Office: COMM 2002K

Course Summary and Objectives

Welcome to *Technology and Digital Culture*!

What are the implications of our "always on" culture? What will advances in robotics and artificial intelligence mean for humans? How will increasingly immersive media environments shape human relations with other humans and non-humans? What impact does hyperpublicity have on reputation, interpersonal relationships, and civic affairs? How is the internet changing patterns of surveillance and voyeurism? Is "digital immortality" something to strive for or resist? How will new technologies help us love and hate better? These questions—and many more like them—are (or are soon to be) pressing issues that demand thoughtful responses. *Technology and Digital Culture* will explore these questions in the context of *Black Mirror*, a BBC/Netflix series about the near future.

This course is particularly geared towards honor students due to the level of ethical conversations surrounding technology. As such, this course promotes/encourages critical thinking as well as application of fantasy world ethics to our own reality.

**In order to receive Honors Credit for this course, you MUST receive a grade of a C or better.

Learning Outcomes

After successfully completing this course you will be able to:
- Explain controversies about technology and digital culture from multiple perspectives. (Oral communcation)
- Understand ethical issues, policy implications, and historical antecedents related to digital technology. (Inquiry and Analysis)
- Develop ways to navigate communication challenges of emergent technologies. (Critical Thinking)

Student Engagement:

I will try to answer emails within 24 hours. Please feel free to drop in anytime during office hours (listed above) – but I would appreciate an email that you're coming in, please 😊

Course Readings

REQUIRED RESOURCES:

All readings will be available on D2L as PDFs.
Access to a Netflix account. *Black Mirror* is streaming ($8.99/month.)
Warning: This course is rated "R." *Black Mirror* features adult themes involving sex, violence, and salty language. If you are uncomfortable viewing and discussing these themes, then I recommend that you drop this course.

Course Requirements/Assignments

Reading Engagement. (5 points/week for 15 weeks; 3 lowest grades dropped, 60 points). Each week, students will engage with the readings by creating a 250-400 word post on the D2L discussion board and by bringing any questions they may have about the readings/episodes to class.
*This assignment works toward the "Critical Thinking" learning outcome.

Discussion Guides. (10 points/discussion guide for 3 discussion guides; 30 points). Small groups will take the lead on developing discussion guides for 3 episodes over the course of the semester. Discussion guides will include an episode synopsis, list of main characters, discussion questions, companion texts, and other items that would enrich viewers' experience of *Black Mirror*. We will assign groups and episodes during Week 1 of the semester.
*This assignment works toward the Oral Communication and the Inquiry and Analysis learning outcomes.

Rethinking Digitality. (50 points). Individual students will compose a vision of our shared digital future that offers an alternative to *Black Mirror*'s bleak dystopia. Students can use a mix of speculative fiction and analytical argument to "rethink digitality"—how might digital technologies be bent towards building a utopia we want to live in? Compositions can be short papers, videos, audio productions or other creative artifact.
*This assignment works toward the Critical Thinking learning outcome.

Final Project: All final projects will be group projects unless a student can demonstrate why that would not work for them (please see Christina for further instruction). Otherwise, groups of 3-5 students have the following options for their final:
*This assignment works on all three learning outcomes.

- **Commercial**. Group will develop a commercial for *two* of the technologies featured in *Black Mirror*. Using clips from *Black Mirror* and other available resources, groups must imagine what kind of rhetorical appeals might be marshaled to sell these new technology products and develop a compelling 30 second or 1 minute commercial spot. These will be presented during the last week of classes.

- **Policy Brief**. Groups will compose a 5 page policy brief that proposes a governmental regulation on an existing or near future technology that is related to one of the technologies in the *Black Mirror* universe. Policy briefs outline the scope of the problem, offer several policy alternatives, and make recommendations for a specific course of action. The brief should be well researched and use credible sources to cite reasonings for the regulation. These will be presented during the last week of classes.
  Here are a couple of websites to help with formatting and examples of a policy brief:
    - https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/policy-briefs/
    - https://idrc-crdi.ca/en/funding/resources-idrc-grantees/how-write-policy-brief

- ***Black Mirror* Episode.** Students in groups will develop their own original *Black Mirror*-style episode. Although the subject matter is open for discussion, a possible focus of the episode might be the surveillance potential of "ed tech" converging with a pandemic. Presentations of the episode could be similar to the discussion guides during the semester that includes things like: episode synopsis, list of main characters, potential companion texts, etc. These will be presented during the last week of classes.

- **New Episode Analysis.** In April of 2025, *Black Mirror* released its latest season (Season 7). Obviously, none of those episodes were covered in the readings we had for this semester. For this option, groups will co-write a paper analyzing something from the latest season using theories and ideas from class. You can choose a single episode, a common theme, or compare/contrast current episodes to ones that were previously released. The paper should be at least 15 pages in length, and contain a clear introduction, literature review, argumentation, and impacts/conclusion. The groups will give a brief presentation of the elements of the paper during the last week of class.

General Statements

CMST Accessibility Statement:

Your success in class is important to me. Many of us need various learning accommodations because we each learn differently. If aspects of this course negatively affect your learning experience or exclude you, please let me know as soon as you feel comfortable. If you need reasonable accommodations, you have a right to have them met, so please notify me so we can work together to create an inclusive learning environment. We can form an agreement to document those reasonable accommodations. The Office of Access and Accommodations (OAA) office provides support and various services for students with disabilities. To best serve the student population, OAA requests you contact the office at the beginning of the semester or at your earliest convenience. OAA is located in the Student Health Center, Room 220, and can be reached at 618-453-5738 (VP 618-615-4492), access@siu.edu, or access.siu.edu. The Achieve Program also offers support to students with learning disabilities and can be reached at 618-453-6155, achieve@siu.edu, or achieve.siu.edu.

Title IX:

Title IX makes it clear that violence and harassment based on sex and gender is a Civil Rights offense subject to the same kinds of accountability and support applied to offenses against other protected categories such as race, national origin, etc. If you or someone you know has been harassed or assaulted, you can find the appropriate resources here: http://safe.siu.edu.

Preparation and Absences:

It is imperative that you come to class ready to discuss the readings. So much of this class is unpacking how the fantastical relates to our current everyday experiences, and discussion is the best way to do that. Also, a key grade for this class is the discussions – you would want other students to contribute to your day, so please offer them the same courtesy.

Having said that, it is also imperative that you come to class every day. Obviously, extreme circumstances are excused but please try to limit absences.

Assignments:

All assignments must be:

> *A reasonably sized font (Times New Roman 12, or Calibri 11)
>
> *Double-spaced
>
> *Lacking extra spaces between sentences, paragraphs, and sections
>
> *1 inch margins
>
> *Left-aligned
>
> *Proofread and spellchecked

In other words, do not resort to logistical games to meet a page requirement. I reserve the right to deduct points from assignments not following these guidelines.

Use of AI:

As we will discuss, it is important to use any new technology as ethically as possible. In this class, that means 1) never submitting exact text generated by AI (i.e. you must adapt results to the assignments), and 2) letiing me know when you have used AI on your assignments.
Usage of GenAI programs and attempting to pass off AI-generated work as your own will be considered academic dishonesty and addressed accordingly (i.e. pursuit of an academic dishonesty case).
If you are unsure if the use of AI is acceptable while working on an assignment in this course, ask me!

Tentative Schedule of Readings

Introduction – Science Fiction and Culture
Tuesday 8/19:
Introductory thoughts and syllabus

Thursday 8/21:

David Kyle Johnson, with Leander P. Marquez, and Sergio Urueña, "*Black Mirror*: What Science Fiction Does Best," in *Black Mirror and Philosophy: Dark Reflections*, ed. David Kyle Johnson (Wiley, 2020), 3-8.

Spectacle, Media Ecology, and Analysis (I)
Tuesday 8/26:
Morgan & Purje, "An Illustrated Guide to Guy Debord's 'The Society of the Spectacle,'" *Hyperallergic*, August 10, 2016, https://hyperallergic.com/313435/an-illustrated-guide-to-guy-debords-the-society-of-the-spectacle/.

Thursday 8/28:
Trischa Goodnow, "Visual Bias in Time's 'The Great Divide': A Semiotic Analysis of Clinton and Obama Photographs" in *American Behavioral Scientiest* 54(4): 406-416

Spectacle & Media Ecology (II)
Tuesday 9/2:
S1: E1 The National Anthem

Brian J. Collins with Brandon Boesch, "*The National Anthem* and Weighing Moral Obligations: Is It Ever OK to F*ck a Pig?," in *Black Mirror and Philosophy: Dark Reflections*, ed. David Kyle Johnson (Wiley, 2020), 11-19.

Thursday: 9/4
S5: E2 Smithereens

Pierluca D'Amato, "*Smithereens* and the Economy of Attention: Are We All Dopamine Addicts?," in *Through the* Black Mirror, eds. Terence McSweeney and Stuart Joy (Palgrave, 2019), 83-94.

Spectacle & Media Ecology (III)
Tuesday: 9/9
S3: E6 Hated in the Nation

Julia M. Hildebrand, "Overextended Media: Hashtag Hatred and Domestic Drones," in *Black Mirror and Critical Media Theory*, eds. Angela M. Cirucci and Barry Vacker (Lexington, 2018).

Thursday 9/11:
S2: E3 The Waldo Moment

Greg Littmann, "*The Waldo Moment* and Political Discourse: What's Wrong with Disrespect in Politics?," in *Black Mirror and Philosophy: Dark Reflections*, ed. David Kyle Johnson (Wiley, 2020), 59-68.

Surveillance, Punishment, and Control (I)
Tuesday 9/16:
S3: E3 Shut Up and Dance

Stuart Joy, "Shame, Stigma, and Identification in 'Shut Up and Dance'," in *Through the* Black Mirror, eds. Terence McSweeney and Stuart Joy (Palgrave, 2019), 137-150.

Thursday 9/18:
No Class – work on "Rethinking Digitality" Assignment

Surveillance, Punishment, Control (II)

Tuesday 9/23:
S2: E2 White Bear

Javier Cigüela Sola and Jorge Martínez-Lucena, "Screen Technologies and the Imaginary of Punishment: A Reading of Black Mirror's 'White Bear," *Empedocles: European Journal for the Philosophy of Communication* 7 (1): 3-22.

Thursday 9/25:
S1: E2 15 Million Merits

Mark R. Johnson, "'Fifteen Million Merits': Gamification, Spectacle, and Neoliberal Aspiration," in *Through the* Black Mirror, eds. Terence McSweeney and Stuart Joy (Palgrave, 2019), 33-42.

Gamefication and War (I)
Tuesday 9/30:
S3: E2 Playtest

Soraya Murray, "Augmented Reality Bites: 'Playtest' and the Unstable Now," in *Through the* Black Mirror, eds. Terence McSweeney and Stuart Joy (Palgrave, 2019), 125-135.

Thursday 10/2:
S3: E5 Men Against Fire

Ana Došen, "Deviating the Other: Inspecting Boundaries of Progress in 'Men Against Fire,'" in *Through the* Black Mirror, eds. Terence McSweeney and Stuart Joy (Palgrave, 2019), 165-177.

Gamefication and War (II)
Tuesday 10/7:
S5: E1 Striking Vipers

Darren M. Slade, "*Striking Vipers* and Closed Doors: How Meaningful are Sexual Fantasies?," in *Black Mirror and Philosophy: Dark Reflections*, ed. David Kyle Johnson (Wiley, 2020), 241-250.

Thursday 10/9:
S4: E5 Metalhead

Barbara Gurr, "Killing the Creator in 'Metalhead,'" in *Through the* Black Mirror, eds. Terence McSweeney and Stuart Joy (Palgrave, 2019), 245-55.

Memory, Tracking, and Datafication (I)
Tuesday 10/14
S4: E3 Crocodile

Jossalyn G. Larson, "The Sovereignty of Truth: Memory and Morality in 'Crocodile'," in *Through the* Black Mirror, eds. Terence McSweeney and Stuart Joy (Palgrave, 2019), 217-229.

Thursday 10/16:
S3: E1 Nosedive

Sean Redmond, "The Planned Obsolescence of 'Nosedive,'" in *Through the* Black Mirror, eds. Terence McSweeney and Stuart Joy (Palgrave, 2019), 111-123.

Memory, Tracking, and Datafication (II)
Tuesday 10/21:
S4: E2 Arkangel

Guy McHendry, "'Arkangel': Postscript on Families of Control," in *Through the* Black Mirror, eds. Terence McSweeney and Stuart Joy (Palgrave, 2019), 205-216.

Thursday 10/23:
S1: E3 The Entire History of You

Henry Jenkins, "Enhanced Memory: 'The Entire History of You,'" in *Through the* Black Mirror, eds. Terence McSweeney and Stuart Joy (Palgrave, 2019), 43-54.

Memory, Tracking, and Datafication (III)
Tuesday 10/28:
S4: E4 Hang the DJ

Aidan Power, "Stop Me If You Think You've Heard This One Before: Relationships and Late Capitalism in 'Hang the DJ'," in *Through the* Black Mirror, eds. Terence McSweeney and Stuart Joy (Palgrave, 2019), 231-244.

Thursday 10/30:
Rethinking Digitality Due! Turn in my 11:59 PM No in-person class.

Embodiment and Transcendence (I)
Tuesday 11/4:
S2: E1 Be Right Back

Andrew Schopp, "Making Room for Our Personal Posthuman Prisons: *Black Mirror*'s 'Be Right Back,'" in *Through the* Black Mirror, eds. Terence McSweeney and Stuart Joy (Palgrave, 2019), 57-67.

Thursday 11/6:

S2: E4 White Christmas

Cansu Canca and Laura Haaber Ihle, "*White Christmas* and Technological Restraining Orders: Are Digital Blocks Ethical?," in *Black Mirror and Philosophy: Dark Reflections*, ed. David Kyle Johnson (Wiley, 2020), 71-79.

Embodiment and Transcendence (II)
Tuesday 11/11:
S3: E4 San Junipero

James Cook, "*San Junipero* and the Digital Afterlife: Could Heaven be a Place on Earth?," in *Black Mirror and Philosophy: Dark Reflections*, ed. David Kyle Johnson (Wiley, 2020), 71-79.

Thursday 11/13:
S4: E1 USS Callister

Steffen Hantke, "Dethroning the King of Space: Toxic White Masculinity and the Revised Adventure Narrative in 'USS Callister,'" in *Through the* Black Mirror, eds. Terence McSweeney and Stuart Joy (Palgrave, 2019), 193-204.

Work Week on Final Projects
Tuesday 11/18:
You will find your groups on this day – be prepared with some ideas for the Final Project.

Thursday 11/20: NCA
Christina will be attending the National Communication Association from Wednesday, 11/19-Sunday 11/22. Email responses will be slower than usual.

Thanksgiving
Tuesday 11/25: Thanksgiving
Thursday 11/27: Thanksgiving

Embodiment and Transcendence (III)

Tuesday 12/2:
S4: E6 Black Museum

Gerry Canavan, "Hope, With Teeth: On 'Black Museum,'" in *Through the* Black Mirror, eds. Terence McSweeney and Stuart Joy (Palgrave, 2019), 257-270.

Thursday 12/4
S5: E3 Rachel, Jack, and Ashley Too

George A. Dunn, "Empathy, Emulation and Ashley Too: Can a Robot Be a Friend?" in *Black Mirror and Philosophy: Dark Reflections*, ed. David Kyle Johnson (Wiley, 2020), 260-269.

Tuesday 12/9:
Final Presentations 1

Thursday 12/11:
Final Presentations 2

Finals Week

All projects due the day of the Final Exam by 11:59 PM.

I confirm that I have read this syllabus and understand the expectations and course policies it details:

_____ _____
Signature Date

_____
Name (printed)