

PHIL 634 – Issues in the Ethics of Technology

Fall 2022 – R 11:35-2:25pm
LEA 927

Chris Howard

chris.howard@mcgill.ca

919 Leacock (<https://mcgill.zoom.us/j/2959872915>)

Zoom Hours: T 3:00-5:00pm (and by appointment) – join [here](#).

Overview

This seminar will explore and interrogate recent work focused on issues in the ethics and philosophy of technology. We'll consider questions concerning privacy and digital surveillance, social media addiction, algorithms and their impact on autonomy, moral and epistemic challenges associated with online communication, the simulation argument, the relation between the virtual and the real, existential risk and longtermism, and moral and political issues to do with increased adoption of cryptocurrency.

Readings

There are two required books:

MacAskill, W. (2022). *What We Owe the Future*. Basic Books.

Richards, N. (2021). *Why Privacy Matters*. Oxford University Press.

Two eBook copies of each of these are available through the library. Print copies are available for purchase at Le James. All other readings for the seminar are available on myCourses.

myCourses

This seminar has a myCourses site. Assigned readings and course documents can be found here. All announcements will be posted here, and this is where you'll turn in your assignments.

Assessment

Participation	10%
Reading Responses	15%
Final Paper Proposal	20%
Referee Report	10%
Final Paper	45%

Participation

You are expected to attend every class, complete all assigned readings, and to participate actively and respectfully in each meeting (by raising questions and/or making comments).

Reading Responses

Beginning the week of **September 13**, you will submit a short response to the readings each week. These will be due on Wednesdays by 6:00pm (EST) and should focus on the readings that we'll discuss the

following day. The length of your reading responses should be approx. 350-450 words. They should either motivate and raise a thoughtful question about the reading or develop a critical response to (an aspect of) the reading. Your reading responses must be submitted to the appropriate folder under 'Assignments' on myCourses. Late submissions won't be accepted for credit. **You can skip two without penalty.**

Final Paper Proposal

By **Thurs., November 3**, you'll submit a 1,500-word proposal for your final paper. This should include a brief introduction to your topic, a sketch of your main argument, some objections you'll address and your (tentative) replies, and a reading list. A guide to writing your proposal will be available on myCourses (under 'Content'). I will be available and happy to meet to discuss your topic as you prepare your proposal. The proposal must be submitted to the appropriate folder under 'Assignments' on myCourses.

Referee Report

You will exchange rough drafts of your final papers with another student and provide a "referee report" on a peer's draft that gives comments and feedback. As a guide, I will make a sample referee report available on the myCourses site (under 'Content'). Roughly, the report should summarize the draft and respectfully identify its weaknesses and strengths, providing guidance about how the author might improve it. You must submit to your partner and me a rough draft of your paper by the start of our last class meeting (**Thurs., December 1**). You must submit to your partner and me your referee report within the following week.

Final Paper

Your final paper should be between 5,000 and 7,000 words. You will submit with it a response to your "referee" which explains the revisions you made in light of their report. If you decide not to revise in light of certain of the referee's suggestions, you must explain why in your letter. I will make a sample letter available on myCourses. Both your paper and your letter must be submitted to the appropriate folder under 'Assignments' on myCourses. They will be due by **Thurs., December 15**. You are strongly encouraged to meet with me several times to discuss your paper. I am more than happy to talk with you about your topic, give you reading recommendations, and to provide writing guidance.

Late Work Policy

I'm happy to consider requests for extensions for any assignment (except reading responses) but ask that you please make the request at least one business day prior to the due date. If you anticipate that you'll need an extension, notify me as soon as possible so that we can determine an alternative deadline.

Language Policy

In accord with McGill University's Charter of Students' Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.

Academic Integrity

McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/ for further information).

Topics and Schedule of Readings

- September 1 *Privacy & Digital Surveillance*
Neil Richards, *Why Privacy Matters*, chs. 1 + 2
- September 8 *Privacy & Digital Surveillance*
Neil Richards, *Why Privacy Matters*, chs. 3 + 4
- September 15 *Privacy & Digital Surveillance*
Neil Richards, *Why Privacy Matters*, chs. 5 + 6
Optional: Carissa Véliz, *Privacy is Power*, ch. 3
- September 22 *Algorithms, Autonomy, and Manipulation*
James Williams, “Stand Out of Our Light” (Talk)
Vikram B. Bhargava and Manuel Velasquez, “Ethics of the Attention Economy: The Problem of Social Media Addiction”
Jia Tolentino, “What It Takes to Put Your Phone Away”
Optional: Thomas Moller-Nielson, “What are Our Phones Doing to Us?”
- September 29 *Algorithms, Autonomy, and Manipulation*
Jia Tolentino, “How TikTok Holds Our Attention”
Ben Smith, “How TikTok Reads Your Mind”
J.S. Mill, *On Liberty*, ch. 3 (“On Individuality as One of the Elements of Well-Being”)
- October 6 *Social Media, Communication, & Belief*
Thi Nguyen, “How Twitter Gamifies Communication”
Dan Williams, “The Marketplace of Rationalizations”
- October 13 *No class*
- October 20 *Social Media, Communication, & Belief*
Manoel Horta Ribeiro et al., “Auditing Radicalization Pathways on YouTube”
Thi Nguyen, “Escape the Echo Chamber”
Regina Rini, “Fake News and Partisan Epistemology”

- October 27 *The Virtual and the Real*
Nick Bostrom, “Do We Live in a Computer Simulation?”
David Chalmers, *Reality+*, chs. 2 + 5
- November 3 *The Virtual and the Real*
Robert Nozick, “The Experience Machine”
David Chalmers, “The Virtual and the Real”
Final Paper Proposal Due
- November 10 *Existential Risk & Longtermism*
William MacAskill, *What We Owe the Future*, Intro. + chs. 1-3
Toby Ord, “The Precipice: Existential Risk and the Future of Humanity” (Talk)
- November 17 *Existential Risk & Longtermism*
William MacAskill, *What We Owe the Future*, chs. 4 + 5
Toby Ord, *The Precipice*, ch. 4
- November 24 *Existential Risk & Longtermism*
William MacAskill, *What We Owe the Future*, chs. 6 + 7
Toby Ord, *The Precipice*, ch. 5
- December 1 *Cryptocurrency*
Andrew M. Bailey, Bradley Rettler, and Craig Warmke, *Resistance Money*, chs. 1 + 11
Final Paper Draft Due
- December 7 *Referee Report Due*
- December 15 *Final Paper Due*