COURSE MATERIALS: BOOKS, ARTICLES, POSTINGS, FILMS

There are seven books, see below, awaiting you in the bookstore. Only three of these books are “required”, i.e. must be read, and they are the first three on the list. A fourth, is strongly recommended, book number six below. The four other books provide excellent general background for various issues we will be addressing this semester. In addition I have appended, at the end of this syllabus, several more books, further background, but also possibly of use to in composing your midterm and final essays about which more below. (See “COURSE REQUIREMENTS”). I own all these books, love to share my books, also love to have them returned. Or you can purchase them on line, perhaps previously used and inexpensive, and expect to see it delivered in a very few days, thanks to Amazon.com. In addition, as you will see when you peruse the Latte website for the course, I have posted many short items on various subjects which we will be covering and I'll be adding others, no doubt, as they appear during the next four months. You too may wish to add items for the edification of the class which you come upon. You should read these brief items as they become relevant during the course of the semester.

One would expect that a course on the new Digital Age will use many sorts of collaborative learning of the sort stressed in that Age. In this course I am going to need my students as I do in no other course that I have ever taught at Brandeis (I came here 1492). What I can provide is historical perspective and theoretical analysis, but, as will be quickly apparent, there is also a great deal that you have to teach me, for this is a course about your culture, your values and practices, your experiences and competencies. One writer, Marc Prensky, has spoken of two groups of people with opinions about the Digital Age: the “immigrants” and the “natives.” The minds and intellectual manners of immigrants are shaped by previous cultures, the natives, by the present digital culture. I urge you to summon from Google and carefully read, Prensky's article, written in 2003, “Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants”. In brief, I am an immigrant, you, my students, all of you I would guess, are natives, or as the anthropologists put it, native informers. Here are the books in the bookstore:

1. Nicholas Carr: The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing To Our Brains
3. Dave Eggers, The Circle (novel)
4. Bruce Schneier: Data and Goliath: The Hidden Battles to Collect Your Data and Control Your World
Finally, three films will be posted on the Latte site for the course, "Disconnect (2013) , "Her" (2013), "Minority Report" (2002). You may choose to write a midterm or final essay based on a consideration of these films from the perspectives of the course. We will be referring to the films in class.

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE COURSE:

There is much talk in academia today about "narratives", the implicit stories through which we encounter and interpret the world. As regards the meaning, influence, and value of the (alleged) "digital revolution," there are two warring narratives. On the one hand there are those who see in it glorious steps forward toward greater knowledge of all things, instantly retrievable, universally available, potent in their capacity to conquer problems-- personal, social, political, economic, psychological, medical, even existential-- which were previously thought to be intractable. It is a world which is bringing far greater equality, transparency, enhanced freedom, unprecedented feats of effective collaboration and prodigious competencies. As a result, we are told, we are headed to a world at peace, in which ancient antipathies, and narrow allegiances are things of the past or soon will be. Adept of this position call for an education system which imparts and abets this glorious digital dispensation. In contrast, there is a counter narrative which deeply rues the advent of these promised, and, it argues, unachievable developments. These counter-narrators see dangers in a culture ignorant indeed hostile to their own history and traditions. They see the prospect of shrinking wisdom and a radically diminished ability to think "critically", a pervasive shallowness of mind and character, all threats to the precious individualism and inwardness of autonomous selves. They predict diminished human beings, if human they remain. Precious values are under siege, they say, relativism is all the rage, privacy, precious privacy, and the right to privacy, is disappearing. They anticipate and see the early signs of totalitarian domination, and incessant international conflict, not fundamentally dissimilar from what George Orwell’s adumbrated in Nineteen Eighty-Four. And they furiously resist the changes in educational practices which, they claim, are abetting all of these dreadful tendencies.

Of course, there are middle of the roaders as well, navigating, as I shall, cautiously between these two extremes, arguing that the changes are not as revolutionary as is suggested by those two camps, that the many good features of the Digital Age, and there are many, can be
preserved and nurtured –and in any case are inevitable. By exercising critical self awareness we can avoid the apocalypse.

It is the aim of the course to present, analyze, and critically evaluate the main positions in this crucial debate. I am inviting students to analyze themselves and the lives they are leading from learned perspectives outside of themselves. I am asking you to become, as it were, anthropologists of yourselves, so that you, the natives will be able to not only “experience” your lives and glory in the experiencing of it, it but also think about it and, yes, judge it from alternative even antagonistic perspectives. Value judgments, defended critically and explained, are not discouraged in this class. Nor is self-criticism, which need not be negative criticism by the way. You are not required to agree with the professor, who is, as I say above, is himself an immigrant.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

There will be two papers, a midterm paper, and a final paper, plus a final, three-hour essay-style exam. A large number of optional "questions", or "prompts" as some you prefer to say, will be available to choose from at least a month before the due dates. But, as regards paper topics, I also offer you the option of fashioning your own questions which explore one or more of the myriad issues which will arise in our class discussions. I am giving you wide berth here. A few examples You may be interested, in the kinds of satire of our digital world which one encounters on the internet, on TV, through the social media. All satire, is a form of self-criticism—and there is Saturday night Live and thousands of You Tube submissions, to prove it. What forms of self-criticism, self mockery, can be found on the internet? What is funny about them? Something like this could make a splendid essay, indeed it did in a previous iteration of this course. Or you might get interested, for example, in all the forms of dishonesty which seem to be required of existence under the digital dispensation, or in new forms of addiction, or in the kinds of harassment made available, or the subtle and destructive forms cutthroat competitiveness which are exhibited in this allegedly cooperative digital world. You may be curious about how people arrive at the political positions they strike, the causes they espouse, the petitions that they sign. What are the sources for your passions for these causes? How much do you really know about them? Indeed, how much do you really know about the things you are most zealous about? HOWEVER, if you choose to take this alternate route, answering your own question, I want you to come in to see me, present your thoughts, perhaps shape them in our discussion. I insist on this, not to limit you, but so that you can be assured that your idea is viable, and capable of yielding the grade you most covet.

I am available five days a week and urge you to come in for a human conversation, and more than once if you wish. There is no limit on the number of tickets available for these meetings. Of course, you can contact me by e (g) mail as well, again as often as you choose.
However being an immigrant, I prefer face to face discussions. I read early drafts and outlines of my students’ essays all the time, you are welcome to come in to discuss them. I also invite a speech which begins with these precious words: “Help! I am at sea with this assignment”. Your reputation will survive entirely upon the utterance of these words. If you utter them I think you will find the help you seek.

GENERAL OUTLINE OF TOPICS TO BE DISCUSSED.

A. Instructive tales in two dystopian novels: Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty Four* (1948), and *The Circle*, (2013) by Dave Eggers

B. The Educational Scene: Are you “the dumbest generation” as Mark Bauerlein and many others suggest? Or are you “much smarter than they think” as Clive Thompson has argued? Much smarter than anyone used to be? What are the prospects for universities and colleges in this context?

C. The NSA controversy. Are we in danger? Is Edward Snowden a saint, a hero, or a traitor and villain?

D. Love, “friendship”, courtship, marriage, family, sex in the digital age.

E. Identity (including ethnic and racial identity), diversity, and selfhood in the digital age.

F. Crime in the Digital Age, and the strategies for fighting crime, and, it is predicted by some, will vastly expanded competencies and knowledge dramatically reduce the incidence of crime in the Digital Age? New crimes. Cyber bullying.

G. Journalism in the Digital Age; shopping in the Digital Age

H. The Copy right debate What that we create, do we own? The Encryption debate


J. "Reality" versus "Virtual Reality"; psychiatry in the digital age; the role of video games, digital addictions
K. The Prospect of Artificial Intelligence, the impact of robotics. Will there be enough jobs in the future?

L. Coping Strategies: guides to personal survival in the Digital age? Will there be a Luddite movement? A counter-culture, a counter-revolution?

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Hal Abelson, Ken Ledeen, Harry Lewis: Blown to Bits: Your Life, Liberty, and Happiness After the Digital Explosion +/-
Max Bauerlein: The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stuipifies Young Americans and Jeopardizes our Future -
Max Bauerlein ed.: The Digital Divide: Arguments For and Against Facebook, Google, Texting, And the Age of Social Networking
Daniel Boorstin: The Image: Or What Happened to the American Dream?
Richard Clarke and Robert Knake: Cyber War: The Next Threat to National Security and What to Do About It
Nicholas Carr: The Shalows: What The Internet is Doing to Our Brains -
Joseph Epstein & Frederick Raphael: Distant Friendship: A Friendship in the Age of the Internet
David Gerlerntner: Mirror Worlds: or The Day Sofware Puts the Universe in a Shoe Box,How it Will and What It Will Mean
Glenn Greewald: No Place To Hide: Edward Snowden, the NSA, and the U.S. Surveillance State
Mark Helprin: Digital Barbarism: A Writer’s Manifesto
Matt Ivester: LOL…OMG! What Every Student Needs to Know About Online Reputation Management, Digital Citizenship, and Cyber Bullying
Jeff Jarvis: Public Parts: How Sharing in the Digital Age Improves the Way We Work & Live +
Jeff Jarvis: What Would Google Do? +
Steven Johnson: Future Perfect: The Case for Progress in a Networked Age.+
Ray Kurzweil: The Singularity is Near
Christopher Lasch: The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Era of Dimishing Expectations
Steven Levy: Hackers
Steven Levy: In the Plex: How Google Thinks, Works, And Saves Our Lives+-
Robert W. McChesney: Digital Disconnect: How Capitalism is Turning the Internet Against Democracy
Evgeny Morozov: To Click Save Everything: The Folly of Technological Solutionism
Evgeny Morozov: The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom
Neil Postman: Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology
Kevin Roberts: Cyber Junkie: Escape the Gaming and Internet Trap
Erich Schmidt & Jared Cohen: The New Digital Age: Reshaping the Future of People, Nations, and Business
Mark Slouka: War of the Worlds: Cyberspace and the High-Tech Assault on Reality
Clive Thompson: Smarter Than You Think: How Technology is Changing our Minds For the Better
Sherry Turkle: Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other
David Weinberger: Miscellaneous: The Power of the New Digital Disorder

NOVELS:
Dave Eggers: The Circle
George Orwell: Nineteen Eight Four
Neel Shah and Skye Chatham, Read Bottom Up (This is a love story comprised entirely of e-mail exchanges.)