

From ideation, to creation, to adoption and use, technology is propelled as long as it has any benefit. Email emerged in the 1970's to demonstrate the potential of asynchronous communications over a network, now it defines how many of our workplaces operate. Facebook emerged in the early 2000s to help friends connect and now it has redefined friendships and social relations in ways that are toxic and detrimental to our youth. Netflix streamed content locked in DVDs in the late 2000s, now it defines the media that is generated, and viewed and binged by billions. OpenAI put out an open-to-the-public demo of its large language model, ChatGPT, in 2022, now it sits at the threshold of changing how we search for and communicate information, possibly influencing how we think. No technology emerges without changing the fabric of society around it. We cannot isolate its impact to a single design solution or benefit. This is true of all technology — think of fire, paper, wheel, engine, the printing press, ... — but as the rate of technological developments and reach accelerates, we are hardly afforded the time to take a step back and evaluate its implications. If it does any good, humanity will buy into it. Even when the good is questionable, the fear of being left behind in a competitive global wealth race, forces adoption at global scale. Yet is society happier and do we lead more fulfilled lives? Has technology eliminated the mundane, and hard labor of work to present opportunities for more fulfilling and intellectual lives? Or have we simply shifted the labor to hidden societies: moderator farms in Nigeria sanitizing OpenAI's output; unseen mass production manufacturing factories designed to serve insatiable needs made possible by Amazon 1-click ordering; Has the “elite” or “privileged” society lost its grounding in reality and shifted its work models to those dictated by busyness and a need to justify productivity in a knowledge and service economy where outputs are bits? In doing so, have we lost a sense of purpose and community? Are we more miserable?

The goal of this course is to examine technology with an emphasis on AI and software technology in particular to answer the following questions:

1. What side-effects do we not consider when examining technology through the narrow lens of what it purports to achieve?
2. Is it net-positive when we consider all side-effects including both beneficial and harmful ones?
3. How can we empower ourselves to mitigate the impact of technological advancements on our societies, or at least control how they influence our lives?

Through these questions, we will explore different methods from across disciplines (computer science, philosophy, economics, religious studies and anthropology) on how to build such a framework to scrutinize technology under and evaluate its impact, possibly examining various societies that strictly control the reach of technology within. The course includes a required two-week technology detox, which will allow students to personally evaluate the influence of technology on their personal lives followed by a gradual and intentional re-introduction of tech. It concludes with insights from management, organization and, legal studies, on how we can go beyond ourselves to mitigate the negative impacts of technology on our families, workplaces, neighborhoods and societies and maximizing their positive benefits.

What this course is not.

This course is not about AI ethics, AGIs, algorithmic bias, etc. Rather, given a technology currently at play, we want to critically evaluate it and decide whether to use it at a personal level or a societal level (possibly discussing censorship, tech bans and extreme stances such as Neo-Luddism). Critical evaluation necessitates at times learning about the limitations of AI, AI hype or snake oil and how AI hype is used to sell nascent, flawed and at times fraudulent technology. However, all software tech regardless of the extent of AI involvement, is open for consideration in this course.