Assignment 1, INFO 203, Spring 2013

Scoring:
      (1) answering the question fully (2 pts)
      (2) handling of course concepts (2 pts)
      (3) logic of your claims and argument (2 pts)
      (4) extension of course concepts (1 pt)

11.5 – 15+ is an A-range grade
8.5 – 11.499999 is a B-range grade
At or below 8.5 – need improvement on future assignments, please come talk to us for help

GSIs: EO = Elisa Oreglia, SG = Stuart Geiger, JS = Jen Schradie – contact the GSI who was principally responsible for grading your assignment (initials are written on your paper). PhD students come talk to Prof. Burrell.

Some Writing Issues and Suggestions for Short Essay Question Strategies:

- For a short word count, cut excessive introductions. Also don't waste word count detailing a lengthy history of cars, tablets, and their features, etc. not without tying this into any theoretical frameworks or course concepts.

- Use your first sentence to introduce your essay – i.e. who you are going to reference (i.e. theorists) and a summary of what you are going to say.

- Though you had limited word count, we still expect you to explain/unpack the claims made in your essay responses in enough detail to justify their logic. Theoretical concepts often needed to be explained with more precision and clarity (see notes in your assignment to see if we identified this as a problem).

- This is not business memo-style writing, so don't write it as a memo with bold concepts.

- Look at your paper to see if we suggested that you go to the writing center at Academic Services. Please do so before turning in the next assignment

- Look at examples of exceptionally well-written responses to essay questions (to be provided)

- Perhaps consult this writing guide: http://sociology.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/documents/student_services/writing_guid e/Writing%20for%20Sociology%20Guide%20Second%20Edition.pdf

Some general problems in the short essays:

- Applying the theoretical frameworks wholesale. Labeling the statement or example as offering a 'technologically determinist' argument but without considering the various

elements of tech determinism (i.e. economic rationality, that the technological form develops outside of society, that it has a unidirectional impact on and in some way restructures society). Some of these elements (but perhaps not all) may have been in evidence in the statement. The result of this was some very **forced fits** between examples given and theoretical frameworks. This was particularly a problem in the first question (on tablets vs. laptops) with many people trying to label the first statement tech determinism and the second social constructivism. Neither statement fit this neatly into any one theoretical framework.

- Arguing that a particular perspective would 'agree' or 'disagree' with the statement (similar problem to the above). The point of bringing a perspective to bear on the examples/statements was to explore *how* this theoretical perspective would frame the matter (i.e. of the self-driving car), what questions it might raise, what other issues/concerns it would point to that are perhaps absent / overlooked from the statement.

- Some issues with distinguishing (or rather failing to distinguish) **approach** (user heuristic) from substance (**study of telephones up until 1940**) [i.e. on question #3]. What subject matter the author's studied (or did not study) can't be said to be a shortcoming of their approach. It was not a shortcoming of Fischer's approach that he failed to study the mobile phone (because of course his book was published prior to the mobile phone and studies a historical period long before the mobile phone was invented).

Some problems with specific readings:

- **Heilbroner's soft technological determinism:** answers that employed Heilbroner often demonstrated a very rough grasp of his argument with little attention to the way he scopes his argument for technological determinism and what specifically makes it a *soft* technological determinism. He calls for a "careful specification of our task" on the very first page and then suggests that his concern is with "*the effect of technology in determining the nature of the socioeconomic order*" as opposed to other ways in which we might consider a deterministic relationship between technology and society, i.e. "the impact of technology on the political course of history" or "the effect of machines on social attitudes." Thus he narrows his focus specifically to "technologies of production" such as the hand mill and the steam mill and in the context of production (think factories). Answers that linked Heilbroner to the self-driving car almost never acknowledged that his argument was scoped in this way and failed to address whether the self-driving car fit at all into this category of "technologies of production." (*Relatedly, there was also a more general problem of selectively extracting a single, extreme statement from one of the readings that did not reflect the author's broader argument*)

- **The socio-technical gap (Ackerman):** only referenced infrequently in some of your answers, but often vaguely and sometimes in the way I warned against. The socio-technical gap is neither (a) the difference between what we want a technology to do for us and what it actually does nor (b) general problems of technology related to ease of use. If you employ the 'socio-technical gap' in future writing, please be precise about the 'socio' component of this gap.

- On the whole, most students did well with Latour and Actor-Network Theory!

- Most students also demonstrated a good grasp of Fischer.

Part II (preparation for the final paper):

- You should not carry out any primary research (data collection) for this final paper (i.e. doing statistical analysis, carrying out an ethnographic study) nor should you implement a system. Your final paper will rely entirely on secondary sources.

- Some students had scope issues (selected topics were too broad or in areas where there is already a huge amount of research).

- Be sure your topic is a 203 topic (and not a 202 or 205 topic). It will help if you can cite a theoretical framework or concept from the course to define the angle you will take with your topic.

- We asked, what interests you about the topic? This wasn't really an invitation for you tell us about your hobbies (though it's nice to know more about you!) but for you to point to some intriguing problems or dilemmas in the topic area, to what seems counter-intuitive, etc.