



STUDY PROGRAMME

European General Studies

ACADEMIC YEAR

2021 - 2022

SEMESTER

2nd

COURSE TITLE

Digital Transition and the Future of European Societies

COURSE PROFESSOR

BROADBENT Stefana/DEWANDRE Nicole

COURSE ASSISTANT

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NATURE OF COURSE (COMPULSORY, OPTIONAL)

Optional

LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION

English

ECTS CREDITS

LAW: 3 ECTS; ECO (/ELEA, /EPPA): 3 ECTS; LAW/ELEA: 2 ECTS;
POL: 4 ECTS; POL/EPPA: 3.5 ECTS

1. COURSE OBJECTIVE

The course aims at providing a multidisciplinary critical approach to some of the questions arising from the evermore pervasive hyper-connectivity of societies and economies. Major current debates around data, artificial intelligence, participation, attention and addiction are so highly complex because they are embedded in longstanding perspectives and discussions on fundamental social and philosophical issues. Identifying the framework in which these debates are set seems to be ever more relevant, as the responses to present and future technological developments will have a strong impact on the way in which (European) societies function.

2. LEARNING OUTCOMES

At the end of the course, the students will have:

- studied some philosophical and social perspectives involved in the digital transformation.
- developed an aptitude towards critical thinking and reflexive approaches on digital issues.
- understood the two-way dynamic relationship between EU policymaking and the digital transformation.

3. COURSE CONTENTS

The policy approach to the digital transition is fundamentally couched in technical and ethical terms, so that when we think of a digital transformation we are always drawn into discussions about how to promote technology and innovation, while mitigating the downsides and “risks” arising from this technological development. This leads to a perennial game of cat and mouse between



regulation, legal frameworks and technological advances. In this approach, the social analysis tries to balance between the "reality" of actual practices and the unveiling of social phenomena that are apparently unexpected. In this course, we aim to offer another analytical grid that provides more grip for understanding – and therefore addressing – the challenges brought about by the digital transition.

The course will be structured around 4 themes, one for each 6 hours session.

Session 1 (6h)

The philosophical underpinnings of hyper-connectivity (The Online Manifesto)

In this first session, we will focus on the pervasiveness of the digital transition and unveil the philosophical layers underpinning it: why the digital transition calls for reconsidering what it means to be human (notably, foreground human relationality over human rationality) and how we position ourselves in the world (notably, embrace uncertainty as a state of being).

The three following sessions will then focus respectively on freedom, fairness and responsibility, chosen as terms that refer to essential conditions for human beings to thrive individually and form society with others. In a pre-digital society, transparency and control came to be two important necessary–yet not sufficient- means to enable freedom, fairness and accountability. In the digital age, the abundance of information and solicitation undermine the effectiveness of transparency and control in delivering on these more fundamental qualities, that were essential in the pre-digital society and remain so in the digital society. In this sense, they can be seen as “pivots”. They remain important but the way to enable them changes radically, from what it was in pre-digital societies. For example, we do not like to be fooled, and never liked to be. Yet, the means to fool each other are different in a digital society from what they were in a pre-digital one. More generally, in the pre-digital age, social interactions were –by default- evanescent, so that traces of them had to be constructed, if and when wished. With hyperconnectivity, we are heading towards an age where, by default, social interactions leave a trace. Hence, in the digital age, it is evanescence that needs to be constructed instead. None of this will happen overnight. It is a long social, economic and political process, which is taking place. We are updating the mix of policies, norms and social practices, which will protect us against the risk of being fooled, which will allow evanescence, in some instances, and accountability, in others.

Session 2 (6h) Freedom

Enabling **freedom** in a hyperconnected society. This session will engage in a discussion around what freedom means and entails in a hyperconnected society. It will notably draw from the debates on:

- ✓ Privacy and data management
- ✓ Identity and gender on the web
- ✓ Social control and social media

We will look at the policy frameworks, emerging social practices, their interplay with technological solutions, the responses they engender and examine the frameworks within which these interactions are operating.

Session 3 (6h) Fairness

Enabling **fairness** in a hyperconnected society. This session will focus on what fairness means and



entails in a hyperconnected society where debates on equal access, representativity, and bias have been raging for a long time. More specifically, we will notably examine issues such as:

- ✓ AI and transparency
- ✓ Access
- ✓ Protection of attentional spheres
- ✓ Open source and hacking

Session 4 (6h). Responsibility

In this final session, we will look more closely to what **responsibility** means and entails in a hyper-connected society with an eye to policy frameworks and emerging social practices in public participation. In this sense, the discussion will notably focus on:

- ✓ Liability issues linked to robots, AI, and connected objects
- ✓ “Editorial”/platform responsibility in user-generated content

Again in this session we will look at practices, technologies, regulations and examine the perspectives that underpin these interactions.

4. TEACHING METHOD(S)

The two professors will be jointly present at each of the 6-hour monthly sessions. They will each lead one of the 3-hour slots of the session bringing their own different perspectives and disciplinary expertise.

In each 3-hour slot, the leading professor will teach “ex-cathedra” for 2 hours, during which students will be invited to ask questions or make comments. The third hour will be in the form of a seminar and will therefore be dedicated to presenting and discussing some texts from the reading list that will be provided at the beginning of the course.

4. COURSE MATERIAL

The course material will consist of a reading list and the teaching material (PPTs, videos, podcasts, etc.).

5. EVALUATION

The evaluation will consist in an oral examination, a written essay and a brief presentation/discussion during the seminar sessions. Each element will have a different weight in the overall final mark:

- Oral exam (50%)
- Presentation and participation (20%)
- Essay (30%)



Explanation of Graded Work:

- **Class Participation:** Students are expected to attend each class and to engage fully with class discussions. Working in pairs, students will prepare and deliver an oral presentation related to the readings of the week. Specific expectations and guidelines for these presentations will be reviewed in class; however, presentations should be approx. 10 minutes long and should expand on the course readings by illustrating the problem addressed by the reading and identifying core questions for discussion.
- **Written Assignment:** Students will submit an essay of around 3000 words choosing from a series of proposed themes. An example could be a critical review of one of the readings. The review will loosely follow academic book review style and content, with students required to include mention of an additional 2-4 relevant academic sources.
- **Oral exam:** students will be asked to discuss a question addressed in the lectures and readings.