Information visions
Past, present and future

HSTM20282 (10 credits) · HSTM20782 (20 credits)

The lockdowns and physical distancing policies imposed around the world following the Covid-19 outbreak focused attention sharply on humankind's relationship with information and communication technology.

For many people, online gatherings became the only gatherings, and streaming media the main source of entertainment. Universities and businesses which would once have simply closed down instead shifted to "online delivery" as best they could.

This strange world seemed very new – but the technologies it was built on were well-established, and the ideas that lay behind them were often very old indeed.

The "picture telephone" was as much a

"The future becomes present […] Laura Rabinowitz, a 15-year-old deaf student at New York's Lexington School for the Deaf, and Howard Mann, 14, (on screen), communicated by lip-reading during the first PICTUREPHONE call from the Prudential Building in Chicago to Grand Central Terminal in New York." *Bell Telephone Magazine*, Summer 1964.

Image at commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bell_telephone_magazine_(1922)_(14569361388).jpg

feature of early science fiction as time travel and alien invasions; robot servants and "electronic brains" that could take on traditional human tasks were widely discussed before 1950. To some authors, these ideas were hopeful, suggesting a future of mass leisure and a rich social culture. To others, they spelt a nightmare of dehumanisation and mechanised enslavement.

In this unit, we explore visions of remote communication, online life, and information-based society, from serious practical proposals to wild speculations and fantasies – and also how they shaped reality, as scientists and policymakers tried to achieve or avoid the various imagined outcomes, with varying degrees of success.

We will ask: who are the winners and losers in a data-driven world of mass electronic communication? Why do some visions succeed in some countries or cultures, but not others? And how can we use the lessons of the past to prepare for an uncertain online future?

Course content

The course typically covers the following themes:

- Paper and cogs: information worlds before electronics

- "It can't be done": dreams, nightmares and realities of the "picture telephone"

- Robots in fiction and fact

- "Building a brain": Alan Turing and machines that learn

- Hopes, hype and hazards in artificial intelligence

- The University of the Air: can technology democratise education?

- The revolution that wasn't: why the first home computers didn't take home users online (except in France)

- The Hacker Ethic: subverting authority and building open systems

- "A civilization of the Mind in Cyberspace"? Techno-utopianism and the early public Internet

- Power and identity in the smartphone age

- Alone together? What technology can and can't do in a time of physical isolation

Teaching and assessment

The course runs in Semester 2 and includes weekly face-to-face classes on Thursdays 3 till 5pm, combining lecture presentation and seminar-style discussion. As one of the key course aims is to examine the differences and overlaps between physical and remote engagement, these classes will be supported by online materials including preserved historical websites and videos.

The 10- and 20-credit versions have the same taught content. The 20-credit version is distinguished by an extra assessed component as follows:

HSTM20282 (10 credits): One essay of 1500 words (50%); one two-hour exam (50%)

HSTM20782 (20 credits): One essay of 1500 words (25%); one two-hour exam (25%); one 3000-word essay or equivalent project such as a video or website (50%)

When mobile phones aren't: a tethered cellphone facility at a stall in Cameroon, around 2010

From the Mobile Africa Revisited project. Video at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xeSOlCnEXXA

Prerequisites

None. The unit is accessible to students who have no background in information or communication technology, but is also designed to help students who have experience in these fields understand how they interact with the wider world.

Contact

For all queries, please contact the course co-ordinator, Dr James Sumner: **james.sumner@manchester.ac.uk**