

## Calendar and Readings (week of May 23)

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### Monday, May 23

For the week as a whole, our job is to look at modern computing and try to tease out some of the unintended consequences of technological society. On Monday, I'll look at the philosophical debate between technological optimists who fail to see any downsides to the networked world and technological pessimists who, by contrast, emphasize the risks without considering the benefits. I'll also show excerpts from two short films—*Knowledge Navigator* and *Flash Forward*—that offer fascinating visions of how companies two decades ago thought computing technology would change the world.

*Readings:* The following papers, which are either in the reader or available from the online sources shown:

1. Adam Thierer, “Are you an Internet optimist or pessimist? The great debate over technology’s impact on society,” the Technology Liberation Front, January 31, 2010.  
<http://cs.stanford.edu/~eroberts/LinkToOptimistPessimist.html>
2. Nicholas Negroponte, “Beyond digital,” *Wired*, December 1998.  
<http://web.media.mit.edu/~nicholas/Wired/WIRED6-12.html>
3. Clay Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody*, epilogue, New York: NY: Penguin Press, 2008 (page 345 in the reader).
4. Nicholas Carr, “Is Google making us stupid?”, *Atlantic Magazine*, July 2008 (page 402 in the reader).

### Wednesday, May 25

Essayists—even those whose imaginations range well beyond the present day—are rarely as creative as writers of science fiction, who can invent entire new worlds. In this last class of the quarter, I want to talk about some of those literary visions of a technological future, concentrating on E. M. Forster’s short story, “The Machine Stops,” which several modern readers have heralded as one of the best literary representations of the Internet age, even though it was written over 100 years ago. We’ll also have the chance (I hope) to integrate some ideas from readings suggested in the extra-credit problem described later in this handout.

*Readings:* The following stories from the reader:

1. E. M. Forster, “The machine stops,” *Oxford and Cambridge Review*, 1909 (page 357 in the reader).
2. Isaac Asimov, “The feeling of power,” reprinted from *Nine Tomorrows*, New York: Fawcett Crest, 1959 (page 385 in the reader).

### **Extra-credit opportunity for this week**

In putting together reading lists for this course, for my STS 200 course on “Wired Worlds: Promise and Peril of the Digital Age,” and for the IHUM class I teach with Rob Robinson on “Technological Visions of Utopia,” I’ve run through many novels, short stories, plays, and films that offer literary visions of how computers might shape the future, both utopian and dystopian. I’m sure I’ve missed some. Your extra-credit assignment this week is to:

1. Choose one literary source (and by *literary* I mean that it must have creative or fictional elements, so that pure essays and documentaries don’t count) that really captured your imagination and got you thinking about digital futures. The work may stretch beyond computing to draw in other technologies, but computers or robots or similar technological devices must be the central focus.
2. Write a paragraph or two about why this work was so compelling that would be appropriate for me to share with the class. If I decide your discussion is good enough for me to include it on my handout next Wednesday, you get the extra-credit point for the week.

### **Reaction paper assignment for sections starting May 26**

For this week’s reaction paper, select two passages of no more than a paragraph from E. M. Forster’s “The Machine Stops”: the one that you see as most applicable to the world of the web and social media and the one that you see at which Forster’s predictions landed furthest from the mark. For the first such passage, write a paragraph or two indicating why you find it relevant, even though details will certainly be different. For the second, discuss how you might have rewritten Forster (which, after all, is so old that it predates all recent extensions to copyright laws and is therefore in the public domain) to make that passage fit more consistently with the world we know today.