## CS 3001-C: Computing, Society, and Professionalism

Munmun De Choudhury | Associate Professor | School of Interactive Computing

# Week 2: Do Artifacts have Politics? January 18, 2023

### Does Society Always Choose the Best Technology

- Apple OS vs. Linux vs. Windows
- Power Generation (coal, nuclear, wind, solar, hydro etc.)

Why do you think society chooses certain technologies over others?

### "Do Artifacts Have Politics?"

- How is the "goodness" of a technology measured?
  - Contributions to efficiency and productivity
- And also...
  - Positive and negative environmental side effects
  - What is politics?
  - Technical things have political qualities (Winner's main argument)
    - Manner in which they facilitate or re-establish certain power structures

What are politics of a technology?

### "It's not the technology; it's how it's used"

- A "thing" can't have politics
- Technology is neither inherently good nor bad
- People have politics, and people use the technology to achieve certain ends

# Formally known as...

- \* Technological Determinism (TD): The idea that technology develops as the sole result of an internal dynamic, and then, unmediated by any other influence.
- With the technology, people mold their thoughts and actions, and for social change.

 Criticism: Technology never forces itself on members of the society

### But technologies don't exist in a vacuum

- Technologies are not isolated, separate devices
- An individual technology becomes workable only when it is one part of a larger system (the whole is greater than the sum of its parts)
  - The context is important
- The social or economic system in which the technology exists is more important
- Examples: washing machine, missile

# Technologies have political properties

# Two ways technologies have politics

### Technical Arrangement and Social Order

- Technologies are ways of building order in our world.
- Technological changes express many human motives, including desire for power over others.
- Many technologies are designed and built to produce consequences logically and temporally prior to professed uses

# Technologies with unintended consequences

#### Example: Tomato harvesting

#### Inventions as Extension of Social Order

 Artifacts that correlate with particular kinds of political relationships

# Plato's Republic

- Ships cannot be run democratically
- Their operation requires the coordination of so many individual workers.
- Large ships require social hierarchies that oneperson canoes do not.

# Friedrich Engels

- Complex technical systems
- large production factories → reinforcing centralized control
- knowledgeable 
   people acting at the top of a rigid social hierarchy would seem increasingly prudent

# NYC Long Island Bridges



#### LENGTH:

25.9 miles

#### CONSTRUCTED:

1925-1949

#### REFER ROUTE:

- NY 908M
- <u>Current</u>
   <u>Conditions</u>
- <u>LI Pkwys</u>
- <u>nycroads.com</u>
   <u>HOME</u>
- Rate This Road!



This 2000 photo shows the Southern State Parkway approaching EXIT 15A (Valley Stream State Park). The original bridge crosses the eastbound lanes, while a new bridge constructed during the 1950's was added to cross the westbound lanes. (Photo by Steve Anderson.)

# The Hutchinson Parkway



#### LENGTH:

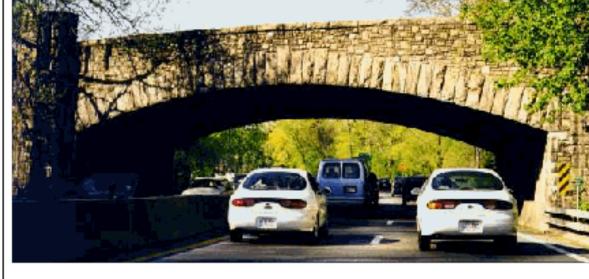
18.8 miles

#### CONSTRUCTED:

• 1924-1941

#### REFER ROUTES:

- NY 908A (Bronx)
- NY 907W (Westchester)
- <u>Current</u>
   <u>Conditions</u>
- <u>Hudson Valley</u>
   <u>Pkwys</u>
- <u>nycroads.com</u>
   <u>HOME</u>
- Rate This Road!



This 1998 photo shows the northbound Hutchinson River Parkway at EXIT 9 (Wolffs Lane) in Pelham, just north of the Bronx-Westchester border. (Photo by Steve Anderson.)

# Other Extensions of Social Order with Technology

 Concrete buildings and huge plazas constructed on university campuses in the United States during the late 1960s and early 1970 to defuse student demonstrations

- Soviet architecture
  - Large plazas
  - Broad boulevards
  - Huge scale of blocks, government buildings

Reflecting on some technologies that are more compatible with certain kinds of political organization:

Nuclear Power? Solar Power?

## Interpretations/Takeaways

### How Do We Measure "Good" Or "Better"

- Economic costs and benefits:
  - jobs created, income generated, etc.
- Environmental impacts
  - pollutants distributed, cancers created
- Risks to public health and safety
  - exposure to natural disaster impact, "unsafe at any speed"
- "Consequences for the form and quality of human associations"

# Obligation

- Is it important to you to make the world a better place through your work?
  - Do you have an obligation to do no harm?
  - What about an affirmative obligation to do good?