

Audio file

[118755-TheSociologyandPolitics of the Digitalage..mp3](#)

Transcript

And Professor Simon Locke has come to give the lecture today, very appreciative of that. And Simon Works, as you can see, the Department of Science and Technology Studies, which does consider science and society and influence society and vice versa. So very relevant for our subject. OK, so thank you very much. I appreciate it. Please take notes, as you always do, and remember that this could be one of the questions you answer in the final academic English writing exam. OK, thanks very much. Thanks.

Thanks, Martin. Hi, everyone. So, as Martin said, I'm in the Department of Science and Technology Studies. My background, I'm interested in kind of the politics behind science, behind technology. So, really, how knowledge gets made, how technology gets made, because it's all by people at the end of the day, and think through some of the kind of ways in which we might want to think critically about that. I've got loads of stuff I want to talk about. We'll see how we go. But the big plan for this class is really to think about how we are entangled, like tied up with digital technologies. I'm not going to talk about all digital tech. I'm largely going to, as Martin already said, think about social media, think about kind of search engines, think about AI, impossible not to think about AI these days. But the big picture, I guess, if you take one thing away from this 50 minutes, is this idea that all technology is political. Technology is a neutral thing. It doesn't just appear from nowhere, or it isn't just like the next best thing, because it was always going to be like that. It's made and built by people. And because of that, it's built in a particular time, a particular context, with a particular set of politics built into it, often when we're talking about technology. And what I want to do today is kind of open that up. and think about, well, can we identify the politics in things that we often kind of take for granted? So I'm going to do that with a bit of history. I'm then going to think through particularly one of the ways in which my sort of set of disciplines work. I'm a sociologist and a historian and a sort of political scientist. I use all sorts of different disciplines, really, here. One of the ways in which we often get to think critically, or it's easier to think critically, is to look at when things go wrong. When things go wrong or when people are harmed or when the politics become very explicit and obvious is often when we can sort of get ourselves into those situations a bit more critically. Anyway, we'll see how much of this I managed to get through. I do have a tendency to go off on tangents, so I apologise in advance for that. If you've got any questions, burning questions, do feel free to raise your hand, wave at me. I will try and address them as we

go. Before we do that, I want to involve you. Okay, so I want to get you thinking. Any of you, feel free, raise your hand. How do you think, what do you think the internet has done, before we talk about maybe the bads, which I am going to focus on largely, what about the goods? Okay, how has the internet improved? How has digital technology improved our lives? Yes, thank you. Encyclopedias, yeah. I think it's like Wikipedia. Yeah, great. That's a really good example of, if you think about it before we had to go to a library and find a book and now it's all available online. Yep. Is there communication? Absolutely. Another great answer. It's networked the world. So the world's kind of got bigger and smaller at the same time in that we can communicate with people across massive geographical distances and in real time now in a way that we, you know, in the 1970s, we couldn't do at all. So yeah, another. Anybody else? Yeah. Information being spread. Yeah, exactly. So also we have access to information that maybe before the internet and the sort of digital age, it really was upon us, we didn't have access to. Yeah, another really good answer. These are all great. Any other thoughts? Yeah.

It saves time, like online shopping.

Yeah, exactly. It's convenient. It's made things much easier, much, we save time, we can, you know, get things quickly, easily, whether that's products, information, absolutely. Yes. Yeah, it's also, I mean, it's radically changed, like, I mean, not just entertainment, but all sorts of industries, right? Entertainment is one of the key ones, but media, news, like, it's reshaped the way in which a lot of these industries work by giving us access to things, people that we didn't used to have, giving us, you know, ways of spending our time that we didn't used to have. It's also presented issues which we'll come to. Any final other thoughts? before we move on. These are all really good examples. So what we can see here is that there are lots of goods, right? The internet digital age has brought with it lots and lots of advantages for lots of people. Obviously, the internet hasn't been around actually in sort of the bigger picture terms that long. This is a quote from John McNaughton. It's quite old now, actually, I suppose. But the internet really as a sort of public thing was only from the 1990s onwards. And here is John McNaughton, who was the tech editor for the *Guardian Observer* newspaper for a long time, writing in 2016. The internet is among the few things that we've built as humans that we don't really understand. It's a big experiment because it involves a lot of anarchy. Hundreds of millions of people are each minute creating and consuming all this sort of digital content in an online world that is not truly bound by terrestrial laws. There's a lot to unpack in this, but again, thinking about the fact that, I mean, it picks up on some of the things you've already said, like we've got people consuming information that we didn't have before, also creating it. We now have the ability to, whether that's on social media, create a video, a blog, a tweet, I shouldn't say that word, should I know it, whatever the equivalent is, post Twitter. But the internet also is global in a way that challenges kind of how we used to legislate information, how we used to control information, how we perhaps used to control people and their access to information.

This is a nice infographic. I mean, I say nice, it's actually quite a lot going on here. But This is what was happening every minute of the day in 2024 on the internet. Okay. You can see all sorts of things here. I mean, again, picking up on some of the things you said, we've got Netflix, entertainment, Google searches, Siri, text messages still, obviously, YouTube, social media, emails, people shopping. This is every single minute in 2024. This is how many people were doing what. So it's actually a lot of different things all happening and being enabled by this same platform. And it's the platform I want to come on to and talk about a little bit historically, because again, if we're interested in how technologies are built, we need a little bit of history. But before I do that, what about the downsides? Again, back over to you. Can we think of the ways in which perhaps the internet, digital culture, digital technologies have maybe caused problems? Yeah. Identity theft, yeah. So it's enabled like new forms of crime, particularly like stealing of people's identity is one of them. Yeah.

Antisocial or addictive?

Yeah, there is a lot of good evidence now that the ways in which certain platforms are built, the endless, you know, infinite scrolling, for example, on TikTok or Instagram, can be addictive, that it might have an impact, you know, it might be encouraging sort of addictive behaviors and other not so nice things. Anybody else? Yes, you look poised. Yeah, exactly. So we might have access to all this information, but equally, there's no one really telling us always whether that's good information or bad information, true or not true, because it's that quote, it's anarchy, right? There's not really this sort of overarching like governance of what's online. So yeah, good answer. Any other thoughts? Yeah. Cyberbullying, yeah. I mean, I'm sure you, well, I say I'm sure you may have grown up in a culture, right, where that was a sort of normal part of like being at school, right? Because you're all on like social media and WhatsApp. I mean, I grew up, I know I don't look at this all, but I grew up in a world where the internet didn't exist, right? And so that just wasn't a thing. It couldn't, literally couldn't happen, right? Bullying happened. I was bullied terribly, but not online. Anyone else? Downsides or sort of things that we might see as, yeah? Parasocial. Pat, can you explain that?

So it's basically having a natural relationship with someone or something that's not real true with the internet.

Oh, yeah. So we're mediating our lives through screens in a way that maybe is different to how it would be if we're in person. Yeah, that's a really interesting answer. Definitely, again, lots of evidence in terms of the way in which online culture has changed the way we interact and think about our relationships. We're able to have relationships at a distance, but are they the same as relationships we have in person? Yeah, really interesting thought. Anyone else? I mean, these are all good. I mean, we could be here forever. That's a lot of good ones. I'm going to talk to you about a lot more. Right, a little bit of history. When the internet started, it was all text-based. There was not even

images on there. And there was this sort of running joke at the time that, you know, on the internet, nobody knew who you were. because you could be anyone, right? You were literally hiding behind the screen. And this was a very famous cartoon from the early 90s. On the internet, nobody knows you're a dog. So this idea that, like, you could be talking to someone, but you wouldn't necessarily know who that person was, because, you know, we all log on and we're anonymous. As the internet's gone through various changes over the years and times, that's actually become a little bit more difficult. This is a slightly more up-to-date one. This is from 2013. And this speaks to this idea of, actually now, because of the way certain platforms work, because of the way we're sort of encouraged to be locked into our identity, we would have to verify ourselves in certain ways to stop things like identity theft happening, that actually it's harder and harder to be anonymous online now. And actually what we do online is tracked and monitored and surveilled and questions about, well, who actually knows what about us online? I'll come back to this. Something else I'll come back to in a bit, a lot more detail, but the rise of the internet and images and online image sharing has also brought with it the rise of facial recognition software to monitor and catalogue that information. There are some serious problems with facial recognition, which we'll come back to in a little bit. Similarly, and I'll talk about this a lot, the internet, whilst it might be a big sort of space for anarchy, is these days, and never has that been more obvious than in the past couple of weeks, is controlled by a few very powerful people and corporations. And what those people decide can and can't be done, what can and can't be put up, what can and can't be said on those platforms, and I'm talking, yes, about Meta, about the X platform, about Apple to a certain extent, like Google, these big, big mega tech corporations who are, they write the rules, right? They decide what can and can't be said and done on these platforms, which leads to maybe certain forms of content being okay and other forms of content not being okay. We'll get back to this in a bit. But again, this idea that it once was this sort of place of freedom, that you could do and say anything and be anyone, actually a bit troubled now. I took this literally out of the headlines this morning. I don't know if anybody's been following the news, but China or a Chinese company launched a new AI platform yesterday or recently called Deepseek, which knocked \$1 trillion of the stock market in America yesterday. It's the biggest loss ever. Sounds like you've got a lot to say about it. We can come back to that. But, all right, settle down, settle down. But this is really interesting, because part of what's also going on in this sort of tech world, digital culture, is a lot of hype, a lot of hyping up of certain technologies, AI being the one of the moment. And this yesterday, slightly punctured this bubble of hype, slightly punctured this idea that AI needs a lot of money being spent on it, and it's the future for American innovation or whichever country, when this small start-up with far less investment and expenditure has basically produced a piece of AI software as good as, seemingly as good as, the leading ones in the market. I will come back to this a bit later. Anyway, these are just, again, a few things we might want to start getting into. But before we do that, how am I doing for

time? Yeah, fine. I want to take you way back. This is ancient, ancient history to you, less so for me. But when the internet was built, okay, can I ask those of you who are chatting to each other to please either not do it or do it so quietly that it's not interfering with the class? Not so much for my benefit, but for the benefit of people around you, because it can be really distracting for other people in the room if there's a lot of noise. Thank you. Right, in the 1970s, the internet was built, I mean, it's actually UCL, as an aside, was the first European academic institution to have access to the internet. It was originally a military project in America called the ARPANET. But it was largely then taken up by the academic world to transfer information and data between academic institutions. We were the first non-US academic institution to be connected up to it in the 1970s. I could go on about this forever. I just want to give you some very key points because it is relevant. When the internet was built, it was largely built as this very open platform. It was built by grad students who wanted to build this very non-hierarchical, very collegiate, very open to revision platform. And those of you who are familiar with coding will know that the platform itself still works like that, right? You can code, you can write, you can change all sorts of aspects of the internet if you understand how the basic core coding structure of the internet works. That was not a mistake. That was a result of a particular moment in time, a particular moment in history, where a particular set of people were interested in building a decentralized, non-hierarchical technological platform. That was what it was at its inception. So it had a very particular set of politics. That's the bit I just, you don't need to worry too much about the detail here. That's the bit I want you to take away. There was a particular set of politics about openness, about sharing, about sort of revision, constantly open to kind of recoding, and no one person gets a final edit. Now, that's in stark contrast to really how the internet works today, which has a very different set of politics. The point of why I'm telling you this is because no one was really at the time thinking about future use. They were thinking, how do we best share information between universities around the world? As we move through, and I'll do this very quickly, the sort of latter part of the 20th century, and particularly when the commercial world and corporations were brought into that sphere, it moved out of academia in this idea of sort of sharing of knowledge into the need for security around money, buying and selling, capitalism essentially, which is a very different set of politics, right? Once that comes in, okay, the politics, how we use it, how we think about it changes, but the infrastructure did not. So we're left with this very open infrastructure, which is based on a certain set of politics, which is now owned and is being sort of pushed around in line with lots of different other politics. This is interesting because actually, A lot of the issues we have with the internet, particularly around surveillance, particularly around cybercrime and all this sort of stuff, goes back to this original sort of construct, idea of the internet. The early internet was also very one-way. It was a few people creating information, sharing it with each other. As we moved into the early part of the 21st century, with what was at the time called Web 2.0, this was the rise of social media. Power moves, okay? So power

was concentrated in the hands of a few people in the early days, and then suddenly with social media, with blogs, with Facebook, with, you know, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, we get the rise of, again, an entirely different ecosystem where people can both produce and consume content all at the same time. Lots of people thought this was wonderful. This is going to be really empowering for some of the reasons that you already brought up. Again, I'll just take this last one. Social media, essentially Web 2.0, is going to increase our ability to share, to cooperate, to take collective action. There's all these utopian ideas about what the internet might be used for, what might be possible. At the same time, people also worrying about surveillance, because it's got this open structure, because actually you can sort of see what everybody's doing, what everybody's coding. Lots of people worrying about also who's now in charge of these platforms. We'll come back to this in a bit more detail in a sec. Who's in charge of these platforms? What do they want from us? And particularly this idea of what are they getting from us, okay? I'll come back to this in a second. But I mean, actually, I'll come back to it. Yeah, I'll come back to it in a second. So at every stage of the internet, there's been this sort of promise, but there's also been these worries and concerns about power, about who's in charge, who has access, who doesn't. These are the things that have kind of dogged scholars like myself who've been thinking and teaching and writing about this for quite some time. At the heart of all of this, and this is what I'm going to focus on really for much of the rest of this session, is, I guess, a question about how much of oneself is on there? How much of oneself can you be on there? Do you have the freedom to be yourself, to do anything you want? To what extent do we need to create rules and regulations and say, you can do this, you can't do this? And who decides? These are really big questions. I mean, as I put here, right, and someone mentioned it earlier, like the internet has enabled huge collaborative kind of communities to exist on a global scale, whether that's around comic book nerds, but also like alt-rights, neo-Nazi politics. Like it serves the same purpose for both. It has the capacity for both these groups to organize. So the question Underlying all of this, and the question I'm going to, I guess, want you to sit with for the next 20 minutes or 25 minutes or so, is given all of this, given that at every stage of the internet, someone has made decisions about what it looks like or what we want it to do, what values, essentially, it has, whose values count? Whose values are shaping how these technologies are built and what the effect that is on us. And does everybody have sort of equal access, use, ability to use the internet? The other thing about social media is it's built on a very particular model. I mean, If I were to ask you a question, what's Facebook's business model? How does Facebook make money? Or Meta, generally. I mean, Facebook's a bit outdated now. Advertising, yeah. How do they advertise? How does the advertising work? Yeah, go on.

Information sold to advertisers.

Yeah, what's the information that's being sold?

Personal information.

Yeah, yeah. So essentially, I mean, this is the golden rule of the internet. It has been for some time. If the platform's free, you are the product. You're the thing being sold, bought and sold. You don't get any benefit from it, right? So this is a nice paper. It argues, essentially, we are actually the workers for Facebook. Because, you know, and the same is true of Instagram, the same is true of TikTok, the same is true of pretty much any social media platform, actually. They're all free at use. But they are the ones that are extracting data from us, from our lives, from our social lives, from our funny memes, from our funny dance videos, whatever it might be that we're posting up there, okay, that they gather all that information from us and then use it to sell us products and advertising. And those of you who have existed on those platforms for some time will, I'm sure, recognise that that's only got kind of increasingly more and more obvious. Instagram is a really good example where it's only maybe three or four years ago that suddenly we're being, that every third post is an advert or a shop. Right? But, and again, it's a really, really easy experiment. I'm sure most of you are aware of this, but if you spend a day on Instagram only clicking on cat videos, then suddenly your whole feed is cat videos, but every advert and shop is about cats and cat food. And so the point being is it's learning about you the whole time. It's extracting that data from, I mean, not just what you click on, but also how long you spend watching a video now. So it times literally. Oh, this person's interested in this particular video about this, so we're going to send them more of this. Point being, these platforms are extracting an awful lot of value from us as users, or valorizing capital, as this paper argues. So we are all wrapped up in what is essentially a sort of capitalist mode of production, right? These platforms Yes, they give us lots of funny cat memes and all sorts of other things, right? But actually, we are the ones creating the value and the millions or billions of dollars for Mark Zuckerberg or Musk or any of the others, right? That is from our social lives and our personhood. And it's been an ongoing kind of worry, concern as well about the extent to which these companies own all of this information about us, the extent to which, we are, because we're the product, like we're being sort of traded on, as part of their product. This is a terms of reference from early-ish days of Facebook, actually. And I mean, it's a little bit less scary now, but just to pick out this, like in the early days of Facebook, by posting content to any part of the site, you grant, you automatically grant and warrant that Facebook essentially has irrevocable, perpetual, non-exclusive, transferable, fully paid, worldwide license to use, copy, publicly performed, publicly displayed. Essentially, In the early days of Facebook, I mean, people have fought this, so it is a bit different now, but Facebook just said anything you put up on our website, we now own and we can use in any way we want. It became obvious sort of not long after this period when people realized that their own faces were being used by brands to sell brands' products without their permission. But again, point being here is that the politics of those platforms which is largely capitalism, but a sort of very extractive form

of capitalism, a way of the product, was maybe, I mean, again, many people are argued, kind of breaching our privacy, perhaps breaching people's rights in ways that we weren't necessarily clear on. I mean, how many of us actually read the terms of conditions before we go? Yes, I agree. I don't. Not many do, right? And so we sign up to these things without realizing. So what this means is actually at the heart of a lot of this Web 2.0, social media, especially sort of digital infrastructure, is a form of surveillance. We are constantly being surveilled and that information is being used by very rich men to make themselves even richer, but also perhaps by governments to map our movements, to map all sorts of things. There's obviously concern, there's been concern in the United States since the overturning of Roe v. Wade, which was the federal law which granted access, universal access to abortions. Since that was overturned, there have been all sorts of worries about women who are using period liking apps, well, who owns that data? Like, is someone monitoring, when I'm fertile, when I maybe am not, could people use that to actually track if I'm accessing abortion services, et cetera? So we maybe don't think about these things until, again, something goes wrong, something changes, and we suddenly realise, oh, we've been giving away all this information about ourselves, and we don't necessarily know who has access to it. And that's true of Almost every single one of these companies. That is how most of these companies work. Not all of them. Wikipedia is a reasonable exception. I mean, we can talk about AI in a slightly different way. AI has obviously scraped the internet and stolen all of what exists already on the internet from people and then used that to build a platform, which then is also training itself on how we use it. So we're very, very wrapped up in the internet, even when we don't necessarily realise that we are both the product and shaping it. This form of internet, this sort of politics, if you like, of the internet, is often referred to as surveillance capitalism, because all of these different bits of data are constantly being mapped and taken by a company or a government and used to build a picture of us so that we can either be sold products, services, or possibly surveilled and tracked in different ways. I would argue this is a bit creepy and has quite serious sort of privacy and potentially sort of harmful implications, particularly if you're from a group that's already marginalised or already minoritised or already at risk of sort of political harms. or social and cultural harms, this perhaps heightens the risk that you are subject to those. I'm going to skip over that a bit. Right, so how am I doing? Yeah, okay, 20 minutes. So questions for the rest of this. In light of these sort of big structural, big kind of global politics, which are shaping, as I hope I've kind of got across the digital, what I'm referring broadly to the digital age, this era of the internet being sort of embedded in our lives in different ways. How might we sort of think about this critically? What can we do to think about this critically? And how might we also resist, or hopefully have time to think about that at the end? It's too simplistic to really think about these technologies as both sort of all bad or all good. There's A nuanced place in the middle where we have to work out, you know, what we are willing to put up with, what we may be are not. But the big point here is that none of this is inevitable. These technologies

don't appear value-free, fresh out-of-the-box. You know, oh, this is just the best bit of technology. They are being shaped in all sorts of ways, with all sorts of ideas. AI being the kind of recent idea. We have this imaginary of AI suddenly being part of every part of our lives because it's going to make our lives simpler and it's going to create jobs and it's going to make certain tasks easier. That is what's called an imaginary, right? We don't know that that's true. And actually, the way it's looking is that probably it will just make lots and lots of people unemployed and create worse art and worse essays, if you're using it for your essays, and worse, you know, it's not necessarily better, but we're being sold that it is something better. in the same way that we were sold Facebook and we were sold TikTokers. These are wonderful platforms to be social, to have your lives on. But underlying that is a different set of politics, which is please keep being on those platforms so we can collect your data, so we can make more money, really. I mean, it sounds cynical, but it's sort of true, right? So the question I want to just sort of sit with again for a little bit is If these platforms have these sort of overarching politics, these sort of overarching ways in which it's deciding how it wants us to be or how we can be and how we're not allowed to be, like what particular sort of forms of politics or structural oppressions or inequities, like clearly This is going to affect some people more than others. Clearly, if there are decisions and choices being made and built into these platforms, that's going to privilege some and perhaps disadvantage others. It's a big part of my research is really thinking about how technology and knowledge as a whole is tied up with forms of oppression, whether that's eugenics, We're at UCL, we can't not talk about eugenics as a sort of system of knowledge which was fundamental in building this sort of racialized hierarchy in the world where certain skin tones. are also more intelligent and better than people with other skin tones. We know that's not true now, but at the time that was seen as legitimate science and knowledge, right? But it has caused unlimited harm since its inception, right, in the forms of kind of racial hierarchy, racism, et cetera. That's one example, but there's multiple examples of science, scientific knowledge, technological knowledge, or technological infrastructures privileging certain people and disadvantaging others. I was saying to Martin before I started, there are so many things I want to talk to you about, I could talk to you about today, because as you can tell, I get quite excited about all of this. I mean, excited is maybe the wrong word, head up about it. Things I'm not going to talk about, but I guess I'm going to flag up as things that if you, know, have an essay or, you know, want to talk about in your seminars after this, you know, these are all fair game as well. I'm thinking a lot about AI at the moment. Again, this hype around it being the next best thing and how it needs to be in everything and change every industry and revolutionize that. It's a bubble. It's a bubble of hype, but we are seeing it in real time and governments are competing to be the best AI superpower at the moment, which is why what happened yesterday is so interesting, actually. But there's also other things we can think about. The environmental impact of AI is huge because these large language models rely on huge amounts of data and processing power, which require

huge amounts of cooling for the servers. If you've not seen the statistic recently, if you did one inquiry on ChatGPT, it's the equivalent of using 500 milliliters of fresh water every time you ask it a question or ask it to do something. which I think is quite shocking, actually. If you think about every time you use ChatGPT to do something, you're just pouring a bottle of mineral water down the drain. That's, you know, but that is the real, and that's before the kind of energy consumption, energy use, right? So there are some, there are all sorts of ways in which, again, these technologies are being built. We're rushing to build them without perhaps thinking about their cultural, social, political, environmental impact. Same with, I mean, same with OpenAI has got a very, very terrible track record in using labour in low and middle income countries to essentially support these kind of systems in the Global North, not just OpenAI. Amazon, I don't know if you've ever been to an Amazon Fresh store. Do you know the stores where you walk in and you don't have to use the till? You just sort of take things off the shelves and then you walk out. right? So you think, right, that that's clever technology, we're being like everything's mapped and tagged and stuff. Turns out, actually, people are sitting in a horrible working conditions in India watching videos of us taking things off the shelf and cataloguing it. So there's these sort of hidden ways in which actually often these technologies, when we're using them in the global North, seem magical, wonderful, but actually are built on quite a lot of exploitative labour. And that's before I even get on to, I mean, don't start me on AI, AI and autonomous weapons use, and warfare more generally, the way it's being used by, perhaps, to decide who can and can't have access to benefits. I mean, in the UK, the Department of Work and Pensions here have just decided not to use AI, having said they were going to use it, but it's quite common in the US. Multiple examples of AI being used to decide on sentencing, which disproportionately affects African-American and people of colour in the US. Anyway, point being, there's loads and loads of examples where we think, oh, this is a great new technology, it's going to do wonderful things, and we tend not to focus, or no one's really focusing on the ways in which it's also creating perhaps harms, which again is disproportionately affecting some people and not others. Right, okay. So A few examples of what this might look like in practice. You might be familiar with the Google autocomplete function in the search box. If you want to read more about this, I can't recommend this book enough by Safia Noble called Algorithms Oppression. Amazing black feminist scholar who essentially looked at the way in which black women are represented in Google search results. what she found was, rather than Google presenting what I guess we would hope is a very sort of measured, neutral, even, account of black women, actually it finds black women and girls over-sexualised. Essentially it's reinforcing a lot of historically racialised tropes about black women. Why is it doing that? Because it's built into the platform, because the platform is using data, knowledge, language. This is how all of the AI platforms work. It's scraping the internet as it looks. And so if the internet is full of racism, misogyny, conspiracy theories, whatever, that's then what gets reproduced through the platform. So instead of these

being neutral platforms that are sort of outside of politics or maybe sort of better, The arguments often used for AI, for example, oh, well, it's not a human making the decision, so it won't be racist or it won't be sexist or it won't be homophobic or whatever it might be. But actually, because of the way these things are built, all of the politics that exist out there are sort of sucked into the system and then get spat out the other end. And there's all sorts of examples, I'll give you a few more in a second, about the ways in which essentially this idea that technology is neutral, actually when you look into it, really isn't true, because what we find is actually it's often reproducing and kind of repackaging back the world as it is back to us through a sort of technological lens. Never is this more true than, I mean, this doesn't happen anymore, but this was some years ago now. The autocomplete on Google wasn't just kind of prejudicing or producing prejudiced depictions of black women, but it was also producing these as the top results when you searched for women more generally. This was if you started to ask a question about the Holocaust. This was if you started to ask a question about climate change. Again, highlighting Google isn't a neutral repository of knowledge. The way it ranks and the way it structures search results is entirely based on who's reading what, who's linked to what. And so if lots of people who believe climate change is a hoax are linking to each other's websites, information, blog posts, et cetera, then that's what it thinks is the best knowledge, right? Because there's no one actually judging that. And it comes back to the point that was made at the beginning, right? So again, even Google as a source might be changing, great, we have access to all this information, but it might be changing what we see as good information or valuable information or verifiable information because of the way the platform is built. Google, whilst trying to wipe their hands and say, oh, this has nothing to do with us. This is just what exists on the internet, then very quietly actually changed the algorithm so that this didn't happen anymore, which, again, points to the fact that they knew it probably was happening and they hadn't done anything about it. Coming back to facial recognition. Facial recognition technology is built on a standardised idea of what a face looks like, which is very much embedded in a Western, white, kind of Caucasian idea of facial features. And we can see this, is the results from, this is from an academic paper that came out in 2018, which was looking at Amazon's facial recognition software. And you could see for women of colour, it was very, very inaccurate. Why might it be so inaccurate for women of colour when it's so accurate for white men, slightly better for... Anyone got any ideas why this might look like this? Yeah. The research cohort was made for white people. Yeah, that's absolutely right. One answer. So they trained the model on essentially mostly white men. Yeah. Anybody else? Why women of color? What's the link? Anyone got any thoughts? Yeah? But why is it less accurate, do you think? I mean, yeah. Because they're both women and black men. Yes, it's the intersection. And again, this is quite complicated, but actually ideas about femininity, like what a woman's face should look like, are entirely constructed around white Western norms, right? So actually, and that's why that slide about Oprah Winfrey I put up at the top, like why that

thinks Oprah Winfrey is a man is because the software has been trained to only think about femininity in a very narrow, very, very racialized, very gender So these platforms, you might think, oh, we just do something better, right? Apart from the fact that if this platform's then used in policing decisions, for example, if this is then used for CCTV footage of crimes, for example, this is going to produce absolute harms for some people and other people less so. this is why we think about this stuff. I'm going to skip over this. Gender. Can't get away from it on the internet. possibly because a lot of the tech companies are straight white men, or full of them, right? But the point being is that they then reproduce their own sets of ideas about how the world works. Alexa got into real trouble when it first launched because any time it was threatened with violence, Alexa giggled and said, oh, ha, ha, ha, ha, aren't you funny? which was embedding and writing into this system this sort of incredibly sort of gendered and very deeply unpleasant idea of like how women respond to threats of violence or perhaps should respond. This is not necessarily done consciously, but it just again shows you how culture as a whole, or technology as a whole, emerges out of particular cultures, particular ideas about the world. And actually, are we okay that, you know, a sort of feminine female voice is used for an assistive bit of software that is always subservient, that is not taught to talk back, that is not, you know, it's reproducing a very particular form of gender politics. So, you know, we might want to think about how it could be done better. Meta is famous again for having a vendetta against the female *****. It was fine for a long time in Facebook for a beheading to be on, a video of a beheading to be on Facebook, but not a woman's *****. So again, this is not neutral, right? The platform's not neutral. Someone somewhere has made a decision about what's okay content-wise, what's not okay. That's disproportionately affecting some people and not others. TikTok, just to give you another example, a few years ago, it was, this document was leaked. So apologies, it's a really fuzzy slide. This was a guide for moderators at TikTok who were told any of these things don't prioritise this content in people's feeds. And I don't know if you can read it. So anyone with an abnormal body shape, who is chubby, who has an obvious beer belly, who has ugly facial looks. Point being, TikTok was manipulating its feed to prioritise certain types of people, certain types of bodies, certain types of body types. Why might it be doing that? Anybody got any thoughts? What's in its interests? I mean, interesting as well, TikTok's a Chinese company, right? And yet actually it's prioritizing, I don't know if it's in this one, it was prioritizing kind of white, blonde, you know, certain types of body types. What's the politics here? Why is it doing it, do you think? What does it get out of certain forms of content and not others? You've already told me the answer. What does any social media platform make? Money, right? So this is based on the US market for TikTok being the bigger market. So therefore, we want to prioritize the sort of standard US forms of beauty and body type, because that's where the money is. That's where we want those people to use it more, right? So you can, again, this is a very explicit example of the politics, right? And this was from, what, two weeks ago in light of Trump's re-election and Mark Zuckerberg

suddenly turning into an alt-right tech bro, apparently. But overnight, the rules about what you can and can't say, I mean, this is just one example, but this is about LGBTQ people on any Meta platform have changed, right? So up until the 10th of January, you were not allowed to say to someone who is gay, you have a mental illness. Now you can, right? So Point being, again, this platform is heavily disproportionately based on here the decisions of a few people affecting some people's ability to exist in these spaces and causing harms for some and not for others. Right. That's a lot of examples. I've thrown a lot of different things at you. But I guess where I'm going to sort of end is this idea of like, what do we do about this? Remind you of sort of what questions might we ask? If we're concerned about digital technology, digital platforms, how might we then, as scholars, which we all are in this room, sort of ask the right questions? I think I've hopefully said this over and over, but like who is building it is a really key one, right? Is it a set of already privileged, powerful people? Is it a set of people who have particular ideas about race, about gender, about sexuality, about class? any of those, right? And are these being built into those platforms? These are what we might call normative assumptions, the way they think the world should work, right? And that reproduces certain forms of power, certain forms of inequality, certain forms of policing of certain identities over others, right? So then this idea of like who is being policed and who is policing them? Who has control, who has power? I think this is always a question we should ask of any bit of technology, who benefits, who loses? A certain people, and it's very true, certain people are getting very, very, very rich from social media platforms, and a lot of people are being harmed and maybe not making any money at all. AI, always worth thinking about data. What data is being used to train it? How is that data collected? As was pointed out, if we're training AI platforms on only pictures of white men, are we surprised when then it disproportionately disadvantages anybody who's not a white man? No, but often we don't know that that's how it's been trained, so it might end up reproducing those harms without us. without us knowing. And then how might we disrupt and reimagine? I'm just going to end on some thoughts. I mean, eat the rich is, I guess, my solution, but we can't probably do that. But actually, we do need to think about power. Who is in charge? Can we, there's a big discussion from a lot of kind of marginalized communities at the moment who have been using Meta, who use Meta to build community, who are now potentially going to be in a space which is quite harmful to them? Do they stop using Meta? And what happens if they stop using Meta? They lose their communities? Or are there ways we can repurpose or reimagine these platforms or create new platforms? Blue Sky is a really good example, right? When Twitter, after Elon Musk bought it and then became X, you know, basically tore up a lot of the ways in which it kept people safe on Twitter. Alternative platforms that work in different ways and have different politics were created, Blue Sky being the main one now. And actually Blue Sky in some ways feels very like what Twitter felt like in its early days. It's safer, it's not full of people shouting at each other or telling each other that they're Nazis or evil. So different platforms are possible and we might be able to build

them. The industry answer is often to ask the people who are being harmed by these platforms to come in and help fix them, which is not necessarily, I would argue, the best way of doing it, because you're often asking people to come into a harmful place and then say, now could you fix this harmful place while continuing to be harmed. And then there are some slightly more, I'm going to, this is my last slide. We can come up with different ways of designing. So rather than design happening in Silicon Valley in the hands of a few, we create design collectives. design which is built by communities for communities to do things for them. That's maybe not about making money, that's about fixing problems. Or we query the data, and I use that in a sort of verb sense. This is an example of how you might disrupt AI. I'm going to get arrested for this, but this is how you might disrupt facial recognition software, right? You can do certain things to your face that stop you being identifiable to AI systems. Right. So a summary of sorts. Thank you for listening to all of that. Apologies, I've run over a couple of minutes. What do I want you to take away? Technology is not neutral, okay? Technology has politics built into it, embedded in it, but there are ways in which we can think about it critically. But we also want to think about how we are both shaped by and are shaping these things. It's A reciprocal relationship, okay? These things don't get given to us like fresh, neutral, right? Someone's built it somehow, and maybe therefore we also can think about how these things can be different. Because we are both the designers, the builders, we are the data, the product, we're all of these different things in relation to digital technology, and in some forms we also might have to be the resistance. I will finish there. Thank you for listening. Good luck.