Instructions: Send your completed exam via email attachment no later than Dec. 16 at 5 pm. Please label your exam file lastname_482final.docx

Other acceptable file types: .rtf, .txt, .doc, .pages, .pdf

Write a short essay on each of the following topics, referring specifically to the readings and giving specific and detailed examples. Be sure to indicate which question you are answering. Each essay is worth 20 pts. Approximate total length, 2500 words.

1. We’ve been here before. Tim Wu writes, in The Master Switch, “I have always been struck by what I feel is too strong an insistence that we are living in unprecedented times. In fact, the place we find ourselves in now is a place we have been before, albeit in a different guise.” How does the digital “revolution” of today differ, both quantitatively and, perhaps more important, qualitatively, from earlier communication shifts signaled by the printing press, typewriter, and telephone? What can we learn from the past to help us understand the present tech explosion and put it into some historical context? What might be “unprecedented” or revolutionary about the digital age?

2. Who are you, anyway? New communication technologies bring with them new issues of trust: readers have to learn to accept the validity and usefulness of writing as a medium of communication, then printing, then online text, by developing means to authenticate and validate messages and documents. As we get used to new technologies, authenticity may become less of an issue, though it can still lurk in the background. Discuss the various ways we have developed to authenticate manuscripts, print, voice communication, and digital comms. How do our practices change as the technologies become more familiar, more accepted? Even after books became common objects, we preferred that some kinds of writing be done by hand. How does this change in the digital age? As we become more and more accepting of the authenticity of what we find online, are there still “danger zones” or areas where we think the old ways might be better, safer, more comfortable?

3. The end/beginning of civilization as we know it . . . The critiques of digital technology have gone from unqualified praise by early adopters and unqualified condemnation by outsiders (it’s the best thing since sliced bread/it heralds the end of civilization as we know it) to more nuanced assessments by those with more intimate experience with the strengths and weaknesses of digitization. Still, the assessments tend to be extreme: ebooks are less effective than print; the internet will no longer be a place of freedom as it cedes control to giant corporations; social media can generate political revolution / social media is becoming a tool for surveillance and repression. As Jaron Lanier 2.0 might put it, “You are/are not a gadget. Choose one.” Assess the new generation of critiques by Curran, Zittrain, Carr, and Lanier, in the light of earlier
critiques by Plato, Thoreau, Henderson, and Roszak. How do they impact actual users of the technology?

4. Hey, that’s private . . . Read “The Telephone Unmasked” ([link here](#)). This 1877 article in the New York Times echoes Thoreau’s critique of the telegraph in 1849 and anticipates Warren and Brandeis’ warning about the new technologies of photography and gossip journalism that threatened privacy in 1890: “What is whispered in the closet shall be proclaimed from the house-tops.” In 1916, New York City’s police commissioner told a Senate committee that surveillance in the form of warrantless telephone wiretaps should only be a concern to those who have nothing to hide. And in 1928, Brandeis, now on the Supreme Court, argued in his dissent to a ruling affirming the legality government wiretaps, that telephone surveillance was at the top of his list of government practices to be regulated, but that he could envision a time when technology would make surveillance even more intrusive:

> Ways may some day be developed by which the Government, without removing papers from secret drawers, can reproduce them in court, and by which it will be enabled to expose to a jury the most intimate occurrences of the home. Advances in the psychic and related sciences may bring means of exploring unexpressed beliefs, thoughts and emotions. The progress of science in furnishing the Government with means of espionage is not likely to stop with wire-tapping. [Olmstead v. United States 1928.474]

Is today’s concern with surveillance, personal data collection, and digital privacy just more of the same, only on a larger scale, or are there qualitative differences between then and now?

5. Hey, that’s mine . . .

Digital communications are either erasing socioeconomic, racial, and gender disparities, creating a more democratic, more inclusive, more global world, or they are reinforcing or even augmenting these distinctions and disparities. The digital divide is the newest reflex of the literacy divide: literacy enables advancement, but it also sorts people into haves and have nots with new and deeper kinds of social stratification, creating a separation between those who have access to a communication technology and those whose access is limited or prohibited, or for whom such technology is simply out of reach. How does the digital divide erase, replicate, or extend our reach?