

- Faculté des sciences économiques
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Current Issues in Social Work: Digitalization, AI and Welfare (5TS2016)

Filières concernées	Nombre d'heures	Validation	Crédits ECTS
Doctorat en travail social	Séminaire: 1 pg	Voir ci-dessous	3

ph=période hebdomadaire, pg=période globale, j=jour, dj=demi-jour, h=heure, min=minute

Période d'enseignement:

- Semestre Automne

Equipe enseignante

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Lecturer
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Contenu

Digital technologies increasingly shape welfare institutions and social work practice. Algorithmic decision systems, digital infrastructures, AI-based documentation tools, and automated eligibility systems are transforming how social services are organized, delivered, and evaluated. Drawing on Science and Technology Studies (STS), the seminar approaches these technologies as socio-technical arrangements that co-produce professional practices, institutional structures, and relations of power, responsibility, and care. The seminar therefore also invites a transdisciplinary dialogue between STS, social work research, welfare studies, and digital governance research.

Over four days, the seminar introduces key STS concepts and applies them to empirical cases in digital welfare and social work, including algorithmic governance, digital welfare infrastructures, AI-based tools in social work practice, and technologies that mediate care relationships. Short lecture inputs are combined with discussion of core readings, case-based group work, and a methodological reflection on possible approaches for empirically studying digital welfare infrastructures (e.g. organizational ethnography, policy and document analysis, interface analysis). In addition to foundational STS literature, the seminar includes a dedicated session on the current research frontier, introducing newer empirical and applied work on digitalization, AI, welfare, and social work. Participants are invited to relate these debates to broader questions of fairness, accountability, trust, professional practice, and care.

Forme de l'évaluation

- Active participation during all seminar days (preparation of readings, contribution to discussions and group work).
- Oral presentation (20–25 minutes) during the seminar, followed by three questions posed by the instructor to assess understanding and independent engagement with the material. Participants may choose one of the following formats:
 - (a) applying one STS concept discussed in the seminar to their own doctoral research project, or
 - (b) presenting a critical analysis of a specific seminar theme, case, or text of their choice.
- Presentations and oral examination take place on Day 4.

The presentation is assessed on the clarity of the argument, accurate and productive use of STS concepts, engagement with relevant literature or empirical material, and the participant's responses to the questions raised in the discussion.

Exams and retake exams are organized by the ITTS. The relevant procedures will be explained in class or communicated separately where necessary.

Modalités de rattrapage

Students who receive a non-passing grade on the oral presentation may submit a revised written reflection (3–4 pages, in English) within 30 days of receiving the original grade, unless otherwise agreed with the instructor.

Exams and retake exams are organized by the ITTS. The relevant procedures will be explained in class or communicated separately where necessary.

Documentation

All core readings, slides, and additional materials will be made available on Moodle before the start of the seminar. Participants are expected to read the assigned texts in advance and bring notes or questions to the seminar.

Core readings

- Benjamin, R. (2019). Race after technology: Abolitionist tools for the New Jim Code. Polity Press.

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- Eubanks, V. (2018). Automating inequality: How high-tech tools profile, police, and punish the poor. St. Martin's Press.
- Jasanoff, S. (2004). The idiom of co-production. In S. Jasanoff (Ed.), States of knowledge: The co-production of science and social order (pp. 1–12). Routledge.
- Mol, A. (2008). The logic of care: Health and the problem of patient choice. Routledge.
- Pols, J. (2012). Care at a distance: On the closeness of technology. Amsterdam University Press.
- Winner, L. (1980). Do artifacts have politics? Daedalus, 109(1), 121–136.
- Rommes, E. (2014). Feminist interventions in the design process. In W. Ernst & I. Horwath (Eds.), Gender in science and technology (pp. 41–56). transcript.
- Ait Si Abbou Lyadini, K. (2019). We need more diversity in AI development now! TEDxHamburg (video).

Recommended readings

- Ananny, M., & Crawford, K. (2018). Seeing without knowing: Limitations of the transparency ideal and its application to algorithmic accountability. New Media & Society, 20(3), 973–989.
- O'Neil, C. (2016). Weapons of math destruction: How big data increases inequality and threatens democracy. Crown.
- Kitchin, R. (2017). Thinking critically about and researching algorithms. Information, Communication & Society, 20(1), 14–29.
- Suchman, L. A. (2007). Human-machine reconfigurations: Plans and situated actions (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Weber, R. N. (1997). Manufacturing gender in commercial and military cockpit design. Science, Technology & Human Values, 22(2), 235–253.
- Noble, S. U. (2018). Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism. New York University Press. (Introduction)
- Jasanoff, S., & Kim, S. (2015). Dreamscapes of Modernity: Sociotechnical Imaginaries and the Fabrication of Power. (Introduction)
- Škoric, J., & Galetin, M. (2024). Artificial intelligence and social work: Ethical dilemmas and challenges in the protection of human rights. Teme, 563–575.

Pré-requis

Pre-condition: Registration as a PhD student at the ITTS (according to the procedures and deadlines communicated by the ITTS) or another doctoral programme in the social sciences or related disciplines. No prior knowledge of STS or AI is required. Basic familiarity with social theory, social work research, or qualitative social research is an advantage.

Open to: Registered PhD students only (ITTS and other doctoral programmes). Not open to Master's students.

Maximum number of participants: 15.

Forme de l'enseignement

In person lectures and homework. The course is taught in English.

Teaching periods: Thursday and Fridays from 9:15 to 17:15 on 17 & 18 September, 5 & 6 November 2026.

Place: Main Building, University of Neuchâtel, Avenue du 1er Mars 26

Room B29 (17 & 18 September and 5 November)

Room C43 (6 November)

Objectifs d'apprentissage

Au terme de la formation l'étudiant-e doit être capable de :

- Develop understanding and explain key STS concepts relevant to digitalization and welfare institutions (e.g. socio-technical systems, co-production, politics of artifacts)
- Explain how algorithmic and data-intensive systems shape professional practice, institutional decision-making, and relations of care and responsibility
- Analyse critically digital technologies used in social work and welfare systems, including algorithmic decision systems and digital infrastructures
- Examine issues of power, inequality, and discrimination in digital welfare infrastructures, including race, class, gender, disability and other axes of difference
- Rate critically recent empirical and applied research on generative AI, digital welfare, and social work.
- Apply STS perspectives on digitalization and AI to empirical cases in social work, welfare, and related fields, and, where relevant, connect them to their own doctoral research projects.

Compétences transférables

- Analyse critically the role of digital technologies and AI systems in welfare institutions and social work practice
- Identify basic strategies and methods for empirically studying digital welfare infrastructures (documents, practices, interfaces)
- Analyse and discuss recent interdisciplinary research literature
- Communicate complex arguments about technology, power, and inequality in oral form
- Apply abstract theoretical concepts (STS) to concrete empirical cases and their own research designs

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