***Critical Conversations: The Internet Is Not What You Think***

**American Library in Paris**

**2024-2025**

**Justin Smith-Ruiu**

**Summary:** What is the internet? How far back in history can we find its precursors, in the form either of mechanical social, or perhaps even biological information networks? What are the political and philosophical ideas that drove early efforts to network human society? And is the internet a fulfilment of these ideas, or does the actually existing internet turn out to be in certain respects fundamentally different from the political and philosophical vision that guided its early development?

In this series of conversations, we will be taking a maximally wide-focused view of these questions, and we will be looking in particular at their importance for understanding the unprecedent technological revolution we are currently living through, as well as its economic, political, cultural, and psychological consequences. We will be focusing in particular on those thinkers who have articulated a theoretical account of the nature of information networks, the possibility of machine intelligence, or the utopian (or dystopian) prospects of a society reliant on machine-aided decision-making.

**Preparatory reading:** Justin E. H. Smith [aka, Justin Smith-Ruiu], *The Internet Is Not What You Think It Is: A History, a Philosophy, a Warning* (Princeton University Press, 2022). [A pdf will be provided.]

All readings will be provided, typically in excerpt form rather than the entire work.

**Summary of sessions:**

*October 10*

**Introduction - What Did We Do Before the Internet?**

*November 14***The Deep History of Telecommunication: Tree-Root Networks and the Semiotics of Nature**

Reading: Stefano Mancuso et al., *Brilliant Green: The Surprising History and Science of Plant Intelligence* (Island Press, 2015).

*December 12*

**What Is Cybernetics? Living Systems and Machine Networks**

Reading: Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics: Or, Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (1948).

*January 9*

**Artificial Intelligence and the Philosophy of Mind**Reading: Susan Schneider, “It May Not Feel Like Anything to Be an Alien,” *Nautilus* 080 (January 16, 2020).

*February 13*

**Strong vs. Weak AI, Reckoning vs. Judgment**

Reading: Daniel C. Dennett, “Will AI Achieve Consciousness? Wrong Question,” *Wired* (February 19, 2019).

*April 10***Algorithms, Profit-Seeking, and the Perils of Deliberative Democracy**

Reading: Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2018)

*May 15*

**The Crisis of Attention**

Reading: D. Graham Burnett, Alyssa Loh, and Peter Schmidt, “Powerful Forces Are Fracking Our Attention. We Can Fight Back,” *New York Times*, November 24, 2023.

*June 12*

**TBA**