

Professor explores complex relationships

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By MEAGAN STILP - DMG writer (mstilp@mininggazette.com) The Daily Mining Gazette

HOUGHTON - Technology is an essential part of most Americans' daily lives. From cell phones to computers to transportation, many depend on technological systems every day. Chelsea Schelly, assistant professor of sociology at Michigan Technological University, explored Americans' relationship to the material world through technological systems, including through alternative technology, in a talk Wednesday.

"A lot of what we do is pretty habitual. It's pretty unthinking. We turn on light switches without really thinking about it, we engage with the material world without a whole lot of thought going into it," Schelly said. "And we use the material resources that we rely upon without having to know anything about them."

Schelly explored many of the frequently used technological systems, focusing on home life to set up the idea of what is considered normal to introduce alternative technologies.



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Chelsea Schelly, assistant professor of sociology at Michigan Technological University, addresses the audience during a talk Wednesday. Schelly discussed the relationship between technology and the material world.

"We learn what normal is through our interactions with our homes and with our communities, the material systems that help us get things done in life. But the way that we use those systems is shaped by sometimes invisible forces like policies and politics," Schelly said. "I think even the term alternative technology demonstrates to us how embedded technology is in shaping our social norms. Things that are alternative energy are things that go against those norms."

Solar panels, intentional communities where resources and spaces are shared, and earthships - environmentally friendly structures composed mainly of old tires - were among the alternative

technologies Schelly focused on. After talking to people who participated in these forms of energy, Schelly found that the language describing alternative technology can be misleading.

"The environmental movement and environmental rhetoric has for a very long time focused on sacrifice, focused on how you have to give something up, there needs to be a limitation," Schelly said. "But the people that I've met who are living with technologies that benefit the environment are suggesting that we need a new environmental norm based on the theory that living differently doesn't require sacrifice and it comes with benefits."

Technology may also affect how we interact socially in addition to how we interact with the world. Schelly looked at ways what is considered normal has changed over time with examples such as going from outhouses to septic tanks and communication practices.

"Technologies shape how we interact with one another on an interpersonal level. We can certainly see this when we think about new communication technologies," she said. "We've all been at a restaurant where we've seen people sitting together but all on their phones. That's a new normal when it comes to shaping our material relationship with the world around us."

Unseen forces such as policy changes can shape interactions with the material and social world. Policies in many communities limit access to alternative technology. A community where Schelly lived in Colorado, for example, did not allow homeowners to collect rainwater because of ranchers' water rights.

"In many rural communities around the United States it is a requirement that you have a septic tank," she said. "You can't have a composting toilet, you can't have a biological treatment system at home - much to the chagrin of my neighbor here. That's a policy that changes how we interact with the material systems every day."

Although she acknowledges that intentional communities and earthships are not for everyone, Schelly proposed that acknowledging the relationships between technology, society and the material world can lead to positive changes.

"I don't think this means that we all need to go live off grid. Maybe it's as simple as we offer our neighbors a ride so we think about reorienting our own practices in ways that promote alternative relationships to material systems," Schelly said. "Maybe it means promoting policies that we wouldn't necessarily directly benefit from but we can see as being good."