UC SANTA BARBARA

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The Life Cycle of a Digital Commodity

For most Americans, one of the defining features of the modern digital economy is the invisibility of its material infrastructure.

Whereas previous technological and industrial revolutions were inextricably linked to the production of physical artifacts and the consumption of material resources, information technologies appear to operate largely independently of the physical environment and, in fact, may even transcend it.

Studied from a global perspective, however, this is anything but the case.

In a talk titled “The Materiality of the Virtual: A Global Environmental History of Computing from Babbage to Bitcoin,” Nathan Ensmenger, an associate professor in the School of Informatics & Computing at Indiana University, will explore the life cycle of a digital commodity (in this case a unit of the virtual currency bitcoin).

Delivering UC Santa Barbara’s annual Lawrence Badash Memorial Lecture, Ensmenger will ground the history of the electronic computer in the material world by focusing on the relationship between computing power and more traditional processes of resource extraction, exchange, management and consumption.

The talk will begin at 5 p.m. on Wednesday, Jan. 21, in the McCune Conference Room, 6020 Humanities and Social Sciences Building at UCSB. It is free and open to the public.

Ensmenger’s research focuses on the social and cultural history of software and software workers, the history of artificial intelligence and issues of gender and identity in computer programming. He is the author of “The Computer Boys Take Over: Computers, Programmers, and the Politics of Technical Expertise,” which explores the rise to power of the “computer expert” in American corporate, economic and political life.

Currently, Ensmenger is working on a book that explores the global environmental history of the electronic digital computer.

Presented by UCSB’s Center for Science and Society, the Badash Lecture honors Lawrence Badash, professor emeritus of history and specialist in the history of physics and nuclear weapons. The lecture recognizes a scholar of science and society whose work has advanced not only the history of science, but also the larger aims of social justice, civil liberties, peace and disarmament, public health or environmental protection.

Tags
Artificial Intelligence

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The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.